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To the Charity and Health Commission of the CEI: if there is a sector where the consequences of throwaway culture are most evident, it is healthcare

The Holy Father received in audience this morning, in the Clementine Hall, the attendees of the meeting promoted by the Charity and Health Commission of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI), coinciding with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the institution of the World Day of the Sick and the twentieth anniversary of the National Office for Health Pastoral Care.

The Pope began his address by thanking the Lord for the progress made in these years, for what has been done in the interest of the holistic care of the sick and for the generosity of many men and women who have accepted Jesus' invitation to visit Him in the person of the infirm. "They have been years marked by important social and cultural changes, and today we can see a situation with light and shade. Certainly, scientific research has gone ahead and we are grateful for the valuable results obtained in the care, if not the cure, for some pathologies", he said, expressing his hope that the same commitment be guaranteed to rare and neglected diseases, "towards which the due attention has never been paid, with the risk of giving rise to further suffering". He also praised the Lord for the many healthcare workers who live their work as a mission and who are "ministers of life" whose hands "touch every day Christ's suffering flesh, which is a great honour and a grave responsibility", as well as for the many volunteers who generously "alleviate and humanise the long and difficult days of many lonely patients and elderly, especially the poor and needy. And here I would like to pause to give thanks for the witness of voluntary workers in Italy. For me it has been a surprise. I would never have imagined to find something like this. There are many dedicated volunteers who work in this field. And this is the work of the parish priests, the great Italian parish priests, who have known how to fight in this field. For me it is a surprise, and I thank God for this".

"Along with the lights, however, there are some shadows that threaten to worsen the experience of our ailing brothers and sisters. If there is a sector in which the throwaway culture is manifest, with its painful consequences, it is that of healthcare. When a sick person is not placed in the centre or their dignity is not considered, this gives rise to attitudes that can lead even to speculation on the misfortune of others. And this is very grave! It is necessary to be vigilant, especially when patients are elderly with gravely compromised health, if they are affected by illnesses that are serious or require burdensome cures, or are particularly difficult to treat, such as psychiatric patients. The application of a business approach to the healthcare sector, if indiscriminate, instead of optimising resources may risk discarding human beings. Optimising resources means using them in an ethical and fraternal way, and not penalising the most fragile".

“In the first place there is the inviolable dignity of every human being from the moment of conception until the final breath (cf. Message for the 25th World Day of the Sick, 8 December 2016). May it not only be money to guide political and administrative decisions, called to safeguard the right to health as enshrined in the Italian Constitution, nor the choices of those who manage healthcare structures. The increasing health poverty among the poorest sectors of the population, due precisely to the difficulty of access to care, must not leave anyone indifferent; may all efforts be redoubled to ensure the rights of the weakest are protected”.

He went on to recall that the history of the Church includes many “inns of the Good Samaritan”, where the suffering have received “the oil of consolation and the wine of hope”. “I think, in particular of the many healthcare institutions of Christian inspiration”, he added, expressing his gratitude for their representatives present for their good work and encouraging them to continue to carry forward “the dream of charity of the Founders”. “In the current context, where the answer to the health question for the most fragile is shown to be increasingly difficult, do not hesitate even to rethink your works of charity, to offer a sign of God’s mercy to the poorest who, with trust and hope, knock on your doors”.

Among the aims that St. John Paul II outlined for World Day of the Sick, aside from the promotion of the Culture of Life, there also the involvement of the dioceses, Christian communities and religious families regarding the importance of health pastoral care, Pope Francis noted, citing the letter written by his predecessor to Cardinal Fiorenzo Angelini in 1992 for the institution of the Day. “There are many patients in the hospitals, but also many at home, even more alone. I hope that they will be visited frequently, so that they do not feel excluded from the community, and that they may experience, through the closeness of those whom they encounter, the presence of Christ Who passes today in the midst of those ailing in body and spirit. Unfortunately, the worst discrimination suffered by the poor – and the sick are poor in health – is the lack of spiritual attention. They need God and we must not fail to offer them His friendship, His blessing, His Word, the celebration of the Sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith”.

“The sick are valuable members of the Church”, Francis exclaimed at the end of his address. “By the grace of God and the intercession of Mary, Health of the sick, may they become strong in weakness, and ‘receive the grace to fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for His body, the Church. For that body, in the image of the risen Lord’s own, keeps its wounds, the marks of a hard struggle, but they are wounds transfigured for ever by love”.
