

Pope Francis's Address to the Pontifical Academy of Life

5 March 2015

Dear Brother Bishops and Priests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I greet you cordially on the occasion of your General Assembly, called to reflect on the theme “Assistance to the Elderly and Palliative Care,” and I thank the President for his courteous words.

Palliative care is an expression of a proper human attitude to take care of one another, especially of those who suffer. They give testimony that the human person is always precious, even if marked by old age and sickness. The person is, in fact, regardless of the circumstance, a good in itself and for others and is loved by God. Therefore, when his life becomes very fragile and the conclusion of his earthly existence approaches, we feel the responsibility to assist and support him in the best way.

The biblical Commandment that calls for honoring parents reminds us, in a broad sense, of the honor we owe all elderly persons. God attaches a twofold promise to this Commandment: “that your days may be long” (*Exodus* 20:12) and “that it may go well with you” (*Deuteronomy* 5:16). Fidelity to the Fourth Commandment ensures not only the gift of the earth, but especially the possibility to enjoy it. In fact, the wisdom that makes us recognize the value of the elderly person and leads us to honor him, is the same wisdom that enables us to appreciate the numerous gifts that we receive daily from the provident hand of the Father and to be happy. The precept reveals to us the fundamental pedagogical relation between parents and children, between the elderly and young people, in regard to the protection and transmission of religious and sapiential teaching to future generations. To honor this teaching and those who transmit it is a source of life and blessing. On the contrary, the Bible reserves a severe admonition for those who neglect or mistreat their parents (Cf. *Exodus* 21:17; *Leviticus* 20:9). The same judgment applies today when parents who have become elderly and less useful, are marginalized to the point of being abandoned.

The word of God is always alive and we see clearly how the Commandment is of stringent current importance for contemporary society, where the logic of usefulness takes over that of solidarity and gratuitousness, even within families.

Therefore, let us listen with a docile heart to the word of God, which comes to us from the Commandments, which – let us always remember – are not ties that imprison but words of life.

“To honor” could be translated today as the duty to have extreme respect and to take care of one who, because of his physical or social condition, could be left to die or “made to die.” The whole of medicine has a special role within society as testimony of the honor due to the elderly person and to every human being. Evidence and efficiency cannot be the sole criteria governing the conduct of doctors nor the rules of health systems and economic profit. A State cannot think of earning with medicine. On the contrary, there is no greater duty for a society than that of protecting the human person.

Your work these days explores new areas of application of palliative care. Up to now, they were a precious support for oncological patients. However, today the sicknesses are many and varied, often connected with old age, characterized by a progressive chronic deterioration, which could make use of this type of care. Elderly people are in need, in the first place, of the care of the family – whose affection cannot be substituted not even by the most efficient structures and the most competent and charitable health workers. When they are not self-sufficient or have an advanced or terminal illness, the elderly can enjoy a truly human care and receive adequate answers to their needs thanks to the palliative care offered to integrate with and support the care of relatives. The objective of palliative care is to alleviate suffering in the final phase of the illness and at the same time to ensure adequate human support to the patient (Cf. Encyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae*, 65). It is an important support, especially for the elderly who, because of their age, always receive less attention from curative medicine and often remain abandoned. Abandonment is the gravest “sickness” of the elderly, and also the greatest injustice they can suffer: those who have helped us grow must not be abandoned when they are in need of our help.

Therefore, I appreciate your scientific and cultural commitment to ensure that palliative care reaches all those in need of it. I encourage professionals and students to specialize in this type of assistance, which does not have less value because of the fact that it does “not save life.” Palliative care does something that is equally important: it appreciates the person.

I exhort all those who, in different ways, are committed in the field of palliative care, to practice this commitment keeping integral the spirit of service and remembering that all medical knowledge is truly science, in its most noble meaning, a good that is never reached “against” a person’s life and dignity. It is this capacity of service to life and to the dignity of the sick person, also when elderly, which measures the true progress of medicine and of the whole society. I repeats Saint John Paul II’s appeal: “Respect, defend, love and serve life, every human life! Only in this way will you find justice, development, true freedom, peace and happiness!” (*Ibid.*, 5).

I hope you will continue to study and do research, so that the work of promotion and defense of life is ever more effective and fecund. May the Virgin Mother help you and my Blessing accompany you. Please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.