



Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators

Volume 2 Issue 1 (June 2025)

ISSN (Online): 3082-3501 | ISSN (Print): 3028-2691

doi: <https://doi.org/10.63130/hijcre.v2i1.184> | Pages: 1-14

Received: May 27, 2025 | Accepted: June 9, 2025 | Published: June 30, 2025

Original Article

Walking Together: Participation of Persons with Vulnerabilities in the Synodal Process of the Catholic Church in Vietnam

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Abstract

“Synodal Church” has become a keyword in the Church’s gatherings and celebrations, global as well as local, since 2021 when the late Pope Francis launched his vision of XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Living out the spirit of communion – participation – mission together with the Universal Church, the People of God in Vietnam embarked on a journey of listening and discernment between the pastors and the faithful. The Church in Vietnam is making a great effort to extend to the margins and become more inclusive. She invites, encourages and facilitates the participation of all members. This paper presents a critical reflection on how the local Church believes and appreciates the engagement of persons with vulnerabilities: the poor, people with contagious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, orphaned children and people with disabilities, in the life of the Church in Vietnam. In numerous forms and to various extents, these groups of people actively participate in their local parishes around Vietnam. Many of such experiences have been recorded by Diocesan Caritas Organizations and published on their websites. To provide a snapshot, this paper limits itself to reviewing only some examples in Vietnamese published literature and Caritas websites of different dioceses in Vietnam. It provides insights and personal reflections of some participants about the meaning of their contributions in the Church’s activities.

Keywords: Participation, People with Disabilities, Poor, Synodal Church, Vietnam

Suggested citation:

Nguyen, N. V. A., & Pham, T. B. T. (2025). Walking Together: Participation of Persons with Vulnerabilities in the Synodal Process of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. *Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators*, 6(2), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.63130/hijcre.v2i1.184>

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Introduction

In recent weeks, both the Catholic Church and the global community have bid farewell with profound sorrow to a great spiritual figure - His Holiness Pope Francis, the beloved and venerable shepherd of the universal Church. His passing into eternal life has stirred deep emotions and heartfelt gratitude among many, who recognize his life and legacy as a divine gift to the Church, the world, and our contemporary era. Among the numerous spiritual legacies that Pope Francis leaves behind—each touching lives and transforming hearts—perhaps one of the most significant is the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, held under the theme: “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.”

As Pope Francis (2024) asserted in the Final Document, local Churches and their groupings everywhere responded with enthusiasm and made the Synodal journey one marked by Pastors listening to the People of God and discerning:

The whole Church, allowing itself to be enlightened by the Holy Spirit, was called to review its own experience and identify the steps to be taken to live communion, realize participation, and promote the mission that Jesus Christ entrusted to the Church. (p.3)

Indeed, distinct from previous synodal assemblies, Pope Francis envisioned this Synod as a multi-year, inclusive process (initiated on October 10, 2021, in Rome and concluded with the Ordinary Assembly in October 2024). It aims to enable all the faithful—without exception—to engage in a journey of listening, dialogue, and contribution. Rather than treating the Synod as a merely administrative event, the Holy Father has framed it as a deeply spiritual process of encounter, listening, and discernment (Holy See Press Office, 2023).

As part of this vision, each country—meaning each local Church—undertook the synodal process at the diocesan level, before progressing to the continental and universal phases as outlined by the Synod Secretariat. Each local Church has reported significant and context-specific outcomes shaped by its unique ecclesial, cultural, and pastoral realities (Nguyen, 2023). This article seeks to contribute to the global synodal reflection by presenting a brief overview of the synodal journey of the Catholic Church in Vietnam, with a particular focus on the participation of persons with disabilities within the Church’s life and mission.

The Catholic Church in Vietnam comprises 27 dioceses grouped into three ecclesiastical provinces: Hanoi, Hue, and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). The Catholic population is estimated at approximately 7.3 million, accounting for 7.21% of the national population. Each diocese reflects diversity and distinctiveness in its demographic and cultural composition—ranging from rural to urban contexts, from majority-Kinh- to multi-ethnic communities. In several regions, Catholics comprise 10% to 30% of the population, whereas in other areas, the figure ranges from 0.3% to 3% (The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Vietnam [CBCV], 2022).

According to national data, as of 2025, Vietnam is home to approximately 7 million persons with disabilities—representing 7.06% of the population aged two years and older. Nearly 29% of this population lives with severe or extremely severe disabilities (Medinet, 2025). Extrapolating from these statistics, it is reasonable to estimate that approximately 500,000 Catholics in Vietnam are living with disabilities. This raises an important ecclesial and pastoral question: In what ways are persons

with disabilities participating in the synodal journey of the Church? What could be the meaning of their participation?

In order to answer these questions, the paper will first look at how people with disabilities might be positioned in the Church. It will then discuss opportunities as well as challenges that people with disabilities in Vietnam may have when participating in the Church's life. Particularly, the paper shall describe some avenues for Caritas organizations in the Vietnamese Church, as the Church official and effective foundations, to reach out to people with vulnerabilities.

Methodology

The paper employs critical review as the research method. It will analyze writings and reports about the different activities and forms of participation that people with vulnerabilities demonstrate in the Church of Vietnam. These literatures have been published in printed journals and websites of various entities of the Vietnamese Catholic Church.

Findings and Discussions

The Position of People with Disabilities in the Church

Throughout history, the Church has always been concerned with and prioritized the poor. Pope Francis emphasized the importance of the Church becoming a Church for the poor and of the poor. He had repeatedly called on the Church to focus on serving those marginalized by society and to advocate for justice, always being mindful of the happiness and dignity of those forgotten (VaticanNews, 2025), especially people with disabilities, as they are often the poorest in society (Pope Francis, 2020).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the General Assembly on March 13, 2007, defines people with disabilities as those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, when interacting with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (UN, 2007).

Why are people with disabilities considered the poorest in society? This is not only because of economic difficulties but also due to the emotional and psychological challenges they face. They are often restricted in their access to employment opportunities due to societal misunderstandings and a lack of acceptance of their abilities, which diminishes their chances of finding stable work and sustainable income. Additionally, people with disabilities frequently experience stigma and discrimination from society (Naz, Anwar & Ullah, 2020). These misconceptions about the capability of people with disabilities can lead to feelings of inadequacy and social isolation. Some even lack support from their families and communities, which exacerbates their sense of loneliness and prevents them from engaging in societal and Church activities. This isolation leads to the risk of depression and hopelessness, causing them to become disheartened and lose their faith in life (Jung, Kang, Park & Jang, 2022). Therefore, people with disabilities are indeed the poorest of the poor.

Many people with disabilities ask themselves: "What can I contribute to society and the Church?" Implicitly, they carry within them the wounds of Christ. Pope Francis assured those with disabilities that the Church is truly their home, that

the Church loves them as they are, and that she needs them to fulfill her mission of serving the Gospel (Gomes, 2021). This is a great source of comfort for them.

When speaking of “the Church of the poor,” it reflects the spirit of living the Gospel, following the teachings and examples of Jesus Christ. The Church is constantly reminded that the Church of the poor originates from Christ’s actions and teachings, where He prioritized caring for the poor and fighting for social justice. This is demonstrated through the refusal to turn a blind eye to the poor and the disabled. Indeed, the poor hold a privileged place in the heart of God (Evangelii Gaudium, 197). Indifference to others is contrary to the Gospel values and makes society cold and devoid of human compassion.

Each person is a member of the Body of Christ, whether disabled, impoverished, healthy, or otherwise (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:27). When people connect with one another, no one should exclude people with disabilities or the poor, as it is only then that the Church’s image becomes truly beautiful. In this way, the poor and disabled can truly live within the Church and participate in its life. The Church can only live fully with all its dynamic members—when love and compassion are always present and spread.

It is essential to understand that poverty and disability are not choices but rather difficult circumstances that unfortunate individuals face (Belfast City Council, 2017). They might be people who have lost jobs, suffered accidents, or dealt with unexpected illnesses. Being in such a condition is not a personal choice but perhaps a consequence of societal structures (Assari, 2017). People could fall into poverty or disability at any point in life, and when that happens, help from others becomes invaluable.

A society can develop sustainably when everyone works towards common progress and happiness. Indifference to those facing difficulties is inhumane and weakens social cohesion. When people share and help one another, one not only helps the poor live a better life but also enriches his or her own spiritual values (Cregg & Cheavens, 2022; Mental Health America, 2024). Moreover, assistance does not always have to be grand acts or expensive gifts. Sometimes, a smile, a word of encouragement, or a small gesture of concern can bring hope and warmth to those in need. These actions alleviate suffering and create a better living environment where kindness and love flourish (Kumar & Epley, 2023).

Practicing compassion is not something that happens spontaneously. Education plays a crucial role in nurturing compassion and community awareness. Children need to be taught from an early age the importance of helping the poor and people with vulnerabilities and the value of sharing and compassion towards those less fortunate (Pardon et al., 2023). When these values are clearly communicated and continuously practiced, they form a solid foundation for future acts of compassion.

Participation in the Life of the Church: Opportunities and Challenges for People with Disabilities in Vietnam

Jesus affirmed: “You are my friends” (John 15:14). He has given humankind a friendship that transcends space and time, a friendship that can never be destroyed. As friends, Jesus always accompanies each person in every circumstance, even when one feels that God is absent in times of suffering due to illness (Pope Francis, 2021). In today’s society, people with disabilities remain a group that needs special attention from the community, particularly from the Church. These people are very close

friends of Jesus (Holy See Press, April 2024). People with disabilities, a group often categorized as the poorest and most marginalized, have received substantial support from Caritas Vietnam and various Caritas foundations of the dioceses. These efforts are not only about providing material support and fostering growth in faith but also about opening up opportunities for people with vulnerabilities to participate in the life of the Church, helping build a community of love, respect, equality, and sharing. Despite these efforts, much still needs to be done to scale down the challenges and obstacles vulnerable members of the Church face.

1. Opportunities

1.1 Spiritual and Mental Support

As an inclusive community, the Church provides spiritual and mental support through activities such as Mass, prayer groups, and communal prayer meetings, teaching catechism and other faith formation activities (Maisonchance, 2015; CBCV, 2021). Mental support to vulnerable groups of people comes through listening, comforting, and inspiring hope. Through visits, conversations, and listening to people with disabilities, the Church often brings messages of love, hope, and comfort that dispel their feelings of inadequacy, helping the poor and people with disabilities recognize God's overwhelming love for them so they can find meaning and purpose in their lives (Caritas BuiChu, 2024).

1.2 Personal Development and Skills

Offering education and training programs is a part of enhancing personal and skills development. Many parishes or diocesan Caritas offices regularly organize classes, life skills training, vocational training, and free or low-cost educational programs for people with disabilities and volunteers who support them. They are the extended arms of God's love to those in difficult situations, offering knowledge and skills to serve vulnerable individuals in society more effectively, helping people with disabilities develop themselves, and creating employment opportunities, enabling them to support themselves (Caritas DaNang, 2024). By attending training courses and participating in volunteer activities at parishes, people with disabilities and the poor experience joy, develop skills, build relationships, and make themselves useful to the community and society (Caritas HaiPhong, 2024). This brings them a sense of pride, confidence, and fulfillment.

1.3 Material and Financial Support

Many dioceses and parishes have established support funds and social services, such as providing food, clothing, temporary shelter, medicines, and medical aids for people with disabilities and the poor. In times of disasters and crises, Caritas offices of the dioceses and Caritas Vietnam often run emergency assistance programs for people with disabilities facing sudden difficulties, helping them overcome temporary hardships. Scholarships are provided to help send young people to schools and training courses (Caritasvietnam, 2024).

1.4 Community Integration

Through encounters and interactions with people with disabilities, dioceses and parishes strive to create a friendly, inclusive, and non-discriminatory environment that helps people with disabilities feel welcomed and respected.

Participating in parish activities helps people with disabilities and the poor build social relationships. Through these interactions and bonds, people find support from the community (Caritas SaiGon, 2022).

2. Challenges and Concerns for People with Disabilities

2.1 Physical Accessibility

Despite efforts to improve infrastructure, many churches and Church facilities are not fully adapted to serve people with disabilities. The lack of wheelchair access, accessible restrooms, and elevators are issues that need to be addressed. Besides, there remains an insufficiency of assistive technology, such as sound systems, visual aids, or interpretation services for people with disabilities. This can be a great challenge for people with vulnerabilities (Nguyen, 2023).

2.2 Barriers of Awareness and Attitude

Some members of the community may have negative attitudes or discriminate against people with disabilities and the poor. There is still a lack of goodwill to recognize the lives of people with disabilities as they truly are, lives of equal children of God to work according to their grace and talents in God's vineyard (Justin Glyn, 2023). Being unaware of the needs of people with disabilities and the poor can also lead to insufficient understanding and support for them (Merlo, 2024).

2.3 Financial Barriers

Some Church activities may require fees, making it difficult or preventing the poor and people with disabilities from being able to participate. The inability to afford tickets or means of transportation stops people from attending events and gatherings organized by Church groups. This may result in widening the gaps in terms of accessing knowledge and updating themselves to the world and society.

2.4 Communication Barriers

Difficulties and barriers in communication are a reality for many people with vulnerabilities. People with hearing or vision impairments may face challenges in accessing information and communication. There is a shortage of communication support services such as sign language interpretation services or easy-to-read materials for people with disabilities (Le & Dao, 2024).

Perhaps the greatest challenge the Church in Vietnam still faces is the stigma and prejudice from the community towards people with disabilities. These suffering individuals are sometimes seen as burdens or no longer useful. Some do not even receive spiritual care or the sacraments. Such stigma and discriminatory attitudes worsen the already deep pain of people with disabilities. Although the Church has made efforts to promote community integration for people with disabilities, changing people's perceptions of them is a long and complex process. Despite these challenges and issues, the Church, with love and compassion, continues to do everything it can to welcome people with disabilities into the heart of the Church. This love is expressed through the welcome and acceptance of people with disabilities in the Church, through the specific activities of Caritas Vietnam and diocesan Caritas foundations.

3. Caritas Vietnam's Social Charity Activities

The Social Charity Commission of Caritas Vietnam is an organization operating under the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam. Caritas Vietnam

consists of the Caritas Vietnam Office and 27 diocesan Caritas foundations (collectively referred to as Caritas Vietnam). Each diocesan Caritas group extends its services down to parishes and communities. In the light of God's Word and the teachings of the Church, all members of the Caritas family carry out charitable activities rooted in Christian charity aimed at spreading the Gospel.

The diocesan Caritas groups have implemented numerous programs and activities to support people with disabilities, helping them integrate and participate fully in church life. Some notable activities include:

1. Medical and Rehabilitation Support Programs

Caritas Vietnam regularly organizes free medical examinations, provides health insurance aids, and distributes essential medical equipment such as wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, and prosthetics. These efforts help improve the health and quality of life for people with disabilities. Indeed, for a healthy person, a wheelchair may seem insignificant, but for a person with a disability, it is an essential tool that allows them to continue their journey through life. After a four-year hiatus in distributing wheelchairs due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, Caritas Vietnam, in collaboration with Wheelchair of Love from the United States, delivered 676 wheelchairs, 100 walkers, and 100 crutches to people with disabilities in the dioceses of Hanoi and Hue. This program touched the hearts of the participants, offering them a chance to witness firsthand the struggles of elderly people who had spent years working hard, only to find their legs failing in old age, as well as young individuals suffering from strokes, workplace accidents, or congenital disabilities (Caritas Vietnam, 2023).

2. Education and Vocational Training Programs

To help people with disabilities become self-reliant and find employment, Caritas Vietnam organizes vocational training courses and scholarship programs. As a result, many individuals with disabilities have been able to secure jobs, increase their income, and gain confidence. With support from Caritas Vietnam, Caritas Vinh delivered a training course on Household Management and Economic Development for people with disabilities who can still work for their families. Through this program, people learned about suitable business types, financial management, and how to plan for improving their families' lives (Caritas Vietnam, 2023).

3. Psychological and Spiritual Support Programs

Caritas Vietnam is not only concerned with the physical health but also the spiritual and mental well-being of people with disabilities. Counseling services, community activities, and religious events help them feel loved, respected, and spiritually encouraged. In the parish of Cuu Vien in the Kê Sặt Deanery, Caritas Hai Phong convened a meeting and exchange event on Vietnamese Day of People with Disabilities. The event gathered nearly 140 people with disabilities from various parishes and groups. The day began with a solemn Eucharistic adoration, offering prayers for those suffering from physical and emotional challenges. The event allowed people with disabilities to share their stories, demonstrating resilience and optimism in overcoming hardships. An example is Nguyen Thi Hoa, who spent most of her life in a wheelchair, but now she runs a support club for others in similar situations (Hai Phong Diocese, 2023).

4. Community Development Programs

Caritas Vietnam also participates in community development activities. It includes creating support groups and organizing gatherings that allow people with disabilities to interact, learn, and develop in a respectful and inclusive environment.

The participation of people with disabilities in church life benefits them and enriches the entire church community. Thanks to the efforts of the Church and Caritas Vietnam, individuals with disabilities now have more opportunities to integrate, grow, and contribute to society. This is a testament to the love and compassion of the Church, affirming that everyone is valuable and deserving of love and respect in the eyes of God (cf. Fratelli Tutti, 107).

The “Church of the Poor” will fail if it regards itself as a place of happiness while marginalizing people with disabilities. Thus, the Church’s and every Christian’s core mission is to be a “Church of the Poor.” Despite the challenges, the Church continues to make efforts to open its arms to all members of God’s people (Caritas Vietnam, 2023).

What does it mean for People with Disabilities to Participate in Church Life?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (#280) teaches that all people are children of God, created in God’s image, and have immeasurable worth. Therefore, the invitation to involve the poor and people with disabilities in the life of the Church is not only an act of charity but also a sacred mission of the Church. Below are several important reasons why the Church must extend an invitation to the poor and people with disabilities to participate in her life.

1. Demonstrating Equality and Love

The Catholic Church consistently teaches about love and equality among all people. When the poor and people with disabilities are invited to participate in Church activities, they experience that they are not excluded and are treated equally as all other members. This helps strengthen the spirit of love, respect, and unity within the community of the parish, diocese, and beyond while also creating a positive environment for them to fully integrate into the community.



Figure 1. Persons with disabilities are invited to participate in the Synodal process—to articulate their dreams and hopes.

On June 18, 2022, in alignment with the Church's journey of Synodality, with the spirit of Communion - Participation - Mission, Bishop Joseph Đỗ Mạnh Hùng of Phan Thiết Diocese organized a Synodal Day for over 250 Caritas members and representatives of people with disabilities and people living with HIV. During this event, participants had the opportunity to speak out their hearts. Some shared that it was through the spirit of equality and love from everyone, especially the Caritas members, that people with disabilities and those living with HIV felt they could speak up, felt useful, and overcame their own negative self-perceptions. The smiles and words of encouragement from the Caritas members were the most valuable encouragements, helping people with disabilities and the poor to become braver in life and overcome their own feelings of inferiority.

2. Encouraging and Facilitating Personal Development

The poor and people with disabilities often face numerous material and spiritual challenges in life. When they are given the opportunity to participate in activities such as singing, reading scriptures during Mass, arranging flowers, or engaging in Caritas parish groups, they can develop their inherent abilities, feel useful, and gain recognition. This enhances their self-confidence and helps them find meaning and purpose in life.

Miss Maria Nguyễn Thị Hương is a member of the Caritas group at Tu Tề Parish in the Phan Thiết Diocese. She has a physical disability. Initially, she felt self-conscious about having to wear a prosthetic arm. She avoided social interactions and did not participate in any association. However, after several visits, the religious sisters in Caritas Phan Thiết invited her to lead a group of scholarship recipients. Additionally, she became involved in the Caritas activities at her parish, working alongside other members. As a result, she became more active, cheerful, confident, and diligent in attending Mass because she realized that, in God's eyes, she was still unique and valuable to the Church through her small contributions.



Figure 2. Ms. Maria Nguyễn Thị Hương (who has a physical disability) accompanied the students to participate in the summer camp organized by Caritas of the Diocese of Phan Thiết.

3. Respecting Human Dignity and Recognizing the Value of Each Person

Inviting the poor and people with disabilities to participate in Church activities shows respect for their dignity and recognizes their value (Glyn, 2022). Each

individual possesses precious qualities and has the potential to contribute to the community in their own way. This respect and recognition help them feel valued and encourage them to contribute even more as they experience a sense of “belonging.” They are not merely recipients of help but also individuals who can contribute to and engage in the life of the Church. Furthermore, they are strengthened in their faith, given the opportunity to draw closer to God. They can experience more deeply God’s presence in their lives and find the spiritual strength to face daily challenges. As shared by some people with disabilities, “We feel grateful to the Church for welcoming us. Participating in liturgical celebrations makes us feel valued and loved,” or “When we participate in Caritas activities or the choir, we realize that, regardless of the difficult circumstances, we still have a place in the Church. This is truly valuable to us.” Caritasvietnam, 2024)



Figure 3. A blind person does the reading at the Holy Mass

However, in the reality of Church life as a whole, very few people with disabilities are involved in Church activities (Final Document of Synod XVI, #36). Many people with disabilities have the ability and determination to contribute to building the Church, but they do not receive the support and encouragement from the Church to develop their abilities and integrate into the community. Some people with disabilities have shared, “We are the poorest among the poor in the Church and society.”

4. Contributing to Enriching Church Activities

Every person has unique talents and experiences. When the Church expands and invites everyone to participate, including the poor and people with disabilities, the activities of the Church will become more diverse and enriched. Their contributions, no matter how small, will add to the richness and vibrancy of the community. As Nhất Sinh (Phan Thiết Diocese), a person with visual impairment, shared: “As a disabled person, I also hope to do something for the Church, to walk alongside others, and to help those who are more disadvantaged than I am to have a better life.” He used his singing talent to raise funds for a neighbor in need of brain surgery. His good deeds have enriched the Church because the Church is made

beautiful by the life stories of many people, including the unique contributions of people with disabilities, the poor, and those living with HIV.

5. Reflecting the Church's Mission of Service and Care

One of the Church's key missions is to serve and care for the marginalized and disadvantaged in society, as part of the journey together on the pilgrimage of life (Pope Francis, 2025). As the Synod XVI Assembly confirmed, "the Church receives from Christ the gift and responsibility of being the effective leaven in bonds, relationships and kinship of the human family" (Final Document #20). Thus, inviting the poor and people with disabilities to participate in activities reflects the Church's mission of service and brings to life its teachings of compassion and concern for others. In so doing, the Church is demonstrating its vocation and prophetic service in God's plan to unite all humanity to Godself in freedom and communion (cf. LG 12). This also makes the Church appear closer and more trustworthy in the eyes of the human community.

6. Creating a Unified and Inclusive Community

Inviting people with disabilities to participate in Church activities such as reading scriptures, joining the choir, or engaging in Caritas helps create a friendly and united community. This contributes to closing the gaps and overcoming discrimination and prejudice among people. Moreover, a community of love, solidarity, and inclusion is formed when everyone participates in shared activities, regardless of wealth or ability. People will learn to respect, understand, and love each other (Glyn, 2022). This enriches parish life and contributes to building a better society.

Conclusions

The Church, as the common home for all believers, must continually strive to create an environment of love, acceptance, and inclusion for everyone, especially the poor, the marginalized, and those with disabilities. In the Church of Vietnam, vulnerable members show their participation by joining the different groups organized by parishes or Diocesan Caritas offices. Membership in these groups enables people to receive spiritual nourishment via liturgical celebrations, prayers, bible sharing, catechism, and faith formation. Their mental health, personal, social, and financial wellbeing are cared for when taking part in events and trainings tailored for them. Through this grouping, people with vulnerabilities also become volunteers to offer peers support and advocates for public awareness and societal changes.

As the paper has analyzed, while it is acknowledged that the participation of vulnerable members in the life of the Church is significantly meaningful for them as well as for the Church, local and universal, there still remain challenges and obstacles from both sides. With great effort, parish entities and Caritas organizations in Catholic dioceses around Vietnam continuously improve their services to accommodate and enlarge the activeness of people with vulnerabilities in the Church. Indeed, the involvement of the most vulnerable members of the Church demonstrates God's encompassing mercy and compassion, who created human beings in God's image and gave them invaluable dignity.

The legacy Pope Francis left behind for the Church and the world significantly marked by radical reforms, openness and communication, compassionate love, and a preferential option for the poor, all in one synodal journey together. There are reasons to trust that the Holy Spirit will continue the good work He had begun and carry it on to completion (cf. Pl 1:6) when the world celebrated Pope Leo XIV as the 267th successor of Saint Peter. Under his pontificate, the whole Church is expected to make an even bolder move into evangelization, loving care for the least and the rejected. The Church will promote the defense of human dignity, social justice and labor, dialogue with all, and the progression of unarmed and disarmed peace (Aleteia, 2025). This is the mission of every single member of the Church, with no exception.

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