

The Good News of Jesus: The Foundation of a Culture of Life

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Your Excellency,
Mister President,
Dear Delegates,

Today the human condition, globalized like never before, is living out a unique period of rapid change. We appreciate all the great benefits these changes have brought. Indeed, many indicators show an improvement in the quality of life for an increasing number of individuals. But there are also negatives, sometimes violent and tragic. Healthcare is certainly an area where technical progress is showing amazing possibilities together with disruptive social and cultural limitations. The imbalance between rich countries and poor, or between different levels of society within a single country, shows the inability of technology and its processes to solve the mystery of human existence.

Taken by a frenzied quest for results—luckily, encouraging results—we run the serious risk of forgetting humanity itself, or of considering only its pathologies that challenge the medical arts.

In addition, the untouchable dignity of every single human person (fruit of Christian thinking) is, increasingly, showing its limits as it leads to narcissistic individualism. The deceptive myth of self-sufficiency that leads to the disappearance of accountability tends to prefer an empty solitude to the fullness of family and social bonds. Here too, in India, albeit in ways different from what is happening in the West, there are worrisome signs of the dissolution of social ties, and frictions, perhaps understandable, even in the area of healthcare and accompaniment.

The culture of accompaniment is, in truth, the paradigm for all of our lives together. The gift of mutual accompaniment, bonding each to each, the sick to the healthy, doctor to patient, is a true indicator of humanity. It is how humans live and die. It is also the framework for the doctor-patient relationship. We have to demonstrate in person, in word and deed, that human life is to be accompanied from when it begins inside its mother and throughout all the years of its development. Every age needs to be accompanied. No age is separate from the others. The defense and promotion of life is about the whole of life, from the fight against abortion and against violence to children and adolescents, to the struggle to give young people a future and women their full dignity, to unquestionable opposition to war, hunger, the death penalty and euthanasia. It is a commitment to bring about a new humanistic vision to contemporary globalization, which now runs the risk of being subordinated to a dictatorship of technology and markets.

Jesus, a doctor: He cares for and heals

Speaking to Christian physicians and other healthcare practitioners as a bishop and as President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, I want to offer you a reflection on healing and healthcare in a Christian context. I want to capture the sense of the Church's mission in this area and convince you that the Church's mission is also the mission of physicians and all healthcare personnel. Without the spiritual energy that your mission confers, it is more difficult to understand and live out what I have no hesitation in calling the exalted vocation of caring for the sick and returning them to health. And I cannot but begin with what the Gospels tell us about how Jesus related to the sick. For Jesus, this was at the very heart of the Gospel message. Healing the sick is a clear sign, concrete and tangible, that God has entered human history as a healer who cares for and heals His people, at every moment until the Kingdom comes in its fullness. Christianity is not an ideology, it is not a doctrine, it is not morals. Christianity is an experience of God, who stands next to us, helps us to live justly, delivers us from the power of the Devil, conquers evil and death, and saves us.

Already in the Old Testament we read about numerous pleas to God for healing. One episode involves Hezekiah, King of Judah. When he fell sick he turned to the Lord, saying, "Heal me and let me live." (Is 38: 16). In this twofold plea, we find both the expectation of healing and of a life preserved. We could translate the passage: "Let me last, let me live, make me well forever."

Curing sickness is a constant part of Jesus' mission. The evangelists summarize His work under two headings: "Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people."(Mt 4,23) The evangelist continues: "So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them."(Mt. 4, 24-25) And the scene depicted by Luke is beautiful: "Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any that were sick with various diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them." (Lk 4,40).

Jesus' wonder-working action differed from that of the other healers of those days. It was, in fact, consistent with the biblical tradition where God intervenes in human history as a God who heals his people and saves them by giving them a full and peaceful life. In the Old Testament only once is God described as being a "doctor": "I am the Lord, your healer." (Ex 15:26); but the pages of the Old Testament are full of pleas for healing. If the prayers, invocations and even demands that the sick psalmist addresses to God were compiled, the collection would be a true "psalter of the sick." The Lord always visits His people and heals them from illness. It is in this perspective of

deliverance from illness that the Messianic age is looked for—a time when illness is conquered and healing is full. Jesus does not keep this power for Himself. He gives it to his disciples as well. The evangelist writes, "He gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease." And a little further on he adds: "As you go, preach this message: The kingdom of heaven is near. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, drive out demons" (Mt. 10:8). The mission of the disciples is modeled on that of Jesus: proclaiming the Gospel and healing the sick. Healing is therefore not something added to the proclamation. Healing the sick is the concrete and visible sign that the Kingdom of God has begun. That is why Jesus insists: "Heal, raise the dead, cure, drive out devils!" It was necessary for disciples to continue His work; nay, to expand it: "Amen, amen I say to you, he that believeth in me, the works that I do, he also shall do; and greater than these shall he do." (Jn. 14:12). These words clearly express the power given to the disciples.

The Christian community and healing

Christian communities, from antiquity, have not hesitated to call Jesus "the physician of Christians" and the Church "a true hospital." Irenaeus wrote: "The Lord has come as a doctor for those who are sick." And Origen taught, "Know that in the Gospels Jesus healed all weakness and illness, not only when these healings took place according to the flesh, but he still heals today. Know that has not come down only among those of his time, but He comes down among us every day. Behold, He is with us every day until the end of the world." There are many quotes along these lines, from what we read in the Liturgy of St. Mark: "Lord ... Doctor of the Souls and Bodies, come to us and heal." to an ancient Christian inscription: "Please, Lord, come to my aid, you are the only physician."

For the Christian community curing disease was a constant and was always directed toward the goal of full healing. That is why prayer was always a part of the patient's care. This did not mean underestimating the doctor's skill. Quite the contrary. Sirach asks that the doctor be honored: "Make friends with the doctor, for he is essential to you; God has also established him in his profession. From God the doctor has wisdom, and from the king he receives sustenance. Knowledge makes the doctor distinguished, and gives access to those in authority. God makes the earth yield healing herbs which the prudent should not neglect; Was not the water sweetened by a twig, so that all might learn his power? He endows people with knowledge, to glory in his mighty works, Through which the doctor eases pain, and the druggist prepares his medicines. Thus God's

work continues without cease in its efficacy on the surface of the earth. My son, when you are ill, do not delay, but pray to God, for it is he who heals. Flee wickedness and purify your hands; cleanse your heart of every sin. Offer your sweet-smelling oblation and memorial, a generous offering according to your means. Then give the doctor his place lest he leave; you need him too, For there are times when recovery is in his hands. He too prays to God that his diagnosis may be correct and his treatment bring about a cure."(Sir 38: 1-14).

The relationship between Church and illness, between the Christian community and healing, between a physician and a patient, is part of Jesus' own mission. Church and Medicine have the same goal: heal the sick. The two terms, "care for" and "heal," can be interchangeable, even though there is a nuance of difference. Healing, in fact, goes beyond care and leads towards the fullness of life in the Kingdom of God. Jesus the healer means He gives health to the sick, but always with a view to the fullness of the Kingdom. For the Christian community, the curing of disease has never lacked this utopian element, but it has a community dimension as well: the whole people is saved. Prayer, which is a recognition of God's otherness, has always been part of the patient's care, without taking anything away from respect for the doctor's skill.

God came to save mankind in its totality. Illness is therefore not a mere biological fact: it becomes a metaphor for life, it shows the radical weakness of life and its need for God as our Savior. Man is "dust"(as the Book of Genesis says), or is a "vessel of clay"(as Paul writes). But God takes care of this dust: not only breathing life into it, but also caring for it, defending it, healing it when it weakens. The condition of a sick person reminds us what we are made of and lets us appreciate our need to rely on others. This is a very important lesson today when culture is devoted to the worship of health at any cost, to the illusion of omnipotence leading to immortality. Cardinal Martini wrote, "Illness is part of life ... It is not an accident, it is rather a revelation of the limited state that is a normal part of the human condition, something that defines me as fragile, weak, uncertain, lacking. It reveals clearly what is hidden in me even when I'm feeling well. And I fear it, because I do not want the truth of my limits, my poverty, to become known."

In this regard, I think it is important today to understand fragility. Usually considered just harmful, the full depth of fragility needs to be discovered. Fragility is certainly a "wound"; it needs listening, kindness, love, companionship. Independence and self-sufficiency are its opposite, so is full health. A society made up of strong and self-sufficient individuals is cruel and inhuman. Instead, people who are aware of their fragility know they need others, they know how to call for help, they know how to pray, they know how to call forth solidarity and reweave the torn fabric of

relationships. Those who, deceiving themselves, think they are strong are in reality just arrogant, quarrelsome, petty and dictatorial. The Apostle Paul writes: "When I am weak I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). The Apostle's weakness shows forth God's power. The fragility of those who are ill helps the healthy realize their own fragility. For a more human society, it is crucial to recognize that fragility is one of the bearing walls of life: it helps us to discover the value of gentleness and mildness, of listening and of attention to others, but also the value of being in communion with the sufferings, the expectations and hopes of others. An extraordinary communion is created between those who care and who are cared for, among those who assist and who are assisted.

Illness means pain and suffering. It is part of the mystery of human existence. We can and must fight both suffering and pain. I hardly think we can eliminate them, but we must always accompany them. That is one of the keys called for by the centrality of care. God himself, who does not protect us from all pain, is always with us in every pain. Loving companionship is the most important care for the sick person. Illness is not just a medical problem. It is a cry for help, for love, because life becomes more intense in the presence of persons who feel hurt and weak. It is important to emphasize the therapeutic power of the physician, and the Christian community, for the sick, especially in a society that, with its social imbalances and its marginalization processes, aggravates the already radical weakness of every person.

The doctor: an exalted mission

It is within this framework that I believe we must place the work of a Christian doctor, and anyone else who deals with the sick. Ethical care does not hinder the carrying out of technical skills or conformity with professional regulations, which are obviously necessary. But it is important to create a deep relationship between the doctor and the patient, which is far more than the one between a technician and an illness. You experience it every day: the sick need not only need medical care, drugs and technology, they also need love, relationship, listening, looking into one another's eyes, and feeling the comfort that compassion offers.

The Gospel asks for the sick to be seen as the privileged part of humanity that benefits from technical-scientific skills, together with love and with commitment to their healing. This attitude is not automatic. It requires a real conversion, a movement of the heart that leads persons to give their love, to give their life, for others; to bond deeply with one who is ill. Too often doctors, nurses, priests, relatives, stand at the bedside of a sick person, content with their own health and out of touch with the suffering of the patient. It's a distance that the sick person perceives. In these

circumstances, let us not forget the work of mercy in which Jesus Himself presents himself as the sick person we visit.

The therapeutic strength of love needs to be added to necessary scientific professionalism. Unfortunately, this dimension seems to be lost even in Christian communities. And yet, the history of the Church is full of holy wonder-workers. Here I allow myself just a nod to the need to recover a spirituality of healing. Even today miracles are possible. And I'm not talking about magic. Healing the sick requires doctors and believers with pure hearts. Cyprian of Carthage writes that personal holiness itself can work wonders, "When we are chaste and pure, modest in our actions, restrained in our speech, we can even heal the sick." I remember Saints Cosmas and Damian, martyrs of the third century. Their portraits are in Rome, in the Basilica of the same name, dressed in white robes, like doctors, next to Christ, who is also dressed in white. Tradition says that these two doctors went to the bedside of the sick but before inquiring about the patient's health, they prayed. Only afterward did they ask about the patient's condition and decide on the treatment. Their miracles were combination of faith and care. Healing is always a combination of love and care.

Why, despite a prevailing rationalist mentality, is there a great demand for healing? Why are so many people chasing after magic, the occult, voodoo, astrology? Isn't this breathless search after protection, safety and healing just a great search for love? Isn't that why we should more readily open our hearts to the sick? If there is love, the spirit becomes stronger even if the body does not heal. I'm not fully enough informed about the question to get in to it deeply, but I know one thing: the sick are not just patients, they are brothers and sisters to love with all our hearts. It is on this commitment that the medical profession must base its activity. So remember that Saint John Paul II was right when he said that medical science is "a sublime form of human service."

Thank you.