

Every patient is a person

11 September 2020

Address to the International Gynaecologic Cancer Society

Pope Francis

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning! I offer you a cordial welcome on the occasion of the annual Meeting of the International Gynaecologic Cancer Society. Your visit affords me an opportunity to acknowledge with esteem the work of your association in caring for women suffering from complex and distressing diseases. I thank your President, Professor Roberto Angioli, for his kind words of welcome and for arranging this encounter.

I am also pleased to welcome the representatives of the various associations, especially those of former patients, which offer a setting for mutual sharing and support. In providing this valuable service, you show how important it is to forge bonds of solidarity and support between patients suffering from serious pathologies, their family members and medical personnel. This becomes all the more important when it has to do with illnesses that can impair or eliminate fertility and the possibility of motherhood. In those situations, which so greatly impact women's lives, profound sensitivity and respect for the well-being of each patient – psychological, relational, spiritual – must constantly be shown.

For this reason, I can only encourage your efforts to concentrate on these aspects of the integral care of patients, also in cases where treatment is essentially palliative. The involvement of other persons who can support the patient by offering trust, hope and love is likewise important. We all know – as has been shown – that good relationships help and encourage the sick at every stage of care, rekindling and deepening their hope. It is exactly that loving closeness that opens the door to hope and thus to healing.

Every patient is a person and, as such, is defined by much more than his or her clinical data. When a sick person senses that he or she is being treated as a unique person – and you can surely confirm this from your experience – the result is greater confidence in the medical team and greater hope for a positive outcome.

I trust, as I am certain you do, that these values will not remain merely an ideal, but will be increasingly recognized within healthcare systems. It is often stated, and rightly so, that a good relationship with healthcare personnel is itself part of the cure. What a great benefit it is for the sick to have an opportunity to open their hearts freely and speak to others about their condition and needs! But also to be able to shed tears, knowing that they will be understood. This opens new horizons and assists healing, or in cases of terminal illness, provides encouragement and support.

Yet, important as this is, can it realistically happen in hospital environments that are strongly conditioned by functional needs? Here I must observe with regret that the human dimension of the care of the sick is all too often left to the kindness of the individual physician rather than being considered, as it should be, an integral part of the services offered by healthcare facilities.

Financial concerns should not be allowed to dominate the field of healthcare to the point where such essential aspects as building relationships with patients are overlooked. In this regard, praise is due to the various non-profit organizations that place patients at the centre, assisting with their needs, responding to their legitimate questions and enabling those who, due to the fragility of their personal, economic and social condition, cannot make their voices heard.

Research, of course, demands significant financial resources. Yet I am confident that a sound balance between these various factors can be achieved. Even so, priority must always be given to people, in this case, women suffering from serious illnesses, but also – let us not forget – to the personnel who deal with them daily to ensure that they can carry out their work in dignified conditions. But also that they have time to rest and regain their energy and strength.

I encourage you to make known the important results of your studies and research for the sake of the women for whom you care. Amid their difficulties, they help us to remember aspects of life that we sometimes forget, such as the precariousness of our existence, our need for one another, the vanity of self-centredness, and the reality of death as part of life itself. Sickness reminds us of the decisive attitude for every human being, namely, our need to entrust ourselves: to others who are our brothers and sisters, and to the Other who is our heavenly Father. It also reminds us of the importance of closeness, of our need to be neighbours to one another, as Jesus

taught in the parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:25-37). At the right time, what healing can a caress bring! You know that better than I.

Dear friends, I offer you my prayerful good wishes for your work. Upon you and your families, your associates and all those for whom you care, I invoke God's blessing. I bless all of you whatever your faith or religious tradition. God is the same for all. I bless all of you and I invoke God's blessing, source of wisdom, strength and interior peace. I assure you of my prayers and - they say priests always do this! - I conclude by asking your prayers for me because I need them. Thank you.