



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE ITALIAN CATHOLIC DOCTORS ASSOCIATION

Thursday, 28 December 1978

Gentlemen and beloved Sons of the Italian Catholic Doctors Association,

Welcoming you heartily to this house, which has now become mine, I want to express to you in the first place my joy at this meeting where I can make the acquaintance of so many persons eminent for their scientific merits, admirable for their high sense of duty, and exemplary for their courageous profession of Christian faith. I am sincerely grateful to you for the courtesy and affection of which this visit of yours is a manifest and consoling sign, and I am happy, therefore, to address my greeting to your zealous Ecclesiastical Assistant, our revered Brother, Mons. Fiorenzo Angelini; to your illustrious President, Prof. Pietro de Franciscis, efficiently assisted by the three Vice-Presidents; to the indefatigable Secretary General, Prof. Domenico Di Virgilio; to the members of the National Council; to the Regional Delegates and Presidents of the diocesan Sections; to representatives of the members of the Association, as well as to the group of Catholic nurses whose presence today wishes to be a testimony of the close collaboration which they intend to carry out with you doctors in the service of the patients.

I am glad to take the opportunity to express publicly my great esteem for a profession such as yours, always considered by everyone more as a mission than as ordinary work. The dignity and responsibility of such a mission will never be sufficiently understood, or adequately expressed. To assist, treat, comfort and cure human pain is a commitment which, in its nobility, usefulness and ideality, is very close to the priest's vocation. In both offices, in fact, there is a more direct and evident manifestation of the supreme commandment of love of one's neighbour; a love called not infrequently to assume forms which reach the point of real heroism. We must not be surprised, therefore, by the solemn admonition of Holy Scripture: "Honour the physician with the honour due him, according to your need of him, for the Lord created him; for healing comes from the Most High" (Sir 38:1-2).

Your Association came into being to promote the attainment of the high aims of the profession and to enrich them with the specific contribution of Christian values. To measure the importance of the contribution it intends to make to your activity as Christian doctors, it is enough to recall the terms of article 2 of the Statute. The latter indicates as purposes of the Association the qualification of the moral, scientific and professional formation of members; the promotion of medico-moral studies in the light of the principles of Catholic doctrine; the animation of the spirit of real human and Christian service in the relationship of doctors with their patient; action to ensure the most dignified exercise of the profession and for protection of the just interests of the medical class; and education of members to rightful ecclesial co-responsibility and to generous availability for every charitable activity connected with the exercise of the profession.

These are not resolutions which have remained only on paper. I am glad to acknowledge the action of sensitization and orientation carried out by the Association in these years among the Italian medical class, both through varied and specialized publishing productions, and through the appreciated periodical "Orizzonte Medico", and in the "Study Courses" (the Proceedings of the recent one on "The Man of the Holy Shroud" were kindly presented to me) which have seen, in the space of eleven years, eminent specialists of the different sciences deal with anthropological subjects of fundamental interest, in search of an answer that will satisfy man and the Christian. I cannot but express appreciation and praise: the formative purpose, which is pursued by means of these instruments, deserves to be cordially approved, and efforts made in this direction must be warmly encouraged.

That applies particularly today, when powerful movements of opinion, effectively supported by the great media of mass communication, are trying to influence the consciences of doctors in every way, to induce them to lend their services in practices contrary not only to Christian, but also to natural, morality, in open contradiction with professional ethics, expressed in the famous oath of the ancient pagan doctor.

In the [Message for the World Day of Peace](#) on first of January last, my great predecessor Paul VI of revered memory, addressing a special word to doctors who were pointed out as "wise and generous defenders of human life", expressed his confidence that alongside the "religious ministry" there could be the "therapeutic ministry" of doctors in affirming and defending human life in all "those particular contingencies in which life itself can be compromised through the positive and wicked intention of human will". I am certain that this heartfelt and prophetic appeal has met, and still meets, with wide support not only among Catholic doctors, but also among those who, though not sustained by faith, are, however, deeply aware of the higher requirements of their profession.

As minister of that God who is presented in Scripture as the "Lord who loves the living" (Wis. 11: 26), I, too, wish to express my sincere admiration for all medical practitioners who, following the dictates of sound conscience, are able to resist daily enticements; pressure, threats and

sometimes even physical violence, in order not to stain themselves with behaviour that is harmful in any way to that sacred good, which is human life. Their courageous and consistent testimony is a very important contribution to the construction of a society which, in order to be fully human, cannot but be based on respect and protection of the prime premise of every other human right, that is, the right to live.

The Pope willingly unites his voice to that of all doctors with a sound conscience, and adopts their fundamental requests: the request, in the first place, for recognition of the deeper nature of their noble profession which wishes them to be ministers of life and never instruments of death. And then the request for full and complete respect, in the legislation and in facts, of freedom of conscience, understood as the fundamental right of the person not to be forced to act contrary to his conscience or prevented from behaving in accordance with it. Finally, as well as the request for an indispensable and firm juridical protection of human life at all its stages, also the request for adequate operational structures, which will encourage the joyful acceptance of life about to be born, its effective promotion during development and maturity, its careful and delicate protection when its decline begins and up to its natural extinction.

Service of life should see committed, with generous enthusiasm, Catholic doctors particularly. These, in their faith in God the creator, whose image man is, and in the mystery of the eternal Word who descended from heaven in the frail flesh of a helpless child, find a new and higher reason for industrious dedication to loving care and disinterested safeguarding of every brother, especially if he is little, poor, defenceless, threatened. It consoles me to know that these convictions are deeply rooted in your hearts: they inspire and direct your daily professional activity and are able to suggest to you, when it is necessary, even public, clear, and unmistakable stands.

How could I fail to mention, in this connection, the exemplary witness you bore, with timely and compact adherence to the indications of the Episcopate, in the recent and distressing matter of the legislation in favour of abortion. It was a witness in which—I proudly stress it in my capacity as Bishop of Rome—this City distinguished itself particularly, offering non-Catholic doctors also a reminder and a stimulus of providential efficacy. This responsible gesture will reach more effectively its aims of asserting the right of the medical and ancillary personnel to freedom of conscience, a right sanctioned by a special clause in the law; to personal consistency; to defence of the right to life and to social denunciation of a legal situation prejudicial to justice, a right adopted with authenticity of motivations and confirmed by disinterested generosity open to all the commitments and initiatives in the service of the human person.

I make no secret of the fact that consistency with Christian principles may mean for you the necessity of exposing yourselves to the risk of incomprehension, misunderstanding and even serious discrimination. In this sad case may you be assisted by the programmatic words by which a great colleague of yours, Blessed Giuseppe Moscati, was constantly inspired: "Love truth", he wrote in a personal note on 17 October 1922, "show yourself as you are, without pretence,

fearlessly and bluntly. And if truth costs you persecution, accept it; if torture, bear it. And if you had to sacrifice yourself and your life for truth, be strong in sacrifice." (cf. *Positio super virtutibus*, Rome 1972). Is it not natural, moreover, that Christ's prophecy: "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (Jn 15:20), should come true in the Christian's life? It will be the case, then, to recall that the divine Master reserved a special beatitude for those who are reviled and persecuted "on his account" (cf. Mt 5:11-12).

Confirming to you, therefore, together with my esteem, cordial encouragement to continue along the way of courageous testimony and exemplary service in favour of human life, I implore upon your good resolutions the help of the Blessed Virgin, whom you love to invoke as "Salus Infirmorum et Mater Scientiae". I implore the protection of St Luke "the beloved physician" (Col 4: 14), whom you honour as your patron saint. And thinking with fatherly affection of your colleagues of the Association scattered all over Italy, of their respective families, as well as of so many sick persons to whom your daily concern goes, I raise my hands over you and them to impart warmly a special Apostolic Blessing, petitioning all desired heavenly consolation.

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