



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE LEADERS IN CATHOLIC HEALTH CARE**

*Convention Centre (Phoenix)
Monday, 14 September 1987*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,
Leaders in Catholic Health Care,*

1. In the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ I greet you and thank you for your warm welcome. This meeting gives us the opportunity to honour and give thanks to God for one of the most extensive and fundamental works of the Catholic Church in the United States, all that is embraced in the term "Catholic health care". I am pleased to be able to express to you who represent so many of your country's health care organizations *the esteem, support and solidarity of the whole Church*. In you, Jesus Christ continues his healing ministry, "curing the people of every disease and illness" (Cfr. *Matth.* 4, 23).

This is the high dignity to which you and your colleagues are called. This is your vocation, your commitment, and the path of your specific witness to the presence of God's Kingdom in the world. Your health care ministry, pioneered and developed by congregations of women religious and by congregations of brothers, is *one of the most vital apostolates* of the ecclesial community and *one of the most significant services* which the Catholic Church offers to society in the name of Jesus Christ. I have been told that membership in the Catholic Health Association extends to 620 hospitals and 300 long-term facilities; that Catholic hospital beds number 11 per cent of the total number in the country; that Catholic institutions administer approximately 17 per cent of the health care throughout the nation, and that they cared for nearly 46 million people last year. I am grateful to Sister Mary Eileen Wilhelm and to your President, Mr Curley, for illustrating to us this immense

network of Christian service.

2. Because of your dedication to caring for the sick and the poor, the aged and the dying, you know from your own daily experience how much illness and suffering are basic problems of human existence. When the sick flocked to Jesus during his earthly life, they recognized in him a friend whose deeply compassionate and loving heart responded to their needs. He restored physical and mental health to many. These cures, however, involved more than just healing sickness. They were also *prophetic signs of his own identity and of the coming of the Kingdom of God*, and they very often caused a new spiritual awakening in the one who had been healed.

The power that went out from Jesus and cured people of his own time (Cfr. *Luc. 6, 19*) has not lost its effect in the two-thousand-year history of the Church. *This power remains, in the life and prayer of the Church, a source of healing and reconciliation*. Ever active, this power confirms the identity of the Church today, authenticates her proclamation of the Kingdom of God, and stands as a sign of triumph over evil.

With all Catholic health care the immediate aim is to provide for the well-being of the body and mind of the human person, especially in sickness or old age. By his example, Christ teaches the Christian "to do good by his or her suffering and to do good to those who suffer" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Salvifici Doloris*, 30). This latter aspect naturally absorbs the greater part of the energy and attention of health care ministry. Today in the United States, Catholic health care extends the mission of the Church in every state of the Union, in major cities, small towns, rural areas, on the campuses of academic institutions, in remote outposts, and in inner city neighbourhoods. By providing health care in all these places, especially to the poor, the neglected, the needy, the newcomer, *your apostolate penetrates and transforms the very fabric of American society*. And sometimes you yourselves, like those you serve, are called to bow, in humble and loving resignation, to the experience of sickness - or to other forms of pain and suffering.

3. *All concern for the sick and suffering is part of the Church's life and mission*. The Church has always understood herself to be charged by Christ with the care of the poor, the weak, the defenceless, the suffering and those who mourn. This means that, as you alleviate suffering and seek to heal, you also bear witness to the Christian view of suffering and to the meaning of life and death as taught by your Christian faith.

In the complex world of modern health care in industrialized society, this witness must be given in a variety of ways. First, it requires continual efforts *to ensure that everyone has access to health care*. I know that you have already examined this question in the report of your Task Force on Health Care of the Poor. In seeking to treat patients equally, *regardless of social and economic status*, you proclaim to your fellow citizens and to the world Christ's special love for the neglected and powerless. This particular challenge is a consequence of your Christian dedication and conviction, and it calls for great courage on the part of Catholic bodies and institutions operating in

the field of health care. It is a great credit to your zeal and efficiency when, despite formidable costs, you still succeed in preventing the economic factor from being the determinant factor in human and Christian service.

Similarly, the love with which Catholic health care is performed and its professional excellence have the value of a sign testifying to the Christian view of the human person. *The inalienable dignity of every human being is, of course, fundamental to all Catholic health care.* All who come to you for help are worthy of respect and love, for all have been created in the image and likeness of God. All have been redeemed by Christ and, in their sufferings, bear his Cross. It is fitting that our meeting is taking place on the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross. Christ took upon himself the whole of human suffering and radically transformed it through the Paschal Mystery of his Passion, Death and Resurrection. *The Triumph of the Cross gives human suffering a new dimension, a redemptive value* (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Salvifici Doloris*, 30). It is your privilege to bear constant witness to this profound truth in so many ways.

The structural changes which have been taking place within Catholic health care in recent years have increased the challenge of *preserving and even strengthening the Catholic identity of the institutions and the spiritual quality of the services given.* The presence of dedicated women and men religious in hospitals and nursing homes has ensured in the past, and continues to ensure in the present, that spiritual dimension so characteristic of Catholic health care centres. The reduced number of religious and new forms of ownership and management should not lead to a loss of a spiritual atmosphere, or to a loss of a sense of vocation in caring for the sick. This is an area in which the Catholic laity, at all levels of health care, have an opportunity to manifest the depth of their faith and to play their own specific part in the Church's mission of evangelization and service.

4. As I have said, Catholic health care must always be carried out within the framework of the Church's saving mission. This mission she has received from her divine Founder, and she has accomplished it down through the ages with the help of the Holy Spirit who guides her into the fullness of truth (Cfr. *Io.* 16, 13; *Lumen Gentium*, 4). *Your ministry therefore must also reflect the mission of the Church as the teacher of moral truth*, especially in regard to the new frontiers of scientific research and technological achievement. Here too you face great challenges and opportunities.

Many times in recent years the Church has addressed issues related to the advances of biomedical technology. She does so not in order to discourage scientific progress or to judge harshly those who seek to extend the frontiers of human knowledge and skill, but in order to affirm the moral truths which must guide the application of this knowledge and skill. Ultimately, the purpose of the Church's teaching in this field is *to defend the innate dignity and fundamental rights of the human person.* In this regard the Church cannot fail to emphasize the need to safeguard the life and integrity of the human embryo and foetus.

5. The human person is a unique composite - a unity of spirit and matter, soul and body, fashioned in the image of God and destined to live forever. Every human life is sacred, because every human person is sacred. It is in the light of this fundamental truth that *the Church constantly proclaims and defends the dignity of human life from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death*. It is also in the light of this fundamental truth that we see the great evil of abortion and euthanasia.

Not long ago, in its "Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation", the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith once more dealt with certain vital questions concerning the human person. Once more it defended the sanctity of innocent human life from the moment of conception onward. Once again it affirmed the sacred and inviolable character of the transmission of human life of the procreative act within marriage. It explained that new technologies may afford new means of procreation, but "what is technically possible is not for that very reason morally admissible" (Congr. Pro Doctr. Fidei [*Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation*](#), Introd. 4). To place new human knowledge at the service of the integral well-being of human persons does not inhibit true scientific progress but liberates it. The Church encourages all genuine advances in knowledge, but she also insists on the sacredness of human life at every stage and in every condition. The cause she serves is *the cause of human life and human dignity*.

6. In the exercise of your professional activities you have a magnificent opportunity, by your constant witness to moral truth, to contribute to *the formation of society's moral vision*. As you give the best of yourselves in fulfilling your Christian responsibilities, you will also be aware of the important contribution you must make to building a society based on truth and justice. Your service to the sick enables you with great credibility *to proclaim to the world the demands and values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, and to foster hope and renewal of heart. In this respect, your concern with the Catholic identity of your work and of your institutions is not only timely and commendable, it is essential for the success of your ecclesial mission.

You must always see yourselves and your work as part of the Church's life and mission. You are indeed a very special part of the People of God. You and your institutions have precise responsibilities towards the ecclesial community, just as that community has responsibilities towards you. It is important at every level - national, state and local - that there be *close and harmonious links between you and the bishops*, who "preside in place of God over the flock whose shepherds they are, as teachers of doctrine, priests of sacred worship and officers of good order" ([*Lumen Gentium*](#), 20). They for their part wish to support you in your witness and service.

7. I have come here today *to encourage you in your splendid work* and to confirm you in your vital apostolate. Dear brothers and sisters: for your dedication to meeting the health care needs of all people, especially the poor, I heartily congratulate you. You embody the legacy of those pioneering women and men religious who selflessly responded to the health care needs of a

young and rapidly expanding country by developing an extensive network of clinics, hospitals and nursing homes.

Today you are faced with new challenges, new needs One of these is the present crisis of immense proportions which is that of AIDS and AIDS-Related Complex (ARC) Besides your professional contribution and your human sensitivities towards all affected by this disease, you are called to show the love and compassion of Christ and his Church As you courageously affirm and implement your moral obligation and social responsibility to help those who suffer, *you are, individually and collectively, living out the parable of the Good Samaritan (Cfr. Luc. 10, 30-32).*

The Good Samaritan of the parable showed compassion to the injured man By taking him to the inn and giving of his own material means, he truly gave of himself. This action, a universal symbol of human concern, has become one of the essential elements of moral culture and civilization How beautifully the Lord speaks of the Samaritan! He "was neighbour to the man who fell in with the robbers" (*Ibid.* 10, 36). To be "neighbour" is *to express love, solidarity and service*, and to exclude selfishness, discrimination and neglect The message of the parable of the Good Samaritan echoes a reality connected with today's Feast of the Triumph of the Cross: "the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs, in hope, of eternal life" (*Tit.* 3, 4-7). In the changing world of health care, it is up to you *to ensure that this "kindness and love of God our Saviour" remains the heart and soul of Catholic health services.*

Through prayer and with God's help, may you persevere in your commitment, providing professional assistance and selfless personal care to those who need your services. I pray that your activities and your whole lives will *inspire and help all the people of America, working together, to make this society a place of full and absolute respect for the dignity of every person*, from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. And may God, in whom "we live and move and have our being" (*Act.* 17, 28), sustain you by his grace. God bless you and your families and your contribution to America!

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