



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HOLY FATHER FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE MEETING
ORGANIZED BY THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION
OF CATHOLIC MEDICAL ASSOCIATIONS**

*Clementine Hall
Friday, 20 September 2013*

Please excuse the delay, there were complications today on account of the audiences ... forgive me please.

1. The first reflection that I would like to share with you is this: today we are witnessing a *paradoxical situation*, which concerns the medical profession. On the one hand, we note — and we thank God for it — the advances made in medicine, thanks to the work of scientists who passionately and unsparingly dedicate themselves to the search for new cures. On the other hand, however, we also find the danger of a doctor losing his own identity as a servant of life. Cultural disorientation has beset what seemed to be an unassailable sphere: yours, medicine!

Although, by their very nature, healthcare professions are at the service of life, they are sometimes induced to disregard life itself. Yet, as the Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* reminds us: "Openness to life is at the centre of true development". There is no true development without this openness to life. "If personal and social sensitivity towards the acceptance of a new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable for society also wither away. The acceptance of life strengthens moral fibre and makes people capable of mutual help" (n. 28). This paradoxical situation may be seen in the fact that, while persons are being accorded new rights — at times even presumed rights — life itself is not always protected as a primary value and primordial right of every human being. The final aim of the doctor's action is always the defence and promotion of life.

2. The second point: *in this context of contradiction, the Church makes an appeal to consciences*, to the consciences of all healthcare professionals and volunteers, and especially to you

gynaecologists, who are called to assist in the birth of new human lives. Yours is a singular vocation and mission, which requires study, conscientiousness and humanity. There was a time when women who helped in the delivery were called “comadre” [co-mothers, midwives]: like one mother with another, with the real mother. You, too, are “co-mothers” and “co-fathers”, you too.

A widespread mentality of the useful, the “culture of waste” that today enslaves the hearts and minds of so many, comes at a very high cost: it asks for the elimination of human beings, especially if they are physically or socially weaker. Our response to this mentality is a decisive and unreserved “yes” to life. “The first right of the human person is his life. He has other goods and some are more precious, but this one is fundamental — the condition of all the others” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on procured abortion*, 18 November 1974, n. 11). Things have a price and can be sold, but people have a dignity; they are worth more than things and are above price. So often we find ourselves in situations where we see that what is valued the least is life. That is why concern for human life in its totality has become in recent years a real priority for the Church's Magisterium, especially for the most defenseless; i.e., the disabled, the sick, the newborn, children, the elderly, those whose lives are most defenseless.

In a frail human being, each one of us is invited to recognize the face of the Lord, who in his human flesh experienced the indifference and solitude to which we so often condemn the poorest of the poor, whether in developing countries or in wealthy societies. Every child who, rather than being born, is condemned unjustly to being aborted, bears the face of Jesus Christ, bears the face of the Lord, who even before he was born, and then just after birth, experienced the world's rejection. And every elderly person – I spoke of children: let us move to the elderly, another point! And every elderly person, even if he is ill or at the end of his days, bears the face of Christ. They cannot be discarded, as the “culture of waste” suggests! They cannot be thrown away!

3. The third aspect is a mandate: *be witnesses and diffusers of the “culture of life”*. Your being Catholic entails a greater responsibility: first of all to yourselves, through a commitment consistent with your Christian vocation; and then to contemporary culture, by contributing to recognizing the transcendent dimension of human life, the imprint of God's creative work, from the first moment of its conception. This is a task of the new evangelization that often requires going against the tide and paying for it personally. The Lord is also counting on you to spread the “gospel of life”.

Within this perspective, hospital departments of gynecology are privileged places of witness and evangelization, for wherever the Church becomes “the bearer of the presence of God”, there, too, she becomes the “instrument of the true humanization of man and the world” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization*, n. 9).

By fostering an awareness that the human person in his frailty stands at the centre of all medical and healthcare work, the healthcare facility becomes “a place in which the relationship of treatment is not a profession” — your relationship of treatment is not a profession — “but a

mission; where the charity of the Good Samaritan is the first seat of learning and the face of suffering man is the Christ's own Face" (Benedict XVI, *Address at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart*, 3 May 2012).

Dear friends and physicians, you are called to care for life in its initial stage; remind everyone, by word and deed, that this is sacred — at each phase and at every age — that it is always valuable. And not as a matter of faith — no, no — but of reason, as a matter of science! There is no human life more sacred than another, just as there is no human life qualitatively more significant than another. The credibility of a healthcare system is not measured solely by efficiency, but above all by the attention and love given to the person, whose life is always sacred and inviolable.

Never fail to ask the Lord and the Virgin Mary for the strength to accomplish your work well and to bear witness courageously — courageously! Today courage is needed — to bear witness courageously to the “gospel of life”! Thank you very much.