



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO MEMBERS OF THE ITALIAN FEDERATION OF THE
BOARDS OF NURSING PROFESSIONS (FNOPI)***

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Saturday, 3 March 2018*

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

I am pleased to meet you and, first and foremost, I would like to express to you my appreciation and my esteem for the most valuable work that you do for so many people and for the good of all of society. Thank you; thank you very much!

I offer my cordial greeting to the President and to the entire National Federation of the Boards of Nursing Professions represented by you today. While originating from a long associative tradition, this Federation can call itself “fledgling”, and is now taking its first steps. Its constitution, confirmed several days ago by the Italian Parliament, sheds more light on the value of the nursing professions and guarantees a greater appreciation of your professionalism. With almost 450 members, you form the largest Italian professional board, and you also represent a point of reference for other categories of professionals. The common journey that you take allows you not only to have a single voice and greater contractual power, but above all to share the values and aims that are at the foundation of your work.

The role of nurses in assisting the sick is truly irreplaceable. Unlike any other, the nurse has a direct and continuous relationship with patients, taking care of them on a daily basis, listening to their needs and coming into contact with their bodies, which the nurse attends. It is a particular approach to healthcare which you accomplish with your actions, wholly taking upon yourselves the burden of people’s needs, with that typical concern that patients recognize in you, and which represents a fundamental part in the treatment and healing process.

The International Code of Nursing Ethics, to which the Italian code also aspires, identifies four fundamental responsibilities of your profession: “to promote health, to prevent illness, to restore health and to alleviate suffering. The need for nursing is universal” (Preamble). It entails complex and numerous functions, which touch upon every sphere of care, and which you carry out in cooperation with other professionals of the sector. The curative and preventative, rehabilitative and palliative character of your work demands from you a high level of professionalism, which requires specialization and continuing education, due also to the constant evolution of technologies and treatments.

This professionalism, however, manifests itself not only in the technical sphere, but also and perhaps even more so in the sphere of human relationships. Being in contact with physicians and family members, in addition to the sick, you become, in hospitals, in healthcare facilities and in homes, the crossroads of a thousand relationships, which require attention, competence and compassion. And it is precisely in this synthesis of technical abilities and human sensitivity that the value of your work is fully revealed.

Taking care of women and men, of children and elderly, in every phase of their life, from birth to death, you are tasked with continuous listening, aimed at understanding what the needs of that patient are, in the phase that he or she is experiencing. Before the uniqueness of each situation, indeed, it is never enough to follow a protocol, but a constant — and tiresome! — effort of discernment and attention to the individual person is required. All this makes your profession a veritable mission, and makes you “experts in humanity”, called to carry out an irreplaceable undertaking of humanization in a distracted society which too often leaves the weakest people at the margins, taking interest only in those who “count”, or responding to criteria of efficiency or gain.

Being in contact with patients each day, the sensitivity that you acquire makes of you promoters of life and of people’s dignity. May you be able to recognize the proper limits of technology, which can never become an absolute and relegate human dignity to second place. May you also be attentive to the desire, sometimes unexpressed, for spirituality and religious assistance, which for many patients represents an essential element of life’s meaning and serenity, even more compelling in fragility caused by illness.

For the Church, the sick are people in whom, in a special way, Jesus is present; he identifies himself in them when he says “I was sick and you visited me” (Mt 25:36). Throughout his ministry, Jesus was close to the sick; he approached them with loving kindness and healed so many of them. In meeting the leper who asks Jesus that he be healed, He reaches out his hand and touches him (cf. Mt 8:2-3). The importance of this simple gesture must not escape us: Mosaic law prohibited touching lepers, and forbade them to approach populated areas. However, Jesus goes to the heart of the law, which finds fulfilment in love of neighbour, and in touching the leper He reduces the distance from him, so that he may no longer be separated from the community of men

and perceive, through a simple gesture, the closeness of God himself. Thus, the healing that Jesus gives him is not only physical, but goes to the heart, because the leper has not only been healed but also felt loved. Do not forget the “medicine of caresses”: it is so important! A caress, a smile, is full of meaning for the sick person. It is a simple gesture, but it lifts one up; a person feels supported, feels healing is near, feels as a *person*, not a number. Do not forget it.

Being with the sick and practicing your profession, you personally touch the sick, and more than anything else, you take care of their bodies. When you do so, remember how Jesus touched the leper: not in a distracted, indifferent or annoyed manner, but attentive and loving, so it makes him or her feel respected and taken care of. In doing so, the contact that you establish with patients accompanies them as an echo of God the Father’s closeness, of his tenderness for each one of his children. Precisely *tenderness*: tenderness is the “key” to understanding the sick. The sick cannot be understood with harshness. Tenderness is the key to understanding them, and is also a precious medicine for their healing. And tenderness passes from the heart to the hands; it passes, with full respect and love, through the “touching” of wounds.

Years ago, a religious confided to me that the most touching phrase ever addressed to him in his life was that of a sick man whom he had assisted in the terminal phase of his illness. “I thank you, Father” — he said — “because you have always spoken to me about God, even without ever naming him”: this is what tenderness does. This is the greatness of the love that we give to others, which is carried hidden within, even if we do not think about it, the love of God himself.

Never tire of being close to people with this human and fraternal manner, always finding the motivation and the impulse to carry out your task. Be careful, too, however, not to expend yourselves until almost consumed, as happens if one becomes involved in patient relationships to the point of becoming absorbed, living in the first person all that happens to them. What you perform is an arduous work, beyond exposure to risks, and excessive involvement, along with the difficulty of the tasks and shifts, could make you lose the freshness and peace that are necessary to you. Be careful!

Another factor that makes the performance of your profession onerous and sometimes unbearable is the shortage of staff, which cannot help to improve the services offered, and which a wise administration cannot envisage in any way as a source of savings.

Mindful of the highly demanding task that you perform, I welcome the occasion to exhort the patients themselves to never take for granted what they receive from you. You too, sick people, be attentive to the humanity of the nurses who assist you. Ask without insisting; do not just expect a smile, but also offer it to those who devote themselves to you. In this regard, an elderly woman told me that, when she goes to the hospital for the treatments she needs, she is so grateful to the doctors and nurses for the work they do that she tries to dress up and look nice to give something to them in turn. Thus, no one should take for granted what the nurses do for them, but always

nourish the sense of respect and gratitude owed to you. And with your permission, I would like to pay tribute to a nurse who saved my life. She was a nursing nun: an Italian sister, a Dominican, who was sent to Greece as a teacher, highly educated. But then, again as a nurse, she arrived in Argentina. And when I, at 20 years of age, was on the verge of death, it was she who told the doctors, even arguing with them: "No, this is not good; more must be done". And thanks to those things, I survived. I thank her so much! I thank her. And I would like to name her here, in front of you: Sr Cornelia Caraglio. A good woman, brave too, to the point of arguing with the doctors. Humble, but certain of what she was doing. And so many lives, so many lives are saved thanks to you! Because you are there all day, and you see what is happening to the sick person. Thank you for all of this!

In greeting you, I express my hope that the Congress, which will take place in the coming days, may be a fruitful occasion for reflection, discussion and sharing. I invoke God's blessing upon all of you; and you too, please, pray for me.

And now — in silence, because you are of various religious confessions — in silence let us pray to God the Father of us all, that he bless us.

May the Lord bless all of you, and the sick whom you attend.