



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE TENTH ANNUAL MEETING
OF THE EUROPEAN ACADEMY OF ANAESTHESIOLOGY**

Thursday, 8 September 1988

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. It is a pleasure to welcome today the participants in the Tenth Annual Meeting of the *European Academy of Anaesthesiology*. I am pleased that you have wished to include this audience in the programme of your meeting in Rome, for it affords me the opportunity to express my esteem for your worthy profession and to assure you of the Church's prayerful support for all who serve humanity through medical science and the art of healing.

In a particular way, I wish to express my appreciation of *the goals of your Academy*, such as your commitment to improving the practical and theoretical training of those who are preparing to serve in the field of anaesthesiology. I am thinking, too, of your promotion of scientific research in this and related fields of medicine and of your desire to facilitate fruitful dialogue with institutional and political authorities on topics of mutual interest and concern. Another contribution of special significance would be your efforts to develop greater collaboration between medical personnel of all the countries of Europe, thereby ensuring a richer cultural exchange and better use of medical resources and the latest findings of scientific research.

2. The medical profession, like the Church herself, places itself at the service of the human family, and more particularly at the service of people who are sick and suffering. It is in light of this exalted mission of yours that I share with you some reflections on *the ethical nature of your vocation*.

As anaesthetists, you seek to relieve the pain of those persons who have been injured in an accident or who for some other medical care. In your medical operation, or receive other medical care. In your work, you are always collaborating with other specialists, making possible surgical interventions or some other form of medical treatment. In every case, you are placing your talents

and expertise *at the service of people who are ill and suffering.*

However, as you know well, no matter how dedicated and effective your efforts, you *can never overcome completely the reality of pain and suffering.* You can suspend it for a certain length of time; in many cases, you can reduce its intensity to a significant degree, but suffering and pain remain an inevitable part of the earthly experience of every human person. This means that your professional work compels you again and again to face the mystery of human suffering.

3. In my Apostolic Letter on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, I wrote of how Christ, by becoming a man and especially by taking suffering upon himself, gave *meaning and redemptive value* to the pain and suffering of human life. For it was precisely by means of his own suffering that Christ accomplished our eternal salvation. Suffering was the means God chose for expressing his eternal love for us and for offering us the gift of the Redemption.

By his own example, Jesus taught us to care for our brothers and sisters who suffer; and he told his disciples, when he sent them forth, “heal the sick... and say to them ‘*The Kingdom of God has come near to you*’” (Luc. 10, 9).

To relieve pain, then, and to care for the sick is a profession of great moral value. At the same time, it is a profession that *demands both high moral standards and courageous ethical conduct*, especially at a time in history when fundamental moral truths are being called into question. For example, some of our contemporaries are advocating the termination of human life through euthanasia as a supposedly compassionate solution to the problem of human suffering.

4. You who work in the field of anaesthesiology are perhaps particularly sensitive to the pleas of those who clamour for the so-called compassionate solution of *euthanasia*, precisely because your profession aims at reducing the pain that others are suffering. This is especially true in instances of intense and prolonged suffering. While being sympathetic to the subjective feelings which may prompt these pleas for *euthanasia*, you must not lose sight of the *objective facts* and *ultimate truths* which necessarily enter into the question.

In this regard, I would like to call your attention to the guidelines contained in the “[Declaration on Euthanasia](#)” issued with my approval by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In this document, the question at hand is dealt with in readily understandable terms.

It states: “It may happen that, by reason of prolonged and barely tolerable pain, for deeply personal or other reasons, people may be led to believe that they can legitimately ask for death or obtain it for others. Although in these cases the guilt of the individual may be reduced or completely absent, nevertheless the error of judgment into which the conscience falls, perhaps in good faith, does not change the nature of this act of killing, which will always be in itself something to be rejected. The pleas of gravely ill people who sometimes ask for death are not to be

understood as implying a true desire for euthanasia; in fact it is almost always a case of an anguished plea for help and for love” (Congr. Pro Doctr. Fidei *Declaratio de Euthanasia* II).

When confronting this grave moral evil and other serious threats to the dignity of the human person, we must remain steadfast in the conviction that *no medical solution could be truly compassionate which would violate the natural law and stand in opposition to the revealed truth of the word of God*. In the end, we must recall that no doctor, no nurse, no medical technician, indeed no human being, is the *final arbiter of human life*, either of one’s own life or that of another. This realm belongs only to *God, the Creator and Redeemer of us all*.

5. There are many other difficult ethical questions which you inevitably face in your noble profession, questions which require careful judgments of conscience in addition to your well-informed medical insights.

That is why there is an increasingly evident *need for a serious ethical formation* of all those engaged in the medical field. Such formation is appropriate and necessary in light of the fact that your aim is not only to serve each patient by your professional diligence and competence but also to provide a “fully human” care that meets the needs of the whole person. In this entire field, I want to assure you of the interest and concern of the Church, which is eager to offer you assistance through the guidance of her moral teaching and the wealth of her spiritual patrimony. It is in mutual collaboration that we can best serve those who suffer.

Along these lines I wish to recall a point which I emphasized a few years ago, in an address to the World Medical Association: “One cannot but render homage to the immense progress achieved... by the medicine of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But, as you are aware, it is necessary now more than ever to overcome the separation between science and morality, to rediscover their profound unity. It is man whom you are dealing with, man whose dignity it is precisely the province of morality to safeguard” (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Allocutio ad eos qui XXXV coetui Consociationis medicorum ab omnibus nationibus interfuerunt coram admissos*, die 29 oct. 1983: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VI, 2 (1983) 917 ss).

My words this evening are intended, dear friends, to be, above all, an expression of esteem and encouragement in your generous efforts to assist those in pain. I gladly commend you and your work to the Lord of Life, the God and Father of all. May he grant his abundant blessing to you and to all your dear ones.

