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Differences make community, and we are all part of the unity of the Church

Vatican City, 12 June 2016 – In his meeting yesterday afternoon in the Paul VI Hall with participants in the Jubilee for the sick and disabled, Pope Francis gave the discourse he had prepared to the prefect of the Papal Household, Archbishop Georg Gänswein, to distribute to those in the audience, and instead answered questions posed to him.

The first question related to fear of diversity. "We are all different: not one of us is the same as another. There are some types of diversity that are great, others lesser, but we are all different", Francis said, stressing that we are sometimes afraid of diversity as it represents a challenge, and challenges cause fear. "It is easier to remain still, it is easier to ignore diversity and to say, 'We are all equal, and if some are not quite so 'equal', let's leave them aside, and not go towards them.' ... Differences are instead richness. ... Let's imagine a world in which everyone is the same: it would be a boring world! It is true that some forms of difference are painful, we all know this: those that have their roots in illnesses. But even these forms of difference help us, they challenge and enrich us". In order to face this challenge, it is best to "share what we have. ... There is a beautiful gesture ... that we do almost without thinking, but it is a very profound gesture: shaking hands. When we shake hands ... we put in common what we have: I give you what is mine to receive what is yours. ... Just think that every time I shake hands with someone else, I give something of mine and receive something from him. This too helps us grow."

Discrimination, and in particular, the denial of the sacraments to the disabled in some parishes, was another of the questions. The Holy Father described discrimination as one of the worst problems to face, and added, "It is true that if one wishes to receive communion it is necessary to prepare, and if you do not understand this language, for example if you are deaf, you must have the possibility in that parish of preparing with sign language. ... If you are different, you also have the possibility of being the best, this is true. Diversity does not say that those whose all five senses function well are better than, for example, someone who is deaf and mute. ... We all have the same possibility of growth, of going ahead, of loving the Lord, of doing good things, of understanding Christian doctrine, and we all have the same possibility of receiving the sacraments. When, many years ago, Pope Pius X said that communion should be given to children, many were shocked. 'But that child doesn't understand, he is different, he doesn't understand well...'. 'Give communion to the children', said the Pope, and he ensured equality in diversity, as he understood that the child understands in a different way. When there is diversity between us, one understands in a different way. ... Each one of us has a way of understanding things that is different: one understands in one way, one in another, but everyone can know God."

The key words for responding to the challenge of difference are welcome and listening, Francis underlined. "What the priest must do, assisted by the laity, catechists, and many, many people, is to help everyone understand: to understand faith, to understand love, to understand how to be friends, to understand differences, to understand how things are complementary, that one can give something and another person can give something else. This is helping to understand. ... To welcome and to listen. To welcome is to receive everyone. And to listen to everyone. I believe that in the pastoral of the Church there are many beautiful things, many good things: in catechesis, in the liturgy, in charity, with the sick ... but there is something that ... priests in particular should do more of. The apostolate of the ear: listening. ... The Lord is in the heart of every person, and one must have the patience to listen."

The Holy Father concluded by thanking all those present for their visit, and for "the beauty of the differences that make a community ... and which all make up the unity of the Church."
