

Message of the President of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers (for Health Pastoral Care) on the Occasion of the World Autism Awareness Day
(2 April 2016)

Creators of Truth and Witnesses to Truth

Dearest Brothers and Sisters,

On the occasion of the ninth World Day to increase awareness about, and sensitivity to, autism, which this year coincides with the days immediately after the Easter of the Resurrection, the Church intends to adopt the approach of the Risen Jesus who inspired hope in the women that he met after the tragic days of his passion and death: ‘Do not be afraid’ (*Mt 28:10*).

Very often daily onerous work, disappointment, dismay, loneliness and anxiety about the future can prevail over hope, which should always animate families, health-care workers, scientific and research associations, school institutions, volunteers and all those who, in various capacities and in a synergic way, are at the side of people who have autism spectrum disorders.

In the awareness that it is important and necessary to stimulate commitment in this sector to the improvement of services and the promotion of research, just as it is essential to be at the side of people with autism and their family relatives, one can affirm that through all these wonderful activities our hearts can only feel strongly strengthened in hope.

‘Christian hope’, as Pope Francis observes, ‘is not simply a desire, a wish, it is not optimism: for a Christian, hope is expectation, fervent expectation, impassioned by the ultimate and definitive fulfilment of a mystery, the mystery of God’s love, in which we are born again and which we are already experiencing. And it is the expectation of someone who is coming: it is Christ the Lord approaching ever closer to us, day by day, and who comes to bring us at last into the fullness of his communion and of his peace. The Church then, has the task of keeping the lamp of hope burning and clearly visible, so that it may continue to shine as a sure sign of salvation and illuminate for all humanity the path which leads to the encounter with the merciful face of God’ (*General Audience* of 15 October 2014).

At a time when it is often difficult to find reasons to hope, above all when faced with the problem of autism spectrum disorders which at times not only encounter difficulties in being diagnosed but also – and especially in families – in being accepted without shame or falling back into loneliness, we are called to place our trust in God. Now, even if by definition hope looks to the future, it is rooted in the today of God who can only love us and tirelessly look for us. Indeed, God is limitless goodness and benevolence, He takes care of His children and He will never abandon those whom He has called to enter His communion, whatever the difficulties may be.

In this horizon of faith, sensitisation to a neurological and behavioural disturbance, which until a short time ago could have been seen as a social stigma,

fortunately is acquiring increasing attention in the field of diagnosis and research, as well as in the fields of assistance, integration into schooling and work, and accompanying at the level of spiritual growth. This constitutes a sign of hope, as emerged, as well, at the time of the international conference that was organised two years ago by this Pontifical Council of the Holy See and which bore the title: ‘The Person with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Animating Hope’.

Despite this, there can be no absence of commitment by everyone to fostering acceptance, encounter and solidarity in a concrete work of support and renewed promotion of hope, taking account, above all, of the fact that autism continues for the whole of a person’s life. It follows from this, therefore, that only an alliance between the sectors of health-care, socio-health-care and education, as well as integration – where this is possible – into work activities to increase personal autonomy, can assure continuity in taking responsibility for these brothers and sisters of ours for the whole of their lives. In agreeing to a working integration of the services specific to childhood and adulthood, one can allow a person with autism to conserve the capacities that he or she has acquired through enabling help when he or she was young, thereby avoiding his or her regression and the wasting of the resources that were employed.

In this arduous but not impossible undertaking, the effect of educational, health-care and social initiatives to support people with autism spectrum disorders and their families can constitute a well-founded incentive to identify and promote effective and efficient policies, thereby creating in local areas and in low-income countries – as Pope Francis observed when he met children and people with autism with their family relatives on 22 November 2014 – ‘a regional network of support and services which are comprehensive and accessible’ that can ‘help families overcome the feelings, which can sometimes arise, of inadequacy, helplessness and frustration’.

Following the invitation of Pope Francis who above all during this Holy Year of Mercy has been stimulating believers and non-believers to rediscover approaches of welcome and fraternal solidarity, let us take responsibility in our lives for the acceptance and inclusion of people with autism and their families, in the certainty that in this way we are witnesses to authentic and joyous hope in the Church and the world!

I wish all health-care workers, researchers, educators, technicians of psychiatric rehabilitation, pastoral and social workers, teachers and especially people with autism and their families, every good and joy in the Risen Lord. Hallelujah!

✠ Zygmunt Zimowski