



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II TO THE 15th INTERNATIONAL HEALTH-CARE CONGRESS

Friday, 17 November 2000

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I am pleased with this meeting, which allows me to bring you my greetings on the occasion of the 15th international congress organized by the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health-Care Workers. I extend a particular greeting to the President of the Pontifical Council, Archbishop Javier Lozano Barragán, whom I thank for the sentiments he has expressed on behalf of everyone present. I express my deep satisfaction to the organizers, as well as to the distinguished scholars, scientists, researchers and experts who have wished to honour this conference with their presence and professional contribution.

The days of the congress, which this year is discussing the important and complex theme "*Health Care and Society*", will help you to examine the new biomedical technologies and the difficult questions posed to the world of health care by the profound social changes now taking place. Your meeting has encouraged a fruitful dialogue and a cultural and religious exchange between qualified workers in the health sector.

2. The theme of the congress highlights a reality of great importance and one in continual transition, which should be carefully analyzed. In particular, you have raised the problem of the relationship between society and institutions on the one hand and those who manage the means of health care, on the other. Profound changes are affecting the traditional structures of a society that is increasingly globalized and has difficulty in relating to the individual, while medicine is involved in developing diagnostic and therapeutic methods which are ever more complex and effective, but often available only to limited groups of people. Today the role of environmental causality in the genesis of certain diseases is also well known because of social pressure and the powerful impact of technology on individuals. Therefore, it is necessary to recover certain criteria of ethical and anthropological discernment, which make it possible to judge whether the decisions taken by medicine and health care are really suited to the human being they must serve.

3. But prior to that, medicine must answer the question about the very essence of its mission. One wonders whether medical care finds its *raison d'être* in preventing illness and, when possible, in overcoming it, or whether one must accept every request for physical intervention because it is technically possible. The question becomes even broader if one considers the concept of health itself. Today an idea of health restricted solely to physiological well-being and the absence of suffering is commonly recognized as insufficient. As I wrote in my Message for the [World Day of the Sick](#) in this Jubilee Year, "health, based on an anthropology that respects the whole person, far from being identified with the mere absence of illness, strives to achieve a fuller harmony and healthy balance on the physical, psychological, spiritual and social level. In this perspective, the person himself is called to mobilize all his available energies to fulfil his own vocation and the good of others" (n. 13). This is a complex concept of health, which is more consonant with today's sensibilities and is aware of the balance and harmony of the person as a whole: you do well to focus your attention on this issue.

The question I asked above is important because the profile of future health-care workers depends on it, as does the style of the health centres which one intends to establish and the very model of medicine which we want to guide us: medicine at the service of the individual's total well-being, or, on the contrary, medicine marked by technical and organizational efficiency. You know that a medical science on the wrong track would soon endanger not only the life of the individual, but society itself. Medicine that aimed primarily at increasing its knowledge for the sake of its own technological efficiency would betray its original ethos, opening the door to harmful developments. Only by serving man's total well-being can medicine contribute to his progress and happiness, and not become an instrument of manipulation and death.

4. Distinguished biomedical scientists, in your activities you know well how to respect the methodological and hermeneutical laws proper to scientific research. You are convinced that they are not an arbitrary burden, but an indispensable help that guarantees the reliability and communicability of the results obtained. May you always recognize with equal care the ethical norms at whose centre lies the human being with his dignity as a person: respect for his right to be born, to live and to die in a worthy manner is the basic imperative which must always inspire medical practice. Do everything you can to sensitize the social community, the national health-care systems and their leaders, so that the considerable resources directed to research and technical applications will always have the total service of life as their goal.

Yes, the centre of attention and care both of the health-care system and of society must always be the person, considered in the concrete circumstances of his family, work, social context and geographical area. Reaching out to a sick person thus means reaching out to a person who is suffering, and not merely treating a sick body. This is why a commitment with the features of a vocation is asked of health-care workers. Experience teaches you that the sick person is asking for more than a mere cure of the organic pathologies affecting him. He expects support from the doctor in order to face the disquieting mystery of suffering and death. To give the sick and their relatives reasons for hope in the face of the pressing questions that beset them: this is your mission. The Church is close to you and shares this impassioned service to life with you.

5. In a globalized society like today's, with increased technical potential but also new difficulties, you have paid special attention during your congress to the new diseases of the 21st century. Nor have you failed to look at the conditions of

health care in certain regions of the world which lack policies of support for primary care. In this regard, I have often had occasion to call on the responsibility of governments and international organizations. Unfortunately, despite praiseworthy efforts, in recent decades the inequalities among peoples have seriously worsened. I appeal once again to those responsible for the destiny of nations to do all they can to encourage suitable conditions for solving such tragic situations of injustice and marginalization.

6. Despite the shadows that still fall on many countries, Christians look with hope at the vast and varied world of health care. They know they are called to evangelize it with the vigour of their daily witness, in the certainty that the Spirit continually renews the face of the earth, and that with his gifts he constantly spurs people of good will to open themselves to the call of love. Perhaps it will be necessary to take new paths to find suitable answers to the expectations of so many suffering people. I am confident that those who sincerely seek the total well-being of the person will not lack the necessary light from on high to undertake appropriate initiatives in this regard.

Dear brothers and sisters, may Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom and Health of the Sick, invoked in Tradition as the New Eve, guide your way. You are committed to one of the noblest causes: the defence of life and the promotion of health. May the Lord sustain you in your quest and always grant you new zeal in your most noble service to your fellow men and women.

With this hope, which becomes a prayer, I impart my Blessing to you all.

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