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**MESSAGE OF THE DIOCESAN COMMISSION FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITY
ON THE OCCASION OF THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITY**

God created us all differently but at the same time we are all equal in His eyes because He created us in his own image. Therefore, in spite of his diversity that includes the person with disability, man is called to treat everyone as his own equal. It is indeed a huge encouragement that Maltese society does not only believe in the value of each person but is also seeing that every person with disability is not excluded from enjoying equal opportunities. The more we create an inclusive society, in which persons with disability and their families feel they are equal members of that same society, the better we can recognise that diversity is indeed something that makes our society more human and richer.

We can safely say that the Church in Malta was at the forefront in promoting in Maltese society a culture of respect, value and dignity towards persons with disability, especially so with Dun Mikiel Azzopardi's contribution in this sector. This notwithstanding, the Church in Malta should continue to show this with concrete action in order to guarantee that persons with disability will continue to be given equal opportunities and full participation in the life of our society and the Church.

We call in a special way on our parish communities who need to show that if they truly want to welcome persons with disability in their midst as equal members, they need to get to know them and consult with them on how inclusion could be made more possible.

It is indeed satisfying to note that in our parish communities we have recently seen a substantial increase in physical accessibility especially to our parish churches. Regrettably, there are still various churches and buildings where Christian formation takes place, that are still inaccessible for everyone and this problem could be solved with more commitment. Lack of accessibility creates a huge obstacle to the participation of persons with disability in parish activities and to any contribution they in turn can give. Quite often this sends out signals that these persons and their families are not really welcome in these same communities. We, therefore, encourage parish priests and all those responsible for centres of Christian formation to ensure, with a sense of justice, physical accessibility in line with the guidelines issued by the National Commission for

Persons with Disability as required by law and social justice. The parish remains the door for participation by persons with disability in the church and, therefore, it is the responsibility of the parish priest, the clergy and lay leaders to ensure that the door is always open both physically and in every other way imaginable.

We also commend all efforts that are being made within our Christian communities where persons with disability not only feel welcome but are also given the same opportunities available to everyone else so that they can give their contribution in various ways.

We also encourage our Christian communities to also provide those services needed to assist persons, especially those with sensorial disabilities, to participate actively and fully in the life of the community. Some of the services that could be highlighted are the interpretation of the Sign Language when it is requested; the provision of informative material printed in large fonts; CD recordings or formats that make it easier to read for persons with disability that need this type of service, as indeed are persons who are blind, persons with intellectual disability and persons who are illiterate.

We encourage parish communities to create even more awareness amongst parishioners in order to eliminate all kinds of prejudice towards persons with disability and to accord them the dignity they do deserve. The parish also needs to be more sensitive and nearer to families with persons with disability by offering them the support they need in their walk of life.

God willing, the International Day of Persons with Disability and the activities organized and initiatives taken towards persons with disability will be an inspiration to our Christian communities so that we can become more and more an inclusive church.