

Global health: avoid a throwaway culture

27 September 2021

Address to the participants in the plenary assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life

Pope Francis

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Dear sisters and brothers,

I am happy to be able to meet you on the occasion of your General Assembly and I thank Msgr Paglia for his words. I extend a greeting also to the many Academics who are connected.

The theme you have chosen for these three days of workshops is particularly timely: that of public health in the horizon of globalization. Indeed, the crisis of the pandemic has made “both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” reverberate even more strongly (Enc. *Laudato Si'*, 49). We cannot remain deaf before this dual cry. We have to listen to it well! And it is what you are setting out to do.

Examination of the numerous and grave issues that have emerged in the last two years is not an easy task. On the one hand we are worn out by the Covid-19 pandemic and by the inflation of issues that have been raised: we almost do not want to hear about it any more and we hurry on to other topics. However, on the other hand, it is essential to reflect calmly in order to examine in depth what has happened and to glimpse the path towards a better future for all. Truly, “even worse than this crisis is the tragedy of squandering it” (Pentecost homily, 31 May 2020). And we know that we do not emerge from a crisis the same: we will either emerge better or we will emerge worse. But not the same. The choice is in our hands. And I repeat, even worse than this crisis is the tragedy of squandering it. I encourage you in this effort. And I think the dynamic of discernment in which your meeting is taking place is wise and timely: first and foremost, listening attentively to the situation in order to foster a true and proper conversion and identify concrete decisions to emerge from the crisis, better.

The reflection that you have undertaken in recent years on global bioethics is revealing itself to be precious. I had encouraged you in this perspective with the letter *Humana communitas* on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of your Academy. The horizon of public health in fact offers the possibility to focus on important aspects for the coexistence of the human family and to strengthen the fabric of social friendship. These are central themes in the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (cf. Chapter 6).

The crisis of the pandemic has highlighted the depth of the interdependence both among ourselves and between the human family and our common home (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 86; 164). Our societies, especially in the West, have had the tendency to forget this interconnection. And the bitter consequences are before our eyes. In this epochal change it is thus urgent to invert this noxious tendency and it is possible to do so through the synergy among different disciplines. Knowledge of biology and hygiene is needed, as well as of medicine and epidemiology, but also of economy and sociology, anthropology and ecology. In addition to understanding the phenomena, it is a matter of identifying technological, political and ethical criteria of action with regards to health systems, the family, employment and the environment.

This outlook is particularly important in the health field because health and sickness are determined not only by processes of nature but also by social life. Moreover, it is not enough for a problem to be serious for it to come to people's attention and thus be addressed. Many very serious problems are ignored due to lack of an adequate commitment. Let us think of the devastating impact of certain diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis: the precariousness of health and hygiene conditions cause millions of avoidable deaths in the world every year. If we compare this reality with the concern caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, we can see how the perception of the seriousness of the problem and the corresponding mobilization of energies and resources are very different.

Of course, taking all measures to stem and defeat Covid-19 on a global level is the right thing to do, but this moment in history in which our health is being threatened directly should make us aware of what it means to be vulnerable and to live daily in insecurity. We could thus assume the responsibility also for the grave conditions in which others live and of which we have so far been little or not interested at all. We could thus learn not to project our priorities onto populations who live on other continents, where other needs are more urgent; where, for example, not only vaccines but also drinking water and daily bread are in short supply. I don't know if one should laugh or cry, cry sometimes, when we hear government leaders or community leaders advise slum dwellers to sanitize themselves several times a day with soap and water. But, my dear, you have never been to a slum: there is no water there, they know nothing about soap. “No, do not leave your home!”: but there the

whole neighbourhood is home, because they live... Please, let us take care of this reality, even when we reflect on health. Let us welcome then, any commitment to a fair and universal distribution of vaccines — this is important —, but taking into account the broader field which demands the same criteria of justice for health needs and for the promotion of life.

Looking at health in its multiple dimensions at a global level helps to understand and take on with responsibility the interconnection between the phenomena. In this way, we can better observe how even the conditions of life that are the result of political, social and environmental choices have an impact on the health of human beings. If we examine in different countries and in different social groups the hope of life — and of a healthy life — we discover great inequalities. They depend on variables such as the amount of wages, the educational level, the neighbourhood in which one resides even though it is in the same city. We state that life and health are values that are equally fundamental for all, based on the inalienable dignity of the human person. But, if this statement is not followed by an adequate commitment to overcome inequality, we are de facto accepting the painful reality that not all lives are equal and health is not protected for everyone in the same way. And here, I would like to repeat my concern: that there always be a free healthcare system. May the countries which have them, not lose them, for example Italy and others, which have a good free healthcare system: do not lose it because otherwise we would end up with only members of the population who can afford it, having the right to healthcare and the others not. And this is a very big challenge. This helps overcome inequality.

Therefore, international initiatives are to be supported — I am thinking for example of those recently promoted by the G20 aimed at creating a global governance for the health of all the inhabitants of the planet, that is, a set of clear rules agreed at the international level that respect human dignity. In fact, the risk of new pandemics will continue to be a threat also for the future.

The Pontifical Academy for Life can also offer a precious contribution in this sense, seeing itself as a travelling companion of other international organizations committed to this same aim. With regards to this, it is important to participate in shared initiatives and in the appropriate manner, to the public debate. Naturally, this requires that, without “watering down” contents, attempts be made to communicate them in a language that is suitable and topics that can be understood in the current social context, so that the Christian anthropological proposition, inspired by Revelation, can also help today’s men and women to rediscover “the primacy of the right to life from conception to its natural end” (Discourse to participants in the Meeting sponsored by the Science and Life Association, 30 May 2015).

Here too, I would like to mention that we are victims of the throwaway culture. In his presentation, Msgr Paglia referred to something: but there is the throwing away of children that we do not want to welcome, with that abortion law that sends them back to their sender and kills them. Today this has become a “normal” thing, a habit that is very bad; it is truly murder. In order to truly grasp this, perhaps asking ourselves two questions may help: is it right to eliminate, to end a human life to solve a problem? Is it right to hire a hitman to solve a problem? Abortion is this. And then on the other side, are the elderly: the elderly who are also a bit of “throwaway material” because they are not needed.... But they are the wisdom, they are the roots of the wisdom of our civilization, and this civilization discards them! Yes, in many places there is a “hidden” law on euthanasia, as I call it. It is the one that makes us say: “medicines are expensive, only half should be given”. This means shortening the lives of the elderly. In so doing, we deny hope, the hope of the children who bring us the life that makes us go forward, and the hope that is in the roots that the elderly give us. Instead, we discard both. And then the everyday throwing away, that life is thrown away. Let us be careful about this throwaway culture. It is not a problem of one law or another. It is a problem of throwing away. And on this point, you academics, the Catholic universities and also Catholic hospitals cannot allow themselves to go this way. This is a path which we cannot take: the throw away path.

Therefore, the work that your Academy has undertaken in recent years on the impact of new technologies on human life and more specifically on “allogeneics” should be looked upon favourably in such a way “that science may truly be at the service of mankind, and not mankind at the service of science” (ibid). I encourage in this regard, the work of the fledgling foundation, renAissance, for the spreading and deepening of the Rome Call for AI Ethics which I strongly hope many will join.

Lastly, I wish to thank you for the commitment and contribution that the Academy has provided by actively participating in the Vatican Covid Commission. Thank you for this. It is beautiful to see cooperation within the Roman Curia in the fulfilment of a shared project. We have to increasingly develop these processes brought forth together, in which I know many of you have participated, urging greater attention to vulnerable people such as the elderly, the disabled and the younger ones.

With these feelings of gratitude, I entrust the work of this Assembly and also your activity as an Academy on the whole in favour of the defence and promotion of life, to the Virgin Mary. I offer my heartfelt blessing to each of you and your loved ones. And I ask you please to pray for me because I need it. Thank you.