



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE WORLD ORGANIZATION OF GASTRO-ENTEROLOGY

Saturday, 23 March 2002

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I warmly greet all of you who are taking part in this Congress that aims to sensitize public opinion about the prevention of cancer of the digestive tract and of the colon. I want to greet Prof. Alberto Montori, President of the European Federation for Diseases of the Digestive Tract, and those of you who come from many countries for this important international meeting.

I also wish to convey my deep gratitude to the organizers of the Congress, to the members of the Scientific Committee, the delegates, moderators, presenters, specialists, and all who are committed to the fight against the disease on whose cure you focus your attention.

One can only be glad to see the growing availability of technological and pharmacological resources that allow for the speedy diagnosis of the symptoms of cancer in a great many cases, as well as rapid and effective treatment. I urge you not to stop at the results you have achieved but to continue with confidence and tenacity, in both research and treatment, making use of the most advanced scientific resources. Young doctors should learn from your example and, with your help, learn how to continue in this direction that is so beneficial for everyone's health.

2. Certainly, we cannot forget that man is a limited and mortal being. It is necessary to approach the sick with a healthy realism that avoids giving to those who are suffering the illusion that medicine is omnipotent. There are limits that are not humanly possible to overcome; in these cases, the patient must know how to accept his human condition serenely, which the faithful know how to interpret in the light of the divine will. The divine will is manifested even in death, the natural end of human life on earth. Teaching people to accept death serenely belongs to your mission.

The complexity of the human being requires that, in providing him with the necessary treatment, the spirit as well as the body be taken into account. It would therefore be foolhardy to count on technology alone. From this point of view, an exasperated and overzealous treatment, even if done with the best of intentions, would definitely be shown to be, not just useless, but lacking in respect for the sick person who is already in a terminal condition.

The concept of health, that we find in Christian thought, is quite the opposite of the vision that reduces it to a purely psycho-physical balance. Such a vision of health disregards the spiritual dimensions of the human person and would end by harming his true good. For the believer, as I wrote in my *Message for the Eighth World Day of the Sick*, health "strives to achieve a fuller harmony and healthy balance on the physical, psychological, spiritual and social level" (*ORE*, 6 August 1999, n. 13). This is the teaching and witness of Jesus, who was so sensitive to human suffering. With his help, we too must endeavour to be close to people today, to treat them and, cure them, if possible, without forgetting the requirements of the spirit.

3. Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, thanks to the cooperation of so many collaborators and volunteers, you are making a considerable effort to inform public opinion of the possibilities of enjoying better health by the rational regulation of daily habits and by submitting to preventive routine check-ups. I am delighted with your service and hope that your profession, by following the ethical norms that govern it, will always be inspired by the perennial ethical values that give it a firm foundation.

Informing citizens with respect and truth, especially when they suffer from a pathological condition, is a true mission for those who take care of public health. Your Congress intends to make its contribution in this area, and I wish it every success. I strongly hope that you will have a large-scale response to the message you plan to launch, and that you will involve the mass media in an effective and informative campaign.

I willingly support you with my prayer, and, as I commend your work to God, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and gladly extend it to your loved ones and to all who work with you in this noble humanitarian mission.