

The COVID pandemic and humanity

7 October 2020

Message of His Holiness Pope Francis on the occasion of the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences

7-9 October 2020

To the Distinguished Members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences Meeting in Plenary Session

I offer you cordial greetings and I express my gratitude to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences for devoting this year's Plenary Session to placing basic scientific research at the service of the health of our planet and its inhabitants, especially the poorest and most disadvantaged. I likewise greet the invited experts and leaders, all of whom have weighty international responsibilities, and I look forward to their contribution.

Before all else, I express my support for the work of the Academy, actively promoted by its President, Professor Joachim von Braun, and the Council. In these days, my interest in your work is even keener, because you have devoted this Plenary Session to what is rightly a topic of profound concern for all humanity. You are focusing on the notion of science at the service of people for the survival of humanity in light of the SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic and other global issues.

In effect, the pandemic brought to light not only our false securities, but also the inability of the world's countries to work together. For all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all (cf. Fratelli Tutti, 7). It is significant, then, that this virtual Plenary Session of the Academy brings together a number of different scientific disciplines; in this sense, it offers an example of how the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis should be addressed through coordinated efforts in the service of the entire human family.

Your efforts are largely concentrated on the study of new immunological and immunochemical pathways to activate the body's own defence mechanisms or stop the proliferation of infected cells. You are also studying other specific treatments, including vaccines now being tested in clinical trials. As we know, the virus, in affecting people's health, has also affected the entire social, economic and spiritual fabric of society, paralyzing human relationships, work, manufacturing, trade and even many spiritual activities. It has an enormous impact on education. In many parts of the world, great numbers of children are unable to return to school, and this situation runs the risk of an increase in child labour, exploitation, abuse and malnutrition. In short, being unable to see a person's face and considering other people as potential carriers of the virus is a terrible metaphor of a global social crisis that must be of concern to all who have the future of humanity at heart.

In this regard, none of us can fail to be concerned for the impact of the crisis on the world's poor. For many of them, the question is indeed one of survival itself. Together with the contribution of the sciences, the needs of the poorer members of our human family cry out for equitable solutions on the part of governments and all decision makers. Healthcare systems, for example, need to become much more inclusive and accessible to the disadvantaged and those living in low-income countries. If anyone should be given preference, let it be the neediest and most vulnerable among us. Similarly, when vaccines become available, equitable access to them must be ensured regardless of income, always starting with the least. The global problems we face demand cooperative and multilateral responses. International organizations such as the UN, WHO, FAO and others, which were established to foster global cooperation and coordination, should be respected and supported so that they can achieve their goals for the sake of the universal common good.

The eruption of the pandemic, within the broader context of global warming, the ecological crisis and the dramatic loss of biodiversity, represents a summons to our human family to rethink its course, to repent and to undertake an ecological conversion (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 216-221). A conversion that draws on all our God-given gifts and talents in order to promote a "human ecology" worthy of our innate dignity and common destiny. This is the hope I expressed in my recent Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* on fraternity and social friendship. "How wonderful it would be if the growth of scientific and technological innovation could come along with more equality and social inclusion. How wonderful would it be, even as we discover faraway planets, to rediscover the needs of the brothers and sisters who orbit around us!" (No. 31).

The reflections of your Plenary Session on the sciences and the survival of humanity also raise the issue of similar scenarios that could originate in the most advanced laboratories of the physical and biological sciences. May we remain quiet in the face of such prospects? As great as the responsibility of politicians may be, it does not exempt scientists from acknowledging their own ethical responsibilities in the effort to halt not only the

manufacture, possession and use of nuclear weapons, but also the development of biological weapons, with their potential to devastate innocent civilians and indeed, entire peoples.

Dear friends, once again, I thank you for your research and your efforts to confront these grave issues in a spirit of cooperation and shared responsibility for the future of our societies. In these months, the entire world has depended on you and your colleagues to provide information, to instil hope and, in the case of countless medical professionals, to care for the sick and the suffering, often at the risk of their own lives. In renewing my own gratitude and offering my prayerful good wishes for the deliberations of your Plenary Session, I invoke upon you, your families and your associates God's blessings of wisdom, strength and peace. And I ask you, please, to remember me in your prayers.

Rome, from Saint John Lateran, 7 October 2020