

Offer love to those who suffer

18 September 2019

Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to members of the Italian Association of Medical Oncology (AIOM)

Pope Francis

Monday, 2 September 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

I offer my cordial greeting to you all: to the President, whom I thank for her words, to the doctors and patients present at this meeting, and to all the members.

Since 1973, the Italian Association of Medical Oncology has played a valuable role in the healthcare sector, encouraging research and prevention, striving to improve diagnosis and treatment, and developing numerous training and updating initiatives for doctors and other workers in the field of oncology. Your Statute illustrates the aims of your non-profit Association which seeks “to promote progress in the clinical, experimental and social welfare field” (Art. 2), with active collaboration among doctors of different disciplines, bodies and institutions. You are committed to “fostering relationships” and to “establishing scientific and collaborative relationships” (ibid.) within the scientific and healthcare world, endeavouring to encourage the sharing of achieved goals and multidisciplinary, which is often hampered by the jealous safeguarding of knowledge.

In a world like ours, often thrust into contention in every sphere of human coexistence, creating and fostering relationships is a commitment essential for the building of the common good. The conscious and often tiring choice to adopt a style of uniting rather than dividing is represented, in all aspects of the life of aiom, by its care for relationships with patients, and today it is manifested precisely by the presence of some patients among you. The choice to participate in this meeting together, sitting side by side, presents a strong message and an eloquent sign not only for the world of healthcare, but for the whole of society, called to renew itself in a fraternal style of solidarity.

The National Congress, which you will hold in a few weeks, will be dedicated precisely to attention to the individual patient, to the “best care for each patient”, based on each one’s biological and clinical characteristics. This is how the oncology of precision, which you promote, also becomes an oncology of mercy, because the effort involved in personalizing care shows attention not only to the disease, but to the patient’s specificities, to the way in which he or she reacts to medications, to the most painful information, to suffering. This form of oncology goes beyond the implementation of protocols and demonstrates the employment of technology at the service of people.

Technology is not at the service of man when it reduces him to a “thing”, when it distinguishes between those who still deserve to be treated and those who do not, because they are deemed a burden, and sometimes even a waste. The practice of euthanasia, which is already legal in several states, only seemingly aims to encourage personal freedom; in reality it is based on a utilitarian view of the person, who becomes useless or is regarded as an expense if, from the medical point of view, he or she has no hope of improvement or can no longer escape pain. On the contrary, the commitment to accompany patients and their loved ones throughout all stages of the journey, seeking to alleviate their suffering through palliative care or by offering a family environment in hospices, which are increasingly numerous, contributes to creating a culture and practice more attentive to the value of each person. Never lose heart as a result of the lack of understanding you may encounter, or in the face of the persistent suggestion of more radical and hasty paths. If one chooses death, in a sense problems are solved; but how much bitterness there is behind this reasoning, and what rejection of hope is involved in the decision to give up everything and break all ties! Sometimes, we are in a sort of Pandora’s box: everything is known, everything is explained, everything is resolved, but only one thing is hidden: hope. And we have to go and look for this; how to translate hope, or indeed, how to provide it in the most extreme cases.

Thus, your service also becomes a task of raising awareness in a society that is not very aware and at times is even distracted. In many ways you bring to its attention the importance of prevention, understood both as early diagnosis, which can significantly reduce the dangerous nature of oncological diseases, and in terms of respecting the body and its needs. Indeed, the best and truest prevention is a healthy environment and a lifestyle that respects the human body and its laws. As we know, this does not depend on individual choices alone, but also on the places where we live, which, especially in large centres, subject the body to constant stress due to the rhythms of life and exposure to pollutants. This draws our attention back to the care of the natural environment, our common home which we must respect, so that it may also respect us. Protection of

the environment and the fight against cancer thus become two sides of the same problem, two complementary aspects of the same battle of civilization and humanity.

In your commitment to the sick, to the healthcare system and to society as a whole, I invite you to always keep in mind the example of Jesus, who was mankind's greatest teacher, to inspire your gestures and make him your own travelling companion. May he — whom one can never tire of contemplating, so great is the light that emanates from him — inspire the sick and help them to find the strength not to break the bonds of love, to offer their suffering for brothers and sisters, to keep alive their friendship with God. May he — who in a certain way is deemed your colleague, as a physician sent by the Father to heal humanity — inspire doctors to always seek the good of others, to expend themselves generously, to fight for a more supportive world. May he inspire everyone to be close to those who are suffering. Closeness, that very important and much needed attitude. The Lord also implemented it, closeness, in our midst. May he inspire everyone to be close to those who suffer, above all to the little ones, and to put the weak in first place, so that they may nurture a more human society and relationships characterized by gratuitousness, rather than opportunity.

I invoke God's blessing upon all your activities, and I entrust you to the Virgin Mary, so that with the affection of a mother she may watch over you, doctors and all the sick. As I assure you that I accompany you with my prayer, I ask you too to pray for me. Thank you!