



The Holy See

**LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMY FOR LIFE
ON THE OCCASION OF A STUDY CONGRESS
ON "QUALITY OF LIFE AND ETHICS OF HEALTH"**

*To my Venerable Brother Bishop Elio Sgreccia
President of the Pontifical Academy for Life*

1. I am pleased to send my cordial greetings to those who are taking part in the Study Congress that the Pontifical Academy for Life has sponsored on the theme: *"Quality of life and ethics of health"*. I greet you in particular, venerable Brother, and offer you my congratulations and good wishes on your recent appointment as President of this Academy. I also extend my greetings to the Chancellor, Mons. Ignacio Carrasco, to whom I also wish success in his new office. I next address thoughts of deep gratitude to eminent Prof. Juan de Dios Vial Correa, who has retired from the presidency of the Academy after 10 years of generous and competent service.

Finally, a word of special thanks goes to all the Members of the Pontifical Academy for their diligent work, especially valuable in these times, marked by the manifestation of many problems in society related to the defence of life and the dignity of the human person. As far as we can see, the Church in the future will be increasingly called into question on these topics that affect the fundamental good of every person and society. The Pontifical Academy for Life, after 10 years of existence, must therefore continue to carry out its role of sensitive and precious activity in support of the institutions of the Roman Curia and of the whole Church.

2. The theme addressed at this Congress is of the greatest ethical and cultural importance for both developed and developing societies. The phrases "quality of life" and "promotion of health" identify one of contemporary society's main goals, raising questions that are not devoid of ambiguity and, at times, tragic contradictions. Thus, they require attentive discernment and a thorough explanation.

In the Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, I said regarding the ever more anxious quest for the "quality of life" typical of the developed societies: "The so-called 'quality of life' is interpreted primarily or exclusively as economic efficiency, inordinate consumerism, physical beauty and pleasure, to the neglect of the more profound dimensions - interpersonal, spiritual and religious - of existence" (n. 23). These *more profound dimensions* deserve further clarification and research.

3. It is necessary first of all to recognize the *essential quality* that distinguishes every human creature as that of being made *in the image and likeness* of the Creator himself. The human person, constituted of body and soul in the unity of the person - *corpore et anima unus*, as the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* says (n. 14) -, is called to enter into a personal dialogue with the Creator. Man therefore possesses a dignity essentially superior to other visible creatures, living and inanimate. As such he is called to collaborate with God in the task of subduing the earth (cf. Gn 1: 28), and is destined in the plan of redemption to be clothed in the dignity of a child of God.

This level of *dignity* and *quality* belongs to the ontological order and is a constitutive part of the human being; it endures through every moment of life, from the very moment of conception until natural death, and is brought to complete fulfilment in the dimension of eternal life. Consequently, the human person should be recognized and respected in any condition of health, infirmity or disability.

4. Consistent with this first, essential level of dignity, a *second*, complementary *level* of quality of life should be recognized and promoted: starting with the recognition of the right to life and the special dignity of every human person, society must promote, in collaboration with the family and other intermediate bodies, the practical conditions required for the development of each individual's personality, harmoniously and in accordance with his or her natural abilities.

All the dimensions of the person, physical, psychological, spiritual and moral, should be promoted in harmony with one another. This implies the existence of suitable social and environmental conditions to encourage this harmonious development. The *social-environmental context*, therefore, characterizes this second level of the quality of human life which must be recognized by *all people*, including those who live in developing countries. Indeed, human beings are equal in dignity, whatever the society to which they may belong.

5. However, in our time the meaning which the expression "quality of life" is gradually acquiring is often far from this basic interpretation, founded on a correct philosophical and theological anthropology.

Indeed, under the impetus of the society of well-being, preference is being given to a notion of quality of life that is both *reductive* and *selective*: it would consist in the ability to enjoy and experience pleasure or even in the capacity for self-awareness and participation in social life. As a result, human beings who *are not yet* or *are no longer* able to understand and desire or those who

can no longer enjoy life as sensations and relations are denied every form of quality of life.

6. The *concept of health* has also suffered a similar distortion. It is certainly not easy to define in logical or precise terms a concept as complex and anthropologically rich as that of health. Yet it is certain that this word is intended to refer to all the dimensions of the person, in their harmony and reciprocal unity: the *physical*, the *psychological*, and the *spiritual and moral* dimensions.

The latter, the moral dimension, cannot be ignored. Every person is responsible for his or her own health and for the health of those who have not yet reached adulthood or can no longer look after themselves. Indeed, the person is also duty bound to treat the environment responsibly, in such a way as to keep it "healthy".

How many diseases are individuals often responsible for, their own and those of others! Let us think of the spread of alcoholism, drug-addiction and AIDS. How much life energy and how many young lives could be saved and kept healthy if the moral responsibility of each person were better able to promote prevention and the preservation of that precious good: health!

7. *Health is not, of course, an absolute good.* It is not such especially when it is taken to be merely physical well-being, mythicized to the point of coercing or neglecting superior goods, claiming health reasons even for the rejection of unborn life: this is what happens with the so-called "reproductive health". How can people fail to recognize that this is a reductive and distorted vision of health?

Properly understood, health nevertheless continues to be one of the most important goods for which we all have a precise responsibility, to the point that it can be sacrificed only in order to attain superior goods, as is sometimes demanded in the service of God, one's family, one's neighbour and the whole of society.

Health should therefore be safeguarded and looked after as the *physical-psychological and spiritual balance* of the human being. The squandering of health as a result of various disorders is a serious ethical and social responsibility which, moreover, is linked to the person's moral degeneration.

8. The ethical relevance of the good of health is such as to motivate a strong commitment to its *protection* and *treatment* by society itself. It is a duty of solidarity that excludes no one, not even those responsible for the loss of their own health.

The ontological dignity of the person is in fact superior: it transcends his or her erroneous or sinful forms of behaviour. Treating disease and doing one's best to prevent it are ongoing tasks for the individual and for society, precisely as a tribute to the dignity of the person and the importance of the good of health.

Human beings today, in large areas of the world, are victims of the well-being that they themselves have created. In other, even larger parts of the world, they are victims of widespread and ravaging diseases, whose virulence stems from poverty and the degradation of the environment.

All the forces of science and wisdom must be mobilized at the service of the true good of the person and of society in every part of the world, in the light of that basic criterion which is the *dignity of the person*, in whom is impressed the image of God himself.

With these wishes, I entrust the work of the Congress to the intercession of the One who welcomed the Life of the Incarnate Word into her life, while as a sign of special affection, I impart my Blessing to you all.

From the Vatican, 19 February 2005

JOHN PAUL II

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