AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

BISHOPS COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, MISSION AND SERVICE

MEDIA RELEASE **NOVEMBER 17, 2026**

International Day of People with Disability

Catholic parishes are being encouraged to consider ways to be more accessible as the Church marks the International Day of People with Disability on December 3.

The theme for this year is "The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at 20: Building on Progress, Advancing the Future".

The United Nations convention, to which Australia is a signatory, highlights people with disability have the same rights as everyone else and should be able to take part in all areas of life.

All governments and communities are being encouraged 20 years on from the convention to build on the progress made and identify and eliminate obstacles and barriers to accessibility (Article 9 of the convention).

A study released this year found accessibility was one of the structural factors behind people with disability not regularly attending Mass.

The *Absent from the Table* report by the National Centre for Pastoral Research heard that an improved focus on support, belonging and participation would draw people back to church.

Bishop delegate for disability, Bishop Robert Rabbat, said there were many opportunities for parishes to take action to promote belonging.

"Catholic communities must move beyond 'accommodating' people with disabilities towards genuine participation and belonging," Bishop Rabbat said.

"We need to listen to people with disability and ensure their voices, gifts and ministries are involved in Church life and decision-making.

"It is important that the principles of accessibility and inclusion are reflected in everything we do."

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Bishop Rabbat highlighted St Paul's challenge to see those amongst us as Jesus did - as essential in our communities: "On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Corinthians 12:22).

Catholic social teaching emphasises the inherent dignity of every person because all are created in the image of God.

Claire Smart, the Disability Projects Officer for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, said she wanted to hear from parishes about the sorts of activities and strategies they are engaged in to make their parishes more accessible and places of belonging.

"A parish accessibility and belonging tool has been developed in collaboration with the Catholic Accessibility Forum," she said.

"The aim of the tool is to give parishes the opportunity to learn, reflect and identify areas of accessibility they could improve in, and consider accessibility as a key to welcoming and belonging."

The tool and other parish resources can be found here.

Parishes are invited to share their stories by emailing disability@catholic.org.au

Beyond taking part in the survey, there are other ways to mark International Day of People with Disability:

- Host a parish morning tea or lunch event with a guest speaker
- Use the prayers here at a Mass
- Attend a local community activity listed on the events calendar
- Host a screening of short films or videos featuring people with disabilities
- If you have lived experience of disability, take part in the Catholic Accessibility Forum
- Resources for schools are available here

The resources will also be available in Easy Read format here

Background to International Day of People with Disability

- The 3rd of December is an opportunity to celebrate those with disability and the contribution they make to our communities. The website can be found at www.idpwd.gov.au
- The theme for 2026 is 'The CRPD at 20: Building on Progress, Advancing the Future'. You can learn more at the United Nations theme on their website here
- You can learn more about the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities here

Key Church Documents on Disability

- The *Final Report of the Synod on Synodality* noted (S.63): "In promoting co-responsibility for the mission of all the Baptised, we recognise the apostolic capacities of people with disabilities who feel called and sent out as active agents of evangelisation. We appreciate the contribution that comes from the immense wealth of humanity they bring with them. We acknowledge their experiences of suffering, marginalisation, and discrimination, sometimes suffered even within the Christian community due to attempts at showing compassion that can be paternalistic. In order to encourage their participation in the life and mission of the Church, we propose the establishment of a Church based research initiative or observatory on disability."
- Pope Leo XIV, in his encyclical *Magnifica humanitas,* talks about how we are all called to the table of the Eucharist and our diversity unites us (S.88): "For the Christian community, solidarity finds its source in the mystery of Christ and is nourished by the Eucharist. Solidarity emerges from communion in faith and the Sacraments: Baptism and Confirmation unite us in Christ, so that we may become one Body and one Spirit, one heart and one soul (cf. Eph 4:4; Acts 4:32). The Eucharist, which is the sacrament of unity, nurtures our belonging to the Body of Christ and teaches us how to share. The diverse sensibilities present in the Church and the strong convictions that animate each person are a source of richness if they remain anchored in the certainty that unity is a gift received and a responsibility to be fulfilled."
- The Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life's report on special synodal consultation with people with disabilities said (S.36): "Numerous reports point to the lack of appropriate structures and ways of accompanying persons with disabilities and call for new ways of welcoming their contribution and promoting their participation: in spite of its own teachings, the Church is in danger of imitating the way society casts them aside."

Get Involved

- The Catholic Accessibility Forum exists to ensure that people with disability are welcomed, valued, and belong in the life of the Catholic Church in Australia. Coordinated by the Disability Projects Officer, the Catholic Accessibility Forum provides a place for people with disability, families, carers, community organisations, parish and diocesan leaders to promote active participation and belonging in the Church. We are looking for more people to join the forum. If you would like to learn more or take part, please contact disability@catholic.org.au

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