

Palliative care: a sign of hope

26 April 2024

Message to the participants in the symposium “Towards a narrative of hope: an international interfaith symposium on palliative care”, Toronto, 21-23 May 2024

Pope Francis
26 April 2024

I offer cordial greetings and best wishes to everyone taking part in the first International Interfaith Symposium on Palliative Care, jointly sponsored by the Pontifical Academy for Life and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, and I thank their respective Presidents, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia and Bishop William McGrattan. I am likewise grateful to the speakers at the Symposium and all who worked to make this gathering possible.

The theme you have chosen, *Towards a Narrative of Hope*, is both timely and necessary. Nowadays, in witnessing the tragic effects of war, violence and injustice of various kinds, it is all too easy to give in to grief and even to despair. Yet as members of the human family and especially as believers, we are called to accompany, with love and compassion, those who struggle and have difficulty finding reasons for hope (cf. 1 Peter 3:15). Indeed, hope is what gives us strength in the face of the questions raised by life's challenges, difficulties and anxieties.

This is even more true when facing a serious illness or the end of life. All who experience the uncertainties so often brought about by sickness and death need the witness of hope provided by those who care for them and who remain at their side. In this regard, palliative care, while seeking to alleviate the burden of pain as much as possible, is above all a concrete sign of closeness and solidarity with our brothers and sisters who are suffering. At the same time, this kind of care can help patients and their loved ones to accept the vulnerability, frailty and finitude that mark human life in this world.

Here, I would point out that authentic palliative care is radically different from euthanasia, which is never a source of hope or genuine concern for the sick and dying. Instead, it is a failure of love, a reflection of a “throwaway culture” in which “persons are no longer seen as a paramount value to be cared for and respected” (Fratelli Tutti, 18). Indeed, euthanasia is often presented falsely as a form of compassion. Yet “compassion”, a word that means “suffering with”, does not involve the intentional ending of a life, but rather the willingness to share the burdens of those facing the end stages of our earthly pilgrimage. Palliative care, then, is a genuine form of compassion, for it responds to suffering, whether physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual, by affirming the fundamental and inviolable dignity of every person, especially the dying, and helping them to accept the inevitable moment of passage from this life to eternal life.

In this perspective, our religious convictions offer a more profound understanding of illness, suffering and death, seeing these as part of the mystery of divine providence and, for the Christian tradition, a means towards sanctification. At the same time, the compassionate actions and respect shown by dedicated medical personnel and caregivers have often created the possibility for those at the end of their lives to find spiritual comfort, hope and reconciliation with God, family members and friends. Indeed, your service is important – I would even say essential – in helping the sick and dying realize that they are not isolated or alone, that their lives are not a burden, but that they always remain inherently valuable in the eyes of God (cf. Psalm 116:15) and united to us by the bonds of communion.

Dear friends, I encourage all of you in your efforts to advance palliative care for the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters. May your discussions and deliberations in these days help you to persevere in love, give hope to those at the end of life and further the building of a more just and fraternal society. Upon you and your loved ones, I invoke the divine blessings of wisdom, strength and peace.

Rome, from Saint John Lateran