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## To the Pontifical Academy for Life: to defend human life is to know its beauty

Vatican City, 3 March 2016 – The study of virtues in the ethics of life is the theme chosen by the Pontifical Academy for Life for its General Assembly, currently being held. In his address to the members, whom he received in audience this morning in the Clementine Hall, the Pope affirmed that it is "a theme of academic interest that transmits an important message to contemporary culture: the good that man does is not the result of calculations or strategies, or even the product of genetic programming or social conditioning, but is rather the fruit of a well-disposed heart and of the free choice that tends to true goodness".

"In various ways the Sacred Scripture tells us that the good or bad intentions do not enter into the human being from outside, but instead spring from the heart. ... In the Bible, the heart is not only the organ of the emotions, but also of spiritual faculties, reason and will; it is the seat of decisions, the way of thinking and of acting. The wisdom of decisions, open to the movement of the Holy Spirit, also involves the heart.

"In our time, some cultural orientations no longer acknowledge the imprint of divine wisdom either in the realities created, or those of man. Human nature is thus reduced to mere matter, that may be moulded according to any design. Our humanity, however, is unique and so precious in God's eyes. For this reason, the first nature to protect, so that it may bear fruit, is our human nature itself ... a great variety of virtues will then be able to bloom. Virtue is the most authentic expression of the good that man, with God's help, is able to achieve. ... It is not merely a habit, but the constantly renewed decision to choose good. ... It is the highest expression of human freedom. Virtue is the best that the human heart offers. When the heart drifts away from the good and the truth contained in the Word of God, it runs many risks, is without direction and risks mistaking good for bad and bad for good. ... Those who embark on this slippery slope fall into the trap of moral error and are oppressed by growing existential anguish".

"The Sacred Scripture shows us the dynamic of the hardened heart: the more the heart tends towards selfishness and evil, the more difficult it is to change. As Jesus affirms, 'Everyone who sins is a slave to sin'. And when the heart is corrupt, there are grave consequences for social life, as the prophet Jeremiah reminds us. ... This condition cannot change either through theories, or by the effect of social or political reforms. Only the work of the Holy Spirit may change our hearts, if we collaborate: God Himself, in fact, assures His effective grace to all those who seek it and those who convert with all their heart".

Francis went on to comment that nowadays there are many institutions committed to service to life, through research, assistance and the promotion not only of good actions, but also passion for goodness. But there are also many structures governed by economic interests rather than concern for the common good. "Speaking of virtue means affirming that choosing good involves and commits the entire person; it is not a 'cosmetic' matter, a form of external embellishment, which would not bear fruit; it is about uprooting dishonest desires from the heart and seeking goodness with sincerity. In the area of ethics of life, too, norms for the respect of the person, while necessary, are by themselves not enough to fully realise the goodness of man. The virtues of those who work in the promotion of human life are the final guarantee that good will truly be respected. Nowadays there is no lack of scientific knowledge and technical tools able to offer support to human life in situations in which it is shown to be weak, but at times humanity is lacking. Acting for good is not the correct application of ethical knowledge, but rather presupposes a real interest in the fragile person. May doctors and all healthcare workers never neglect to unite science and technology with humanity".

In this context, the Holy Father exhorted the universities to consider these issues in their educational programmes, so that students are enabled to mature "the predispositions of the heart and mind that are indispensable for welcoming and caring for human life, in accordance with the dignity that belongs to it in all circumstances". Likewise, he invited the directors of healthcare and research structures to ensure that their staff consider humanity to be an integral part of their important service. "Those who are dedicated to the defence and the promotion of life may show first and foremost its beauty. Indeed, just as the Church grows not by proselytism but by attraction, human life is defended and promoted most effectively only when its beauty is known and shown".

The Pope emphasised that contemporary culture "still conserves the premises for affirming that man, whatever his conditions of life, is a value to be protected; however, this is often the victim of moral uncertainties that do not allow life to be defended in an effective way. Not infrequently it can happen that 'splendid vices' are disguised under the mask of virtue. Therefore, it is necessary not only for virtues to truly inform the thought and actions of man, but for them to be cultivated through continual discernment and to be rooted in God, source of all virtue".

"Here I would like to repeat something I have said a number of times. We must be wary of the new ideological colonisations that enter into human and even Christian thought, in the form of virtues, modernity and new attitudes. They are colonisations – that is, they take away freedom, and they are ideological – that is, they are afraid of reality as God created it", he concluded.

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