



The Holy See

***LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 23rd NATIONAL CONGRESS
OF THE ITALIAN CATHOLIC PHYSICIANS' ASSOCIATION***

*To Distinguished Professor Domenico Di Virgilio
President of the Italian Catholic Physicians' Association*

1. On the occasion of the 23rd National Congress of the Italian Catholic Physicians' Association, I extend my cordial greeting to you and to everyone present.

The Church's concern for the sick has always gone together with preaching the Gospel and is expressed in nursing care and treatment that have benefited untold numbers of suffering persons. With this awareness, as Catholic doctors you are called as believers to witness to Christ through works of fraternal charity and dedication for the promotion of peace and justice, effectively helping to eliminate the causes of suffering that humiliate and sadden humankind. As doctors, then, or servants of life, you find in practising your profession a special opportunity to help build a world that increasingly measures up to the dignity of the human being. Medicine, properly understood, speaks the universal language of sharing, paying attention to every person without distinction and welcoming all to alleviate the sufferings of each one.

2. There is no human being who has not known or will not know illness. It can afflict us all and involves the person at every level, from the physical to the psychological. Medicine must therefore strive to make people whole without any form of discrimination, in keeping with the needs of the entire person.

To succeed in this, the medical world cannot abstain from careful reflection on the very nature of the human being, created by God in his image and likeness. Human dignity is not only founded in the mystery of Creation, but also in the mystery of the Redemption brought about by Our Lord Jesus Christ. And if the origin of man is in itself the basis of his dignity, so is his destiny: the human person is called to be a "son in the Son" and a living temple of the Holy Spirit, in the

perspective of an eternal life of beatific communion with God.

The human being is the centre and summit of all that exists on earth: no other visible being possesses the same dignity. Since men and women are "conscious and free" beings, they can never be reduced to mere instruments. Today, the inviolable dignity of the person must be asserted more powerfully and consistently than ever! It is impossible to speak of a human being who is no longer a person or has yet to become one: personal dignity is a radical feature of each human being and disparity is neither acceptable nor justifiable!

3. Dear promoters of medicine, I reassert in your presence those ethical principles that are founded on the Hippocratic Oath itself: no lives are unworthy of living; no suffering, however terrible, can justify the suppression of a life; no reason, however lofty, makes it plausible to "create" human beings for subsequent exploitation and destruction.

Always be inspired in your decisions by the conviction that life should be nurtured and protected from its conception until its natural end. You will be recognized as Catholic doctors by your defence of the inviolable dignity of every human person.

In your work of safeguarding and fostering health, never neglect the person's spiritual dimension. If, in seeking to cure and alleviate suffering, you are clearly aware of the meaning of life and death and the role of pain in human life, you will succeed in promoting authentic civilization.

4. An arrogant mindset prevails in our society that claims to discriminate between one life and another, forgetting that the only truly human response in the face of someone else's suffering is the love that works wonders through attention and sharing.

Unfortunately, as in so many other human activities, in medicine too, if scientific progress on the one hand is a formidable instrument for improving the standard of life and well-being, on the other, it can serve the desire to oppress and dominate. Scientific research, oriented to the good of the human being by its very nature, then risks losing its original purpose. No type of research can ignore the intangible quality of every individual human life: to violate this rule would mean opening the doors to a new kind of barbarity.

5. Dear Doctors, the Christian vision of service to one's suffering neighbour cannot but be advantageous to the correct practice of a profession of fundamental social importance. Biomedical research also expects to be enlivened by a Christian inspiration so that it may contribute better and better to the true well-being of humanity.

In your hospitals and laboratories, you are proud of the Christian identity that has distinguished you in the past 60 years of your service to the sick and to the promotion of life. May you be able to recognize Christ himself in every ailing person, collaborating with those who are involved in the

pastoral care of the sick. You will thus add to the irreplaceable contribution of your professionalism the warmth of "heart" that alone can humanize structures. Live your service with constant prayer to God "who loves the living" (Wis 11: 26), always remembering that healing ultimately comes from the Most High (cf. Sir 38: 1-2).

Dear Catholic Doctors, I entrust you with affection to the Most Holy Virgin, whom you call upon as *Salus Infirmorum et Mater Scientiae*, so that, sustaining you with her shining example of steadfast faith and greatness in mercy, she may protect you in the daily practice of your profession.

It is with these sentiments that I bless everyone from my heart.

From the Vatican, 9 November 2004

JOHN PAUL II