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The Pope to doctors in Spain and Latin America: compassion is the very soul of medicine

Vatican City, 9 June 2016 – Doctors, with their closeness and dedication to the sick, are able to become a true personification of mercy, said the Holy Father this morning to the managers of the Medical Orders of Spain and Latin America, whom he received in audience in the Sala Clementina this morning. "The doctor's identity and commitment depends not only on scientific knowledge and technical competence, but principally on the attitude of compassion and mercy towards those who suffer in body and spirit. Compassion does not mean pity, it means 'suffering with'."

"In our technological and individualistic culture, compassion is not always considered well; at times, it is even regarded with disdain as it is equated with the humiliation of the person who receives it", continued the Pope. "And then there are those who hide behind an alleged compassion to justify and approve the death of a patient. This is not it. True compassion does not marginalise anyone, nor does it humiliate and exclude; much less consider the disappearance of a person as a good thing. You are well aware of the meaning of the triumph of selfishness, of this 'throwaway culture' that rejects and dismisses those who do not comply with certain canons of health, beauty and utility. I like to bless the hands of doctors as a sign of recognition of this compassion that becomes the caress of health."

He went on to underline that "health is one of the most valuable gifts desired by all, and that in the biblical tradition the closeness between salvation and health has always been highlighted, along with their many and mutual implications. The fathers of the Church used to refer to Christ and His work of salvation with the title 'Christus medicus'. He is the Good Shepherd who cares for the wounded sheep and comforts the sick. He is the Good Samaritan who does not pass by the injured person at the roadside, but rather, moved by compassion, cures and attends to him. The Christian medical tradition has always been inspired by the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is about identifying with the love of the Son of God, Who 'went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him'."

"Compassion, this 'suffering-with' is the just response to the immense value of the sick person, a response made up of respect, understanding and tenderness, so that the sacred value of the life of the patient does not disappear or become obscured, but instead shines with greater splendour precisely in suffering and helplessness", the Holy Father reiterated, citing St. Camillo de Lellis' recommendation in treating the sick: 'Put more heart into your hands'. "Frailty, pain and infirmity are a difficult trial for everyone, including medical staff;

they call for patience, for suffering-with; therefore, we must not give in to the functionalist temptation to apply rapid and drastic solutions, moved by false compassion or by mere criteria of efficiency or cost-effectiveness. The dignity of human life is at stake; the dignity of the medical vocation is at stake. And while antisepsis is technically necessary in the practice of medicine, at the heart of the medical vocation antisepsis goes against compassion. Antisepsis is a necessary technical measure but it must not affect the essence of this compassionate heart. Nothing must prevent you from 'putting more heart into your hands'."

The Pope assured the doctors of his prayers and his appreciation for the efforts they make every day "to increasingly dignify their profession and to accompany, care for and enhance the immense gift of those who suffer due to illness."
