

The dignity of the sick comes before sickness and profit

18 October 2021

Address to members of the Biomedical University Foundation of the Campus Biomedico University of Rome

Pope Francis

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Dear brothers and sisters,

I welcome you and I thank you for your presence and your gift. I am grateful to Professor Paolo Arullani, President of the Foundation, for the words he addressed to me on your behalf. It is good to meet you in person precisely on the day on which we celebrate Saint Luke, whom the apostle Paul calls “the beloved physician” (Col 4: 14).

I gladly accepted the proposal to meet because of what I know of the Campus Bio-Medico in Rome. I know how difficult it is today to work in the field of healthcare, especially when, as in your hospital, the focus is not only on assistance, but also on research to provide patients with the most suitable therapies, and above all it is done with love for the person. Putting the sick person before the disease is essential in every field of medicine; it is fundamental for treatment that is truly comprehensive, truly human. The patient comes before the illness. Blessed Alvaro del Portillo encouraged you to do this: to place yourselves every day at the service of the human person in his or her entirety. I thank you for this, it is very pleasing to God.

The centrality of the person, which is at the foundation of your commitment to assistance, but also in teaching and research, helps you to strengthen a united and synergic outlook. An outlook that puts in first place not ideas, techniques and projects, but the real person, the patient, to be cared for by encountering his or her history and lived experience, establishing friendly relations, which heal the heart. Love for man, especially in his condition of fragility, in which the image of Jesus Crucified shines through, is specific to a Christian reality and must never be lost.

The Foundation and the Campus Bio-Medico, and Catholic healthcare in general, are called to bear witness to the facts that there are no lives that are unworthy or to be rejected because they do not respond to the criterion of usefulness or the demands of profit. We are living in a real throwaway culture: this is something in the air that we breathe and we must react against this throwaway culture. Every healthcare structure, in particular those of Christian inspiration, should be the place where the care of the person is practiced, and where one may say: “Here we do not see only doctors and patients, but people whom we receive and help; here you encounter first-hand the therapy of human dignity. And this should never be negotiated, it should always be defended.

The focus should therefore be on caring for the individual, without forgetting the importance of science and research. Because treatment without science is vain, just as science without treatment is barren. The two things go together, and only together do they make medicine an art, an art that involves head and heart, that combines knowledge and compassion, professionalism and pity, competence and empathy.

Dear friends, thank you for promoting the humane development of research. Unfortunately, we often pursue the profitable paths of profit, forgetting that the needs of the sick come before the opportunities for profit. The needs of the sick are constantly evolving and we must therefore be prepared to deal with new diseases and problems. I have in mind, among others, those of many elderly people and those linked to the many rare diseases, which we know little about, since there has not yet been research to understand them well... In addition to promoting research, you help those who do not have the financial means to pay for university and you face significant costs that the ordinary budget cannot bear. I am thinking in particular of the efforts already made for the Covid Centre, the emergency room and the recent hospice project.

All this is very good, it is good to cope with greater urgencies with greater openings. And it is important to do this together. I stress this simple yet difficult word: together. The pandemic has shown us the importance of connecting, of collaborating, of tackling common problems together. Health care, particularly Catholic health care, has and will increasingly need this, to be in a network, which is a way of expressing togetherness. It is no longer time to follow one’s own charism in isolation. Charity demands giving: knowledge must be shared, expertise must be shared, science must be pooled.

Science, I say, not just the products of science which, if offered on their own, remain band-aids that can dress

the wound but not cure it in depth. This applies to vaccines, for example: there is an urgent need to help countries that have fewer of them, but this must be done with far-sighted plans, not just motivated by the haste of wealthy nations to be safer. Remedies must be distributed with dignity, not as pitiful handouts. To truly do good, we need to promote science and its integral application: understanding the contexts, rooting out treatments, nurturing the healthcare culture. It is not easy, it is a real mission, and I hope that Catholic health care will be increasingly active in this sense, as an expression of an outgoing Church.

I encourage you to continue in this direction, welcoming your work as a service to the inspirations and surprises of the Spirit, who along the way makes you encounter so many situations in need of closeness and compassion. I pray for you, I reiterate my gratitude to you, and I give you the Blessing. And I ask you, please, to continue to pray for me. Thank you.