

Opening speech for the congress proceedings

by Dr. Vincenzo Defilippis, President of FEAMC

Most Reverend Excellencies, dear Colleagues, dear Friends

what a great joy to see you again!

Welcome to Assisi, welcome to the land of St Francis, a place of peace and closeness to God.

In these years the pandemic has kept us apart physically but not in our hearts: we have always felt close by writing emails and exchanging phone calls, and internet technology has allowed us to continue our online bureaux. Then, on 25 and 26 September 2021, we were able to hold our General Assembly in presence in Rome, with the re-election and reconstitution of the FEAMC presidency. The Bureau immediately started planning this Symposium, strongly desired by all, with numerous online meetings. If we were able to organise this Symposium, it is because everyone contributed to it. I thank, first of all, **Monsignor Jacques Suaudeau** for proposing the theme and for his great help and suggestions, despite his objective difficulties. I would like to thank the vice-presidents Prof. **Josef Glasa** (Slovakia), Prof. **Nadiya Helner** (Ukraine), Dr. **Ilona Aleksuniene** (Lithuania), Dr. **Dermot Kearney** (UK) and Dr. **Bogdan Chazan** (Poland) for their cooperation and advice. I would especially like to thank the general secretary Prof. **Frans van Ittersum** for his great and constant organisational and liaison work, the treasurer Dr. **Diogo Cunha e Sa** for keeping the complex accounts, and the Italian delegate Prof. **Oliviero Gorrieri** for taking care of the printing material. Many thanks also to the secretaries **Silvija Vasili** of FIAMC and **Cristina Narcisi** of the AMCI for their invaluable support.

However, the Symposium's journey was abruptly saddened on 24 February 2022, when the dear land of Ukraine was invaded by the Russian army, unleashing a brutal war of aggression in our Europe that is still ongoing. Our hearts and minds went out to our Ukrainian Catholic medical friends, to the bureaux in Lviv (the last in 2018): **Nadiya Helner's** and **Ivan Luts'** emails made us realise the suffering they were and are unjustly suffering. Our homes have opened to welcome Ukrainian refugees, everywhere in Europe. I particularly thank the Catholic doctors of Poland and Slovakia for their great willingness to serve the Ukrainian refugees. Our wish is that peace may be restored, a just peace that will see the land of Ukraine free and whole once again. We want to re-embrace our Ukrainian friends, we want to resume paths of sharing and progress together in the witness of the Gospel as soon as possible. We will pray

especially for them during these days in Assisi and for those who are making themselves "*builders of peace*".

Now we are here and can strengthen relationships and share authentic reflections with one another. I thank in advance all the speakers for their interventions and those who will take part in the discussions: their words will all be reported to the Holy Father next September, as a contribution of European Catholic doctors to the synodal path of the Catholic Church.

The synodal style is, in fact, walking together, sharing time and history and, above all, developing a great capacity to listen to each other. Our time and history are largely that of doctors alongside the sick, the physically and mentally suffering. But this time, if we believe in the Gospel, if we are authentic Catholics, cannot but reflect God's style, which is that of compassion.

Our time, our days are a service to the sick, a true service, that is, of up-to-date, effective, wise, prudent skills. A service to be such must be competent, truly competent. But competent service to suffering is only professional technique, if it is not combined with a position of the heart called compassion.

Our time, our days are a service to the sick, a real service, that is, of up-to-date, effective, wise, prudent skills. A service to be such must be competent, truly competent. But competent service to suffering is only professional technique, if it is not combined with a position of the heart called compassion.

This is the essence of these congress days: to reflect together in the various medical disciplines with testimonies of compassion in order to discover how compassion is itself a cure for the doctor/patient relationship and a condition for integral healing. We must be aware that for the doctor to heal is to cure, to cure is to cure, to save is to save: the closeness of our heart to the sick person makes our heart close to God. Compassion, thus, becomes for God the opportunity to be through us a 'caress' and relief to the suffering of the sick. And this makes us better, that is, authentic witnesses of the Gospel alongside the sick and those who are faced with difficult and arduous choices: in the face of the acceptance of nascent life, disability, addiction, dementia, treatments that do not heal, intractable pain and death.

We would like, in these days, to concretely decline the Pope's Message for the XXX World Day of the Sick on 11 February 2022: "*Be merciful, as your Father is merciful (Lk 6:36). Stand beside those who suffer on a path of charity*". It means that "*when a person experiences fragility and suffering in his own flesh because of illness, his heart also grows heavy, fear grows, questions multiply, the question of meaning for everything that happens becomes more urgent*". Hence *'the importance of having*

witnesses of God's charity at our side who, following the example of Jesus, the mercy of the Father, pour the oil of consolation and the wine of hope on the wounds of the sick'. It is a matter of making our places of care truly 'inns of the Good Samaritan'.

We are aware, as St John Paul II reminded us (Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, 89), that the responsibility of doctors *'is enormously increased today and finds its deepest inspiration and strongest support precisely in the intrinsic and inescapable ethical dimension of the health care profession, as the ancient and ever-present Hippocratic oath already recognised, according to which every doctor is asked to commit himself to absolute respect for human life and its sacredness'*.

But this declaration on respect for human life is an essential condition, but it is not sufficient, because it runs the risk of being static and reduced to an enunciation of a principle, sometimes even an ideological fact, and of *'hardening the heart'*, not of generating relationships founded on the Gospel: compassion must be combined with it.

I would like to close, then, with a viaticum for the work ahead, taking up the words of Pope Francis:

"When the heart becomes hardened, one forgets.... One forgets the grace of salvation, one forgets gratuitousness. The hard heart leads to quarrels, it leads to wars, it leads to selfishness, it leads to the destruction of the brother, because there is no compassion. And the greatest message of salvation is that God had compassion on us. That Gospel refrain, when Jesus sees a person, a painful situation: he had compassion on them. Jesus is the compassion of the Father; Jesus is the slap in the face of every hardness of heart' (Homily in Santa Marta, 18 February 2020).

Let us ask, then, for the grace to have a heart that is *"not ideologised"* and therefore hardened, but *"open and compassionate"* in the face of what is happening in the world because - the Pope reminds us - by this we will be judged on the day of judgement, not by our *"ideas"* or our *"ideologies"* or our professional skills alone, though essential. *"I was hungry, you gave me something to eat; I was in prison, you came to visit me; I was afflicted and you consoled me" is written in the Gospel, and this is compassion, this is non-hardheartedness"*.

May St. Francis, an extraordinary example of compassion, enlighten and guide us in these works of our symposium so that they may bear good fruit, fruits of renewed conversion to the style of God: compassion.

Happy Symposium to all and thank you again for being here.