



The Holy See

ADDRESS TO THE SEVENTH CONGRESS OF THE INTERNATIONAL GYNAECOLOGICAL CANCER SOCIETY

30 september 1999

*Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you, the participants in the Seventh Congress of the International Gynaecological Cancer Society. I am grateful to Professor Mancuso for his words of greeting, and I wish to thank all of you for what you are doing to serve those in need of your medical expertise, especially women stricken by cancer.

In the practice of medicine, you face the most fundamental realities of human life - birth, suffering and death. You share your patients' difficulties and their most intense anxieties. You seek to offer hope and, where possible, healing. Those who undergo surgery never forget the doctors and health care specialists who welcomed them, visited them, treated them. The words of the Gospel come immediately to mind: "Come, you blessed of my Father... because I was sick and you came to my aid" (*Mt 25:36*)... "What you did to one of the least of these my brethren, you did to me" (*Mt 25:40*).

2. Doctors are guardians and servants of human life. In my Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*, I stressed the human significance and the ethical aspect of the medical profession. Today the medical profession is at a kind of crossroads: "In today's cultural and social context, in which science and the practice of medicine risk losing sight of their inherent ethical dimension, health care professionals can be strongly tempted at times to become manipulators of life, or even agents of death. In the face of this temptation their responsibility today is greatly increased. Its deepest

inspiration and strongest support lie in the intrinsic and undeniable ethical dimension of the medical profession"(No. 89).

Guardians and servants of life: this is the truth of what you are in your medical work. As gynaecologists, you care for mothers and their unborn children from conception to birth. For the child, gestation is always a time of risk and uncertainty, but when the mother is stricken with cancer the child is faced with added serious threats to health and the terrible possibility of the loss of its mother. You well know how delicate and dramatic such a situation can be, especially when the woman faces pressure from society and family to end the life within her in order to ease her own situation. In your efforts to be true "servants of life"!, I am certain that you will find light and encouragement in the Church's teaching, the fruit of two millennia of Catholic moral thought on what God has revealed regarding the human condition.

3. While there exists today strong social pressure to use the least sign of risk or alarm as justification for gynaecologists and obstetricians to have recourse to abortion, even when effective forms of treatment are available, advances in your field make it increasingly possible to safeguard both the life of the mother and the life of the child. We must be thankful for this progress and encourage further medical advances which will ensure that the dramatic cases to which I have referred are less and less frequent.

Because we are all aware of the anguish which strikes when families and gynaecologists themselves are faced with a pregnancy threatened by cancer, I give thanks to God for all that you are doing to prevent the increasingly frequent occurrence of this particular cancer in women. Work in all the different fields of cancer research needs to be promoted and supported by adequate funding from public authorities responsible for scientific research. For all the talk about the rising costs of health care, particularly in the area of cancer treatment, there is a lingering sense that too little is being done and too little spent on health education and cancer prevention. Nor should there be any hesitation about pointing out clearly that cancer can be the result of people's behaviour, including certain sexual behaviour, as well as of the pollution of the environment and its effects on the body itself.

4. Thinking about your role in the service of life, I cannot but mention the importance of your utmost commitment when young mothers are stricken with cancer and face premature death. No doubt, when this happens, the gynaecologist or obstetrician, more accustomed to contact with new life coming to birth, experiences a deep sense of participation in the pain of others, and perhaps even a feeling of frustration and helplessness.

A life that is coming to an end is no less precious than a life that is beginning. It is for this reason that the dying person deserves the greatest respect and the most loving care. At its deepest level, death is somewhat like birth: both are critical and painful moments of passage which open on to a life which is richer than what has gone before. Death is an exodus, after which it is possible to see the face of God who is the wellspring of life and love, just as a baby, once born, will be able see the face of its parents. This is the reason why the Church speaks of death as a second birth.

Today so many issues regarding the care of cancer patients are under discussion. Both reason and faith require that we resist every temptation to end a patient's life by a deliberate act of omission or by active intervention, because "euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 65). Nothing, not even a patient's request - which more often than not is a cry for help -, can justify the taking of a life which is precious in the eyes of God and which can be a great gift of love to a family even in the suffering of the final days.

In view of the proposals being made here and there to legislate in favour of euthanasia and assisted suicide, let me stress that "to concur with the intention of another person to commit suicide and to help in carrying it out through so-called - assisted suicide means to cooperate in, and at times to be the actual perpetrator of an injustice which can never be excused, even if it is requested" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 66). Neither can the so-called 'self-determination' of the dying person be encouraged or justified when it means in fact that a doctor helps to terminate life, which is the very ground of every free and responsible act

What is needed today in treating cancer patients is the care which includes effective and accessible forms of treatment, relief of pain, and the ordinary means of support. Ineffective treatment or treatment which aggravates suffering should be avoided, as also the imposition of unusual and extraordinary therapeutic methods. Vitally important is the human support available to the dying person, since "the request which arises from the human heart in the supreme confrontation with suffering and death, especially when faced with the temptation to give up in utter desperation, is above all a request for companionship, sympathy and support in the time of trial" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 67).

5. Dear friends, as the twentieth century and the second millennium of the Christian era draw to a close, you have come to Rome as men and women who are building upon the magnificent work of your predecessors in this century and this millennium. The twentieth century has known its human catastrophes, but surely among its triumphs has been the extraordinary advance of medical research and treatment (cf. *Fides et Ratio*, 106). In the light of this, and even more as we look back a thousand years, how can we not applaud those who have led the way and how can we fail to praise God who is the source of all enlightenment and healing? To look back like this is to understand humbly that we journey on a path marked out by the insight and self-sacrifice of others; seeing how far we have come, we renew our hope at this turning-point that the power of death will be overcome as God wills.

In the great task of combatting cancer and serving life, you are not alone. The whole human family is with you; the Church throughout the world looks to you with respect. I assure you all of a special remembrance in my own prayers, and I entrust your noble work to the intercession of the Mother of Christ, *Salus Infirmorum - Health of the Sick*.

Invoking upon you the grace and peace of her Son who healed the sick and raised the dead to life, I entrust you and your loved ones to the loving protection of Almighty God.

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