



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE 23rd INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS
ORGANIZED BY THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL
FOR HEALTH PASTORAL CARE**

Clementine Hall

Saturday, 15 November 2008

*Your Eminence,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Distinguished Professors,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am glad to meet you on the occasion of the 23rd annual International Congress organized by the Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care. I cordially greet Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán, President of the Dicastery, and thank him for his courteous words on your behalf. I extend my gratitude to the Secretary, to the collaborators of this Pontifical Council, to the speakers, to the academic authorities, to the important figures, to those in charge of health-care institutions, to health-care workers and to those who have offered their collaboration by taking part in various ways in the organization of the Congress whose theme this year is: *"Pastoral care in the treatment of sick children"*. I am sure that these days of reflection and discussion on such a topical subject will contribute to sensitizing public opinion on the duty to give children all the attention they need for their harmonious physical and spiritual development. If this applies to all children, it is even more important for those who are sick and in need of special medical treatment.

Thanks to the contribution of experts of world renown and people directly in touch with children in difficulty, the theme of your Congress, which ends today, has enabled you to highlight the difficult situation in immense regions of the earth in which a rather large number of children are still living and to propose necessary, indeed, urgent interventions to come to their help. Medicine has certainly made considerable progress in the past 50 years: this has led to a substantial reduction of infant mortality, although much still remains to be done with this in view. It suffices to remember,

as you pointed out, that each year four million newborn babies die within 26 days of birth.

In this context, the treatment of the sick child is a topic that cannot fail to raise attentive interest of all those who are dedicated to health pastoral care. A detailed analysis of the current state of affairs is indispensable in order to undertake, or continue, a decisive action aimed at preventing illnesses as far as possible and, when they are present, at curing the small patients by means of the most modern discoveries of medical science as well as by promoting better standards of hygiene and sanitation, especially in the less fortunate countries. The challenge today is to ward off the onset of many pathologies once characteristic of childhood and, overall, to encourage the growth, development and maintenance of good health for all children.

All are involved in this vast action: families, doctors and social and health-care workers. Medical research is sometimes confronted by difficult decisions when it is a question, for example, of reaching a proper balance between the continuation or abandonment of therapy to ensure adequate treatment for the real needs of the small patients without succumbing to the temptation of experimentation. It is not superfluous to remember that the focus of every medical intervention must always be to achieve the true good of the child, considered in his dignity as a human being with full rights. Thus it is always necessary to care for him lovingly, to help him to face suffering and sickness, even before birth, as his situation requires. Then taking into account the emotional impact of the illness and treatment to which the child is subjected which are quite often particularly invasive, it is important to ensure constant communication with his relatives. If health-care workers, doctors and nurses feel the burden of the suffering of the little patients they are assisting, one can easily imagine how much more acutely their parents must feel it!

The medical and human aspects must never be separated and it is the duty of every nursing and health-care structure, especially if it is motivated by a genuine Christian spirit, to offer the best of both expertise and humanity. The sick person, especially the child, understands in particular the language of tenderness and love, expressed through caring, patient and generous service which in believers is inspired by the desire to express the same special love that Jesus reserved for children. "*Maxima debetur puero reverentia*" (Juvenal, *Satire xiv*, v. 479): the ancients already acknowledged the importance of respecting the child who is a gift and a precious good for society and whose human dignity, which he fully possesses even unborn in his mother's womb, must be recognized. Every human being has a value in himself because he is created in the image of God in whose eyes he is all the more precious the weaker he appears to the human gaze. Thus, with what great love should we also welcome a unborn child who is already affected with medical pathologies! "*Sinite parvulos venire ad me*", Jesus says in the Gospel (cf. Mk 10: 14), showing us the attitude of respect and acceptance with which we must look after every child, especially when he is weak and in difficulty, suffering and defenceless. I am thinking above all of little orphans or children abandoned because of the poverty and the disintegration of their family; I am thinking of children who are the innocent victims of AIDS or of war and of the many armed conflicts that are being fought in various parts of the world; I am thinking of children who died because of poverty,

drought and hunger. The Church does not forget her smallest children and if, on the one hand she applauds the initiatives of the richer nations to improve the conditions of their development, on the other, she is strongly aware of the need to invite them to pay greater attention to these brothers and sisters of ours, so that thanks to our unanimous solidarity they are able to look at life with trust and hope.

Dear brothers and sisters, while I express the wish that the many conditions of imbalance that still exist may be set right as soon as possible with decisive interventions on behalf of these small brothers and sisters, I also express my deep appreciation of those who dedicate their energy and material resources to serving them. I am thinking with special gratitude of our *Bambino Gesù* Hospital and of the numerous Catholic social and health-care associations and institutions which, following the example of Jesus Christ the Good Samaritan, and inspired by his charity, offer human, moral and spiritual support and relief to so many suffering children, loved by God with special predilection. May the Blessed Virgin, Mother of every human being, watch over sick children and protect all those who do their utmost to nurse them with humane consideration and a Gospel spirit. With these sentiments, as I express my sincere appreciation of the work of sensitization achieved at this International Congress, I assure you of my constant remembrance in prayer and impart the Apostolic Blessing to all.

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