



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II ON THE OCCASION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF CATHOLIC OBSTETRICIANS AND GYNAECOLOGISTS

Monday 18 June 2001

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I warmly welcome your visit on the occasion of the *International Congress of Catholic Obstetricians and Gynaecologists*, at which you are reflecting upon your future in the light of the fundamental right to medical training and practice according to conscience. Through you, I greet all those health workers who, as servants and guardians of life, bear unceasing witness throughout the world to the presence of Christ's Church in this vital field, especially when human life is threatened by the burgeoning culture of death. In particular, I thank professor Gian Luigi Gigli for his kind words on your behalf, and I greet Professor Robert Walley, co-organizer of your Meeting.

2. Christian obstetricians, gynaecologists and obstetric nurses are always called to be servants and guardians of life, for "the Gospel of life is at the heart of Jesus' message. Lovingly received day after day by the Church, it is to be preached with dauntless fidelity as 'good news' to the people of every age and culture" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 1). But your profession has become still more important and your responsibility still greater "in today's cultural and social context, in which science and the practice of medicine risk losing sight of their inherent ethical dimension, [and] health-care professionals can be strongly tempted at times to become manipulators of life, or even agents of death" (*ibid.*, 89).

Until quite recently, medical ethics in general and Catholic morality were rarely in disagreement. Without problems of conscience, Catholic doctors could generally offer patients all that medical science afforded. But this has now changed profoundly. The availability of contraceptive and abortive drugs, new threats to life in the laws of some countries, some of the uses of prenatal

diagnosis, the spread of *in vitro* fertilization techniques, the consequent production of embryos to deal with sterility, but also their destination to scientific research, the use of embryonic stem cells for the development of tissue for transplants to cure degenerative diseases, and projects of full or partial cloning, already done with animals: all of these have changed the situation radically.

Moreover, conception, pregnancy and childbirth are no longer understood as ways of cooperating with the Creator in the marvelous task of giving life to a new human being. Instead they are often perceived as a burden and even as an ailment to be cured, rather than being seen as a gift from God.

3. Inevitably Catholic obstetricians and gynaecologists and nurses are caught up in these tensions and changes. They are exposed to a social ideology which asks them to be agents of a concept of "reproductive health" based on new reproductive technologies. Yet despite the pressure upon their conscience, many still recognize their responsibility as medical specialists to care for the tiniest and weakest of human beings, and to defend those who have no economic or social power, or public voice of their own.

The conflict between social pressure and the demands of right conscience can lead to the dilemma either of abandoning the medical profession or of compromising one's convictions. Faced with that tension, we must remember that there is a middle path which opens up before Catholic health workers who are faithful to their conscience. It is the path of conscientious objection, which ought to be respected by all, especially legislators.

4. In striving to serve life, we must work to ensure that the right to professional training and practice that is respectful of conscience in law and in practice is guaranteed. It is clear, as I noted in my Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, that "Christians, like all people of good will, are called upon under grave obligation of conscience not to cooperate formally in practices which, even if permitted by civil legislation, are contrary to God's law. Indeed, from the moral standpoint, it is never licit to cooperate formally in evil" (No. 74). Wherever the right to train for and practice medicine with respect for one's moral convictions is violated, Catholics must earnestly work for redress.

In particular, Catholic universities and hospitals are called to follow the directives of the Church's Magisterium in every aspect of obstetric and gynaecological practice, including research involving embryos. They should also offer a qualified and internationally recognized teaching network, in order to help doctors who are subject to discrimination or unacceptable pressure on their moral convictions to specialize in obstetrics and gynaecology.

5. It is my fervent hope that at the beginning of this new millennium, all Catholic medical and health care personnel, whether in research or practice, will commit themselves whole-heartedly to the service of human life. I trust that the local Churches will give due attention to the medical

profession, promoting the ideal of unambiguous service to the great miracle of life, supporting obstetricians, gynaecologists and health workers who respect the right to life by helping to bring them together for mutual support and the exchange of ideas and experiences.

Entrusting you and your mission as guardians and servants of life to the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to all who work with you in bearing witness to the Gospel of life.