

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMY FOR LIFE**

Synod Hall

Thursday, 5 October 2017

Your Excellency,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to join you for this annual meeting and I thank Archbishop Paglia for his kind words of introduction. I am grateful to all of you for the contributions you make; as time passes, their value becomes all the more evident for the advance of scientific, anthropological and ethical knowledge, and for the service of life, particularly for the care of human life and of creation, our common home.

The theme of your meeting – *Accompanying Life: New Responsibilities in the Technological Era* – is one that is demanding and much needed, as it deals with the challenging combination of opportunities and issues associated with recent technological developments in the life sciences. Serious questions are being raised by the power of biotechnologies that, even now, enable the manipulation of life in ways hitherto unimaginable.

There is an urgent need for greater study and discussion of the social effects of this technological development, for the sake of articulating an anthropological vision adequate to this epochal challenge. Your expert advice, however, cannot be limited solely to offering solutions to the questions raised by specific ethical, social or legal conflict situations. The proposal of forms of conduct consistent with human dignity involves the theory and practice of science and technology in terms of their overall approach to life, its meaning and its value. It is from this perspective that I would like to offer you my reflections today.

1. Human beings seem now to find themselves at a special juncture in their history, in uncharted territory, as they deal with questions both old and new regarding the meaning of human life, its origin and destiny.

The key feature of this moment is, in a word, the rapid spread of a culture obsessively centred on the mastery of human beings – individually and as a species – over reality. Some have even spoken of an *egolatry*, a worship of the self, on whose altar everything is sacrificed, even the most cherished human affections. This approach is far from harmless, for it induces people to gaze constantly in the mirror, to the point of being unable to turn their eyes away from themselves and towards others and the larger world. The spread of this approach has extremely grave effects on every affection and relationship in life (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 48).

Clearly, this is not to deny or minimize the legitimacy of the aspiration of individuals to a certain quality of life or the importance of the economic resources and technical means that can make it possible. Still, we cannot ignore the crass materialism that often typifies the linkage between the economy and technology, and ends up treating life as a resource either to be used or discarded for reasons of power and profit.

Sadly, throughout our world, men, women and children are realizing with remorse and grief the fallacious promises of technocratic materialism. This is also the case because, contrary to propaganda about expanding markets automatically resulting in greater prosperity, the zones of poverty and conflict,

rejection and abandonment, resentment and despair, are spreading. Authentic scientific and technological progress ought instead to inspire policies more worthy of man.

Christian faith prompts us to *reclaim the initiative*, without yielding to nostalgia or complaint. The Church has a long tradition of noble and enlightened minds that paved the way for science and social consciousness in their day. The world needs believers who, joyful yet unassuming, are creative and proactive, humble and courageous, resolutely determined to overcome the divide between the generations. This divide disrupts the transmission of life. We applaud the exciting potential of young people, but who guides them to fulfilment as adults? Adulthood means a life of responsibility and love for both future and past generations. When fathers and mothers grow old, they rightly expect to be honoured for what they have generously given, not to be cast aside because they are no longer useful.

2. The inspiration for reclaiming this initiative is once again the *word of God*, which sheds light on life's origins and destiny.

Today, there is great need of a theology of creation and redemption capable of finding expression in words and acts of love for each life and the whole of life, in order to accompany the Church's pilgrim path in this world. The Encyclical *Laudato Si'* is one sign of this renewed attention to the way God and man regard our world, starting from the revelation found in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. There we learn that each of us is a creature *willed and loved by God for his or her own sake*, not merely a combination of cells organized and selected by a process of evolution. All creation is in some way part of God's special love for human creatures, a love extending to every generation of mothers, fathers and children.

God's original blessing and his promise of an eternal destiny are the basis of the dignity of every life; they are meant for everyone. The men, women and children who make up the peoples of the earth are the life of the world that God loves and desires to save, without exception.

The biblical account of creation needs to be read and reread, in order to appreciate the breadth and depth of the loving action of the God who entrusts creation and history to the covenant of man and woman.

This covenant is certainly sealed by the personal and fruitful union of love that, through marriage and the family, is the means of transmitting life. In addition to this seal, the covenant between man and woman is called to be a guiding force for society as a whole. We are invited to be responsible for the world, in the realms of culture and politics, in the world of work and economic life, as well as in the Church. This is not merely a matter of equal opportunities or mutual appreciation. It involves the way men and women understand the very meaning of life and human progress. They are called not only to speak to one another *about* love, but to speak *with* love about what needs to be done so that the human community can take shape in the light of God's love for all his creatures. Men and women are called to speak to one another as covenant partners, because neither of the two – neither man nor woman – can assume this responsibility alone. They were created together, in their sacred difference; together they sinned, for their presumption in trying to take the place of God; together, by the grace of Christ, they return to God's presence, as stewards of the world and of the history that he has entrusted to them.

3. We can say, then, that we are currently on the verge of a cultural revolution. And the Church must be the first to play her part in it.

In light of this, we need first all to acknowledge honestly our *shortcomings and failures*. The forms of subordination that have tragically marked the history of women have to be abandoned once and for all. A new start must be made in the ethos of peoples, and this can be achieved through a new culture of identity and difference. The recent proposal to advance the dignity of a person by radically eliminating sexual difference and, as a result, our understanding of man and woman, is not right. Instead of combatting wrongful interpretations of sexual difference that would diminish the fundamental importance of that difference for human dignity, such a proposal would simply eliminate it by proposing procedures and practices that make it irrelevant for a person's development and for human relationships. But the utopia of the "neuter" eliminates both human dignity in sexual distinctiveness and the personal nature of the generation of new life. The biological and psychological manipulation of sexual difference, which biomedical technology can now make appear as a simple matter of personal choice – which it is not! – runs the risk of dismantling the energy source that feeds the covenant between man and woman, making it creative and fruitful.

The mysterious bond between the *creation of the world* and the *generation of God's Son* is revealed by his taking flesh in the womb of Mary – Mother of Jesus and Mother of God – out of love for us. This mysterious bond never fails to amaze and move us; its revelation fully illumines the mystery of being and the meaning of life. Henceforth, the mystery of human generation radiates a *profound wisdom about life*. Received as a gift, life is itself exalted. Generating life regenerates us; by giving of our lives, we are enriched.

We are challenged, then, to counter an atmosphere of intimidation that surrounds the generation of life, as if it were somehow demeaning to women or a menace to our collective well-being.

The life-giving covenant between man and woman protects, not hinders, the dignity of our human family. Our history will not continue to be renewed if we reject this truth.

4. A fervent concern to accompany and care for life requires, in the history of individuals and societies, a constantly renewed ethos of compassion and tender love for the birth and rebirth of humanity, in all its differences.

We need first to become sensitive once more to the *different stages of life*, especially of *children and the elderly*. Their frailties, their infirmities and their vulnerability are not exclusively the concern of medicine and health care. They also have to do with the soul and with human needs that must be recognized and taken into account, protected and esteemed, by individuals and the community alike. A society that considers these things as buyable and sellable, bureaucratically regulated and technically managed, is one that has already lost its sense of the meaning of life. It will no longer pass on that meaning to its young, or revere it in its aging parents. Almost without realizing it, we have now started to build cities increasingly unfriendly to children and communities increasingly unwelcoming to the elderly. They have walls but no windows or doors; meant to protect, they in fact stifle.

Faith's witness to *God's mercy*, which refines and perfects all justice, is an essential condition for the growth of compassion between generations. Without that mercy, the culture of the secular city is defenceless before the deadening and decay of the human spirit.

It is against this new horizon that I view the mission of the renewed Pontifical Academy for Life. I realize that it is a difficult, yet also exhilarating one. I am certain that there is no shortage of men and women of good will, scholars included, with differing approaches to religion and with a variety of anthropological and ethical visions, who are agreed on the need to propose a more authentic wisdom about life in view of the common good. Open and fruitful dialogue can and must be pursued between all those committed to seeking meaningful foundations for human existence.

The Pope and the whole Church are grateful for the efforts you are about to undertake. The responsible accompaniment of human life, from conception to its natural end, involves discernment and an understanding born of love; it is a task for men and women who are free and dedicated, a task for shepherds, not hirelings. May God bless your resolve to support them with the knowledge, integrity and wisdom that are yours.

Thank you, and please, do not forget to pray for me.