



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO AN INTERNATIONAL HEALTH-CARE CONFERENCE**

Saturday, 8 November 1997

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. I am pleased to extend a cordial welcome to each one of you attending the 12th International Conference organized by the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health-Care Workers on the theme: "*The Church and Health in the World: Expectations and Hopes on the Threshold of the Year 2000*". I wish to express particular gratitude to Archbishop Javier Lozano Barragán for his many efforts in organizing this Symposium and for the courteous words he addressed to me on behalf of all those present. With him I greet and thank all his co-workers.

During these concentrated days of study and discussion, the various papers emphasized how complex health problems are, calling for joint, co-ordinated action for effectively involving not only health-care workers, called to offer increasingly "skilled" therapy and assistance, but also those engaged in the field of education, in the world of work, in protecting the environment and in the economic and political spheres. "To safeguard, recover and better the state of health means serving life in its totality", states the *Charter For Health-Care Workers*, drawn up by your Pontifical Council. In this perspective the lofty dignity of medical and health-care work takes the form of a collaboration with that God who in Scripture is presented as a "lover of life" (Wis 11:26). The Church commends you and encourages you in the work you undertake with generous readiness in the service of vulnerable, weak and sick life, at times leaving your homeland and even risking your lives in fulfilling your duty.

2. There are *many signs of hope present in the last part of this century*. One need only recall the "scientific, technological and especially medical progress in the service of human life, a greater

awareness of our responsibility for the environment, efforts to restore peace and justice wherever they have been violated, a desire for reconciliation and solidarity among different peoples..." (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 46).

The Church rejoices over these important achievements, which have increased hopes for life in the world. However, she cannot be silent about the 800 million people reduced to surviving in conditions of poverty, malnutrition, starvation and precarious health. Too many people, especially in poor countries, still contract illnesses that can be prevented and cured. With regard to these serious situations, world organizations are making a considerable effort to promote health-care development based on equity. They are convinced that "the struggle against inequality is both an ethical imperative and a practical necessity, and on this will depend the achievement of a health system for everyone in the whole world" (World Health Organization, *Projet de document de consultation pour l'actualisation de la strategie mondiale de la santé pour tous*, 1996, p. 8). While I express my sincere appreciation of this worthy action on behalf of our poorer brothers and sisters, I wish to address an urgent invitation to be vigilant so that human, economic and technological resources will always be fairly distributed in the various parts of the world.

I likewise urge the responsible international bodies to commit themselves to drawing up effective legal guarantees to ensure that the health of those who do not have a voice will also be promoted in its entirety and that the world of health care will be imbued with the logic of solidarity and charity rather than with the dynamics of profit. In preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000, *the year of the Lord's favour*, the Church repeats that riches must be considered a common good for all humanity (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 13), to be used in a way that fosters, without any discrimination of persons, a healthy and dignified life.

3. Health is a precious good that even today is compromised by the sin of many and is at risk from behaviour lacking proper moral standards. The Christian knows that death entered the world with sin (cf. Rom 5:12) and that vulnerability has marked human history from its very beginnings. However, sickness and pain, which accompany the journey of life, often become occasions for fraternal solidarity and of heartfelt supplication to God that he show his consoling and loving presence. "In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ *has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption*. Thus each man, in his suffering, can become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ" (*Salvifici doloris*, n. 19). Pain lived in faith leads the sick person to discover, like Job, the true face of God: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (Jb 42:5). That is not all: through his patient witness, the sick person can help even those who are caring for him to see themselves as images of Jesus who went about doing good and healing.

In this regard I would like to emphasize, as the *Charter for the Health-Care Workers* recalls, that medical health-care service is both a "therapeutic ministry" (n. 5) and "service to life". Consider yourselves collaborators with God, who, in Jesus, is shown as the "physician of souls and bodies",

so that you may really proclaim the Gospel of life.

4. Jesus Christ, the one Saviour of the world, is the ultimate Word of salvation. The love of the Father, which he gave to us, heals the deepest wounds of the human heart and calms its anxieties. For believers involved in health care Jesus' example is the motivation and model for daily commitment in the service of those who are wounded in body and spirit, to help them regain their health and be healed, in expectation of their final salvation.

Looking at the mystery of the Trinity, the health-care worker, by making decisions that respect the ontological status of the person created in the image of God, his dignity and the rules inscribed in creation, continues to tell the story of God's love for humanity. Likewise the believing scholar, by obeying the divine plan in his research, gradually brings out all the potentiality with which God has enriched creation. Study, research and technology applied to life and health must, in fact, be factors of growth for all humanity, in solidarity with and respect for the dignity of every human person, especially the weak and defenceless (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, n. 81). In no way can they become an expression of the creature's desire to replace the Creator.

5. The care of physical health must not disregard the constitutive and life-giving relationship with the interior life. It is necessary therefore *to cultivate a contemplative outlook* that "does not give in to discouragement when confronted by those who are sick, suffering, outcast or at death's door. Instead, in all these situations it feels challenged to find meaning, and precisely in these circumstances it is open to perceiving in the face of every person a call to encounter, dialogue and solidarity" (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 83). In the Church's history contemplation of God's presence in weak and sick human beings has always inspired persons and works that, with enterprising inventiveness, have expressed the infinite resources of love, as Mother Teresa of Calcutta has witnessed to in our time. She became a *good Samaritan* to every suffering and despised person, and as I noted on the occasion of her departure from this world, "she leaves us the witness of contemplation which becomes love, of love which becomes contemplation" (*Angelus, 7 September 1997*, n. 2; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 10 September 1997, p. 1).

6. The Virgin Mary, Mother of Health and Icon of Salvation, who in faith opened herself to the fullness of Love, is the highest example of the contemplation and acceptance of Life. The Church, which "by preaching and Baptism ... brings forth children, who are conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God", looks to her as her model and mother (*Lumen gentium*, nn. 63-64). To her, *Salus infirmorum*, the sick turn to receive assistance as they flock to her shrines.

May Mary, the *welcoming womb of Life*, make you ready to understand in the requests of so many sick and suffering people the need for solidarity and the "plea for help to keep on hoping when all human hopes fail" (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 67). May she be near you to make every treatment a "sign" of the kingdom.

With these wishes, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you, to your coworkers and to the sick for whom you lovingly care.

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