

Medicine is service to human life, euthanasia not

20 September 2019

Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Federation of the Orders of Doctors and Dental Surgeons

Pope Francis

Friday, 20 September 2019

Dear brothers and sisters,

It is with pleasure that I welcome you all, members of the National Federation of the Orders of Doctors and Dental Surgeons, and I thank your vice president for his kind words. I know you have devoted the last three years to the “general states” of the medical profession, or rather, to the exchange on how best to exercise your activity in a changed social context, to identify better the changes useful to interpret people’s needs and to offer them, along with professional competences, also a good human relationship.

Medicine is by definition service to human life, and as such involves an essential and indispensable reference to the person in his spiritual and material integrity, in his individual and social dimension: medicine is service to man, to the whole man, every man. And you doctors are convinced of this truth on the basis of a very long tradition, which dates back to the Hippocratic intuitions; and it is precisely from this conviction that there arise your just concerns for the pitfalls to which today’s medicine is exposed.

We must always remember that illness, the object of your concerns, is more than a clinical fact, medically circumscribable; it is always the condition of a person, the sick person, and it is with this entirely human vision that doctors are called to relate to the patient: considering therefore his singularity as a person who has an illness, and not only a case of whatever illness that patient has. For doctors it is a matter of possessing, together with the due technical-professional competence, a code of values and meanings with which to give meaning to the disease and to their work, and to make each individual clinical case a human encounter.

Faced, therefore, with any change in medicine and in the society you have identified, it is important that the doctor does not lose sight of the uniqueness of each patient, with his dignity and his fragility. A man or a woman to be accompanied with conscience, intelligence and heart, especially in the most serious situations. With this attitude we can and must reject the temptation – also induced by legislative changes – to use medicine to support a possible willingness to die of the patient, providing assistance to suicide or directly causing death by euthanasia.

These are hasty ways of dealing with choices that are not, as they might seem, an expression of the person’s freedom, when they include the discarding of the patient as a possibility, or false compassion in the face of the request to be helped to anticipate death. As the New Charter for Health Care Workers states: “There is no right to dispose arbitrarily of one’s life, so no doctor can become an executive guardian of a non-existent right” (169).

Saint John Paul II observes that the responsibility of health care workers “today is greatly increased. Its deepest inspiration and strongest support lie in the intrinsic and undeniable ethical dimension of the health-care profession, something already recognized by the ancient and still relevant Hippocratic Oath, which requires every doctor to commit himself to absolute respect for human life and its sacredness” (Evangelium vitae, 89).

Dear friends, I invoke God’s blessing on your commitment and I entrust you to the intercession of the Virgin Mary Salus infirmorum. Please do not forget to pray for me.