



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS
IN THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL
FOR PASTORAL ASSISTANCE TO HEALTH-CARE WORKERS**

Monday, 9 March 1998

1. I am pleased with this meeting which takes place during the fourth plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health-Care Workers. I greet your President, Archbishop Javier Lozano Barragán, and thank him for his cordial words expressing, together with the sentiments of affection you share, the vitality and commitment of your young dicastery. I also greet you all, dear members, officials and consultants of the Pontifical Council, who are attending this Audience. Through you my greeting is extended with grateful appreciation to all the priests, religious, doctors, scientists, researchers and those who, with their human and ecclesial sensitivity, and according to their respective specialties, are involved in the complex world of health.

2. You intend to discuss demanding topics during these days of study, in which you will attentively examine the problems and challenges that the vast field of health care raises for the pastoral care of health. These first 13 years of activity have witnessed the dicastery's zealous and dynamic commitment in a sensitive, frequently troubled area, and have confirmed the urgent need for the ecclesial service it carries out. I look with gratitude at the many things it has been possible to achieve because of your constant concern to support the admirable, sometimes heroic, willingness of doctors, sisters and chaplains to serve the sick. The health-care apostolate, born of the Church's charity and eminently witnessed to by many saints, among whom St John of God and St Camillus de Lellis are outstanding, flourished extraordinarily over the centuries due to the activity of the religious orders and institutes dedicated to serving the sick. Today it is coordinated and promoted by the institution to which, in various ways, you belong. I myself created it in 1985, entrusting it to the enterprise of Cardinal Fiorenzo Angelini, whose intense activity I again wish to recall with appreciation and gratitude.

3. In receiving and continuing this precious legacy, you have taken charge, with a sense of responsibility and love, of the tasks which the document creating this dicastery assigned to it. You therefore carefully follow the difficult problems of health care, helping those who dedicate themselves to the service of the sick and suffering, so that their work may ever more closely meet the emerging needs in this delicate area. You are particularly concerned to collaborate with the local Churches to ensure that health-care workers are provided with appropriate spiritual assistance as well as with the opportunity to acquire a thorough knowledge of the Church's teaching on the moral aspects of illness and the meaning of human pain. Your dicastery is also attentively following the theoretical and practical problems of medicine, as well as legislative developments in the area of health-care law, with the intention

of safeguarding respect for the dignity of the person in every situation. Unfortunately the beneficial action of protecting and defending health not only encounters obstacles in the many pathogenic factors, both old and new, which threaten life on earth, but sometimes also in the mentality and conduct of individuals. Oppression, violence, war, drugs, kidnapping, the marginalization of immigrants, abortion and euthanasia are all threats to life that result from human initiative. The totalitarian ideologies that have degraded man by making him an object, trampling upon or evading basic human rights, find a worrying counterpart in certain exploitations of biotechnology that manipulate life in the name of an inordinate ambition for domination which distorts aspirations and hopes and increases anxiety and suffering.⁴ "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10): the Church, which preserves and spreads the message of salvation, takes Jesus' vivid and inspiring affirmation as her programme. Defending human health, which is your programme, reflects this mission. The concept of health cannot be limited to the mere absence of illness or of temporary organic dysfunctions. Health involves the well-being of the whole person, his biophysical, psychological and spiritual state. Therefore, in some way it also embraces his adaptation to the environment in which he lives and works. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). The objectives you pursue - such as the defence of the person's dignity in his physical and spiritual life; the promotion of study and research in the field of health care; the encouragement of adequate health-care policies; the guidance of hospital ministry - are the reflection on an operative level of the task which Jesus transmitted to his Church: to serve life! I can only urge you to fulfil this duty.⁵ The Incarnation of the Word healed all our weaknesses and ennobled human nature, raising it to supernatural dignity and making the people of Redemption one body and one mind through the action of the Holy Spirit. Precisely for this reason, every act of helping the sick, whether in the foremost health-care structures or in the simple structures of developing countries, if done with a spirit of faith and fraternal sensitivity, becomes in a very real sense a religious act. Care of the sick, if carried out in a context of respect for the person, is not limited to medical treatment or surgery, but aims at healing the whole man, restoring his interior harmony, the zest for life, the joy of love and communion. This is also the aim of your dicastery's activities in the complex and varied world of holiness, and in collaboration with similar pastoral centres of the local Churches, which co-ordinate the service of the chaplains and nursing sisters with the generous service of volunteer workers. The common goal is respect for the life of every individual who, even if functionally or organically impaired, preserves whole and entire the human dignity that is his.⁶ I keenly hope that in your work over the next few days, you will succeed in formulating appropriate practical guidelines. This is the way to achieve the original goals of the Pontifical Council, which will not fail to play its own particular role in the period of preparation for the *Great Jubilee of the Year 2000*. You will thus help the faithful to become aware that "in suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ" (Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, n. 26). Human suffering, thus transformed into the mystery of the Redeemer's suffering, becomes "the irreplaceable mediator and author of the good things which are indispensable for the world's salvation" (ibid., n. 27). Continue to offer your expert service to the national Episcopal Conferences and all the organizations involved in the health-care ministry, and the Holy Spirit, who "by his own power and by the interior union of the members ... produces and stimulates love among the faithful" (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 7), will continue to show himself to the Church at the beginning of the third millennium as "the principal agent of the new evangelization" (Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 45). As I entrust these wishes to the Blessed Virgin, who after the Annunciation of the angel expressed her immediate willingness to serve life for her cousin Elizabeth, who was soon to give birth, I cordially impart my affectionate Blessing to you and willingly extend it to those who work with you to make the service to persons tried by illness ever more effective and human. © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

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