

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, distinguished representatives of Christian confessions, esteemed leaders of the monotheistic religions, it is a great joy to be with you for the signing of this Joint Declaration on an issue that is of critical importance today. There are three main reasons that have led me to conclude that the times we live in are so important.

1. Importance of the Question.

We are all aware that euthanasia and assisted suicide have become the object of extensive study in contemporary society. The debate does not take place only within the scientific and medical community, where indeed significant healthcare resources are made available by the medical profession in the final days of earthly life. It is also conducted within the broader framework of popular culture which devotes increasing attention to end-of-life issues. New choices are becoming available, but it is our common responsibility to deal with them in a way that protects society and respects the human dignity of every individual. In that context, it is crucial to emphasize our clear and decisive undertaking: we neither want to hasten the death of any dying person nor assist any person to take his or her own life.

In addition, the Declaration we are about to sign is a manifestation of the most authentic spirit of medicine and healthcare professions. Medicine is not about giving or taking away patients' lives. Ending a life is a denial of life's meaning. We know that this is an area where making clear distinctions is difficult, but our never-ending search for meaning, which sickness makes difficult, is a task that all society must shoulder. Society, and culture, is called on to devote all its resources—relationships, symbols, narratives and art, as well as religion—to finding and preaching the genuine meaning of life. Medicine has a role to play in this process, but it is a relatively limited one: initiate care for a person who is sick and determine which protocols would be the most effective in restoring the patient to health, taking wisely into account the limits imposed by the illness itself and by the resources that the medical profession has at its disposal. On the one

hand, the medical profession is not required to employ protocols offering little or no hope of a cure, or to seek to prolong life indefinitely, but on the other hand it must always show its care for the patient, even when an illness is hopeless.

The practice of palliative care emphasizes this point. For this reason, the Declaration underlines their importance and our commitment, both to make their value known and to have them adopted everywhere, including in the university environment. Their aim is integral care for human person, starting with pain management and taking into account all the patient's many human dimensions, with a recognition of the spiritual reality that is a part of all human existence. And there is no question of any collusion between palliative care and ideologies that do not support respect for life at every stage. Indeed, the exact opposite is true, as was made clear in 2002 by the World Health Organization when it stated that palliative care is meant neither to accelerate nor indiscriminately delay the moment of death. Their purpose is to accompany patients, and their families, in a competent and comprehensive way, using a multi disciplinary team approach, in the delicate process of dying.

2. The interreligious and ecumenical dimension

Our event today has a particular value because it reveals our desire to reach agreements and convergences, while in much of today's world it seems, sadly and all too often, that division and opposition prevail. Certainly we need dialogue and willingness to accept each other, as our path together in the drafting of this Joint Declaration demonstrates. But it is of fundamental importance for us to realize—and to testify to everyone—that undertaking a shared journey, thoughtfully and courageously, leads to the discovery of areas of convergence and allows us to harvest the fruits of communion. The process is not automatic. It requires an act of the will and an exercise of reason. If we are willing to work together to serve the men and women of our world, whom we see as sons and daughters of God, we can in turn see ourselves more and more as brothers and sisters, called to answer together the questions all of us are facing. Today, therefore, we also

celebrate a step toward building that culture of encounter that Pope Francis has taught us to appreciate and practice, and that we also want to develop. As we read in the Abu Dhabi document on human brotherhood, this is a basis on which we can “adopt the culture of dialogue as a course of action; common collaboration as a regular practice and reciprocal understanding as a methodology and a criterion.” This is a work that cannot be improvised “off the cuff.” It has to be the result of a commitment that is based first of all on the individual conscience and that radiates out to the institutions with which we collaborate. In this sense, dialogue is a virtue. It is not a single act, but rather an orientation that is purposely and permanently cultivated, a lifestyle that adopts the search for, and the choice of, the good in concrete situations and in individual issues that are addressed.

And here is a second element: protecting and promoting human dignity with greater force and intensity in that delicate and vulnerable moment that is the moment of death. Recognizing and neutralizing the tactics that would lead to renouncing that solidarity which alone makes it possible to face the suffering and the limitation that death represents. The fact that the Abrahamic religions have reached an agreement expressing their shared commitment is an important event. That broad base, which affects a significant portion of humanity (several billion persons!), could make possible an important contribution, practical and not only theoretical, to a deeper understanding of the meaning of life through an understanding of the relationships lived out in the community of believers and of the witness to our common responsibility to care for each other.

3. The journey continues

Certainly the objectives we have achieved so far are not the end but are simply stops on our journey, and they urge us forward. Several possible developments that require our commitment are now appearing. We must make known and spread not only the contents of the Declaration, but also the process that made the Declaration possible. We need to involve others in this process, which is characterized by collaboration and

dialogue, both in the religious communities to which each of us belongs and in reaching out to other communities and their leaders. In that context, all of us share in the joy and encouragement that comes today from learning that, even as we are celebrating our accomplishment here in the Vatican, with His Holiness Pope Francis, the World Medical Association, meeting in Tbilisi, Georgia has again affirmed its resolute opposition to euthanasia and assisted suicide.

In addition, we also want to broaden the reach of our communication, involving other persons who realize the importance of the message we want to communicate. This means becoming a leaven in the societies in which our communities live and reaching out to all men and women of good will, in their different roles and offices. We need to not only discover but also create opportunities where this can happen. This requires us to be present in the public square, communicating in ways that can be understood by persons who think in categories that interpret the world and human life in ways different from ours but have at heart the dignity of all human beings and who search for justice that honors them in the concrete situations of life . The language of the Declaration clearly shows our awareness of this task and offers various possibilities for effective mediation. It is with this hope for the future that we want to celebrate our accomplishment today.