



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE ASSOCIATION OF RELIGIOUS SOCIO-MEDICAL INSTITUTES

18 June 1979 Beloved Brothers and Sisters! Thanking you for your courtesy in requesting this meeting, I wish to express in the first place the deep joy that fills my heart on seeing beside me a skilled representation of the religious Families operating in the socio-medical field. Looking at you, my thought goes instinctively to the vast host of generous souls who share with you the ideal of dedication to Christ and service of brothers, and who spend their energies, like you, in the wards of hospitals or nursing homes, among persons receiving care in rehabilitation Centres or among old people gathered in special Institutes. And then, as if conjured up by your presence, a multitude of other faces flash upon the inward eye: it is the world of the suffering of all ages and from all walks of life; each one with his own story, perhaps with his own bitterness, certainly with an expectation that often becomes heartbroken imploration. Your service springs precisely from deep perception of the needs, the hopes and the disappointments felt by this portion of mankind whom the world of the healthy tends too often to forget. Your sensitiveness is inspired and prompted above all by Christ's words: "I was sick and you visited me." (Mt 25:36.) You have let yourselves be involved personally and have decided to dedicate your lives to the expectations of so many brothers. You have decided to do so in a full and complete way, renouncing everything that might have represented an obstacle to the completeness of the gift, precisely to this consecration of yours to Christ in religious life for unreserved, loving, and active availability for your neighbour's necessities. I wish to testify to you my admiration. By your example, you continue a very noble tradition which, starting from the institution of the first deacons (cf. Acts 6:1), characterizes the whole history of the Church! I am happy to mention particularly the "hostels" of the eleventh century, frequented by pilgrims and crusaders, and the hospitals of the sixteenth century, rich in art and history. But it can be said that from the origins, up to modern medical units, there has been a whole blossoming of charitable initiatives, which draw inspiration and nourishment from the Gospel values. In this connection, it is a significant fact that, right from the most remote past, welfare structures have nearly always followed the same pattern: the cathedral and, near it, the hospital, as if with facts bearing witness to faith in the twofold presence of Christ—the real one under the eucharistic species and the mystical one in needy or sick brothers. It is necessary to revive awareness of these glorious traditions and of the certainties of faith that inspired them, in order to confirm in oneself faithfulness to the commitment of dedication to one's needy neighbour and the superior motivation, precisely that of faith, which enlightens and directs its accomplishment. In other words, that which even today, in an advanced society which aims at being self-sufficient, justifies the ideal that is yours is the fact of offering the patient, together with generous and indefatigable services—not measured sometimes even by recognized rights, irreprehensible on the medical and humanitarian plane—also a living testimony of Christ's love and concern for the suffering. Care, in fact, cannot be reduced to the strictly technico-professional aspect but must address all the elements of the human being, and therefore also his spiritual one. Now, the

human spirit is by its very nature open to the religious dimension, which, in fact, is generally perceived and felt more deeply during illness and suffering. The sick person, therefore, if a Christian, will desire the presence beside him of consecrated persons who, together with all suitable technical services, are able to transcend this merely human dimension, so to speak, and, with thoughtful and patient delicacy, offer him the perspective of a vaster hope; that which was taught us by the cross, on which the Son of God was nailed for the redemption of the world. In this perspective, "every cross"—as I had the opportunity to say recently to a group of sick people during my pilgrimage in Poland—"every cross put on man's shoulders acquires a dignity that is inconceivable on the human plane, and becomes a sign of salvation for him who carries it and also for others". Here is the deep reason that motivates your presence in the vast field of medical care: to bring to the sick, in words and by your example, a limpid and consistent testimony, which will bring to life again before their eyes some features of the lovable figure of the Saviour, who "went about doing good and healing all" (Acts 10:38). Did not this command, also, ring out on Jesus' lips when he sent his disciples "to preach the kingdom of God and to heal" (Lk 9:2; cf. 10:9)? The Church, undertaking care for the sick, merely obeys the will of service and of love of her Teacher and Lord. Continue, with renewed enthusiasm, therefore, beloved sons and daughters, your beneficial action in the service of man. May your daily dedication be a testimony of a reality that transcends you; may Christ himself bend with you over human suffering to relieve its torment with the balm of hope which only he can give. Be aware of this mission and live its demanding consequences consistently. It is just to help you in this commitment of yours that I would like to propose some suggestions to you.

1. The first one concerns *choice of the field of action*. In the last few years the State has made considerable progress in carrying out its medical and welfare task. In spite of this, there remain sectors in which public care is to a certain extent, and sometimes almost inevitably, incomplete and unsatisfactory, even today. Your interest should be directed with priority preference to these sectors. It is obvious that, to operate well-pondered choices in this direction, it will be necessary to subject the initiatives, that have matured within the individual Institute, to a "check" by means of an open confrontation with reality. From a community evaluation of the objective situation there may spring decisions better fitted to the real needs of the concrete social context.
2. The second suggestion concerns *the religious discourse* that goes on between you and the sick: it must aim at proposing—with respect for all, and in particular with delicacy as regards those who do not yet have the gift of faith—together with the witness of your personal life, the paschal mystery in its entirety. There is, in fact, a certain "asceticism of acceptance" which refers to a notion of "resignation" that is closer to fatalism than to Christian patience (St Paul's *hypomonè*). In the paschal mystery, which causes the passion and death of Christ to be understood in the light of the resurrection, the Christian's vocation before illness and death is clarified: the acceptance of suffering is accompanied by the will and the commitment to do everything possible to overcome it and reduce it or surpass it for one's neighbour. In suffering, in fact, and in death is manifested the mysterious inheritance of sin, over which Christ has now triumphed definitively. Not renunciation, therefore, before illness, but active resistance: the Christian operates to free himself from disease and death, in which, thanks to the strength that comes to him from faith in the paschal mystery, he is sustained by the certainty that life will triumph in the end.
3. I wish to entrust a last suggestion to you: it concerns *the style of your presence* beside the sick. It is a presence that has features in common with those of all persons engaged professionally in care for the sick: scientific and technical preparation, generosity of service, constant attention to the person in need of treatment. But it has also, because of the evangelical motivation that inspires it, a special feature which consists in seeing in the sick person, because of his suffering in body and in spirit, the very person of Jesus, and which therefore can call also for sacrifice, the renunciation of rights to which you are entitled professionally and of requirements that are understandable on the human plane. Is this not a testimony, perhaps the most important one, that you are called to give in the sphere of your work? That is, the testimony that the patient cannot but constitute a permanent priority, at the centre of all medical concern and activity. And—I would like to

add with great admiration and affection, because I know how much so many of you give beyond your remaining physical energies—this priority may involve, if necessary, also sacrifices on the organizational and financial plane of your Institutions, especially in favour of the poorest. As you see, yours is really not an easy task! It calls for the exercise of a charity that is modelled every day on the example of Christ who "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28). It is, however, in this genuinely evangelical inspiration that the nobility of your mission lies, as well as the justification of your presence in the world of the sick. The exercise of charity for brothers is a natural expression of faith, and the Church rightly claims it as a dimension of religious freedom itself, and not a marginal or a secondary one. Keep this in mind! And in moments of weariness raise your eyes to Mary, the Virgin who, forgetting herself, set out "with haste" for the hills to reach her elderly cousin Elizabeth who was in need of help and assistance (cf. Lk 1:39 ff.). Let her be the inspirer of your daily dedication to duty; let her suggest to you the right words and opportune gestures at the bedside of the sick; Let her comfort you in misunderstandings and failures, helping you always to keep a smile on your face and a hope in your heart. With these wishes, while I confirm my esteem and affection for your Association and for the Institutes it represents, I embrace you all with a fatherly Blessing, which I willingly extend also to the dear patients in your hospitals and to the medical and auxiliary staff, which diligently offers its competent services in them.

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