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Audience with the members of the Italian Association of Medical Oncology (AIOM)

At 11.50 am today, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francesco received in audience the members of the Italian Association of Medical Oncology (AIOM).

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I address my cordial greeting to you all: to the President, whom I thank for her words, to the doctors and patients present at this meeting, and to all the members.

Since 1973, the Italian Association of Medical Oncology has played a valuable role in the health sector, encouraging research and prevention, striving to improve diagnosis and treatment, and developing numerous training and updating initiatives for doctors and other health workers in the oncology sector. Your Statute illustrates the aims of your non-profit Association which proposes "to promote progress in the clinical, experimental and socio-welfare field" (Art. 2), in active collaboration between doctors of different specializations, bodies and institutions. You undertake to "foster relationships" and to "establish scientific and collaborative relationships" (*ibid.*) within the scientific and health world, endeavouring to encourage the sharing of goals achieved and multidisciplinary, often hampered by the jealous safeguarding of knowledge.

In a world like ours, often pushed to opposition in every sphere of human coexistence, that of creating and fostering relationships is an essential commitment for the construction of the common good. The conscious, and often tiring, choice to adopt a style that unites rather than divides is represented, in all the life of the AIOM, in care for the relationship with the patient, and today it is manifested precisely by the presence among you of some patients. The choice to participate together in this meeting, sitting side by side, represents a strong message and an eloquent sign not only for the world of health, but for the whole society, called to renew itself in

a fraternal style of solidarity.

The National Congress, which you will be hold in a few weeks' time, will be dedicated to attention to the individual patient, to the "best care for each patient", based on the biological and clinical characteristics of each one. This is how the oncology of precision, which you promote, also becomes an oncology of mercy, because the effort to personalize care reveals attention not only to the disease, but to the patient and his characteristics, to the way in which he reacts to the medicines, to the most painful information, to suffering. An oncology of this type goes beyond the application of the protocols and reveals a use of technology at the service of people.

Technology is not at the service of humanity when the latter is reduced to a "thing", when it distinguishes between those who still deserve to be treated and those who do not, since they are considered only a burden, and sometimes even a waste. The practice of euthanasia, which has already become legal in several states, only seemingly aims to encourage personal freedom; in reality it is based on a utilitarian view of the person, who becomes useless or can be equated to a cost, if from the medical point of view he or she has no hope of improvement or can no longer avoid pain. On the contrary, the commitment to accompanying the patient and his or her loved ones at all stages of the journey, seeking to alleviate their suffering through palliative care, or by offering a family environment in hospices, which are increasingly numerous, contributes to creating a culture and practice more attentive to the value of each person. Never lose heart as a result of the misunderstanding you may encounter, or in the face of the insistent proposal of more radical and hurried roads. If one chooses death, in a sense problems are solved; but how much bitterness there is behind this reasoning, and what rejection of hope is involved in the decision to give up everything and break all ties! Sometimes, we are in a sort of Pandora's box: all things are known, everything is explained, everything is resolved but only one thing is hidden: hope. And we have to go and look for this. How to translate hope, or indeed, how to give it in the most extreme cases.

Your service then also becomes a task of raising awareness in a society that is not very aware and at times distracted. You refer in many ways to the importance of prevention, to be understood both as an early diagnosis, capable of significantly reducing the dangerousness of oncological diseases, and in terms of respect for the body and its needs. Indeed, the best and truest prevention is that of a healthy environment and a lifestyle that respects the human body and its laws. As we know, this depends not only on individual choices, but also on the places where we live that, especially in large centres, subject the body to constant stress due to the rhythms of life and exposure to pollutants. This draws our attention back to the care of the natural environment, our common home which we must respect, so that it may also respect us. The protection of the environment and the fight against tumours then become two sides of the same problem, two complementary aspects of the same battle of civilization and humanity.

In your commitment to the sick, to the health system and to the whole society, I invite you always to keep in mind the example of Jesus, Who was the greatest teacher of humanity, to inspire your gestures and make Him your own travelling companion. May He, Whom one can never tire of contemplating, so great is the light that emanates from Him, inspire the sick and helps them to find the strength not to interrupt the bonds of love, to offer suffering for their brothers, to maintain their friendship with God. May He inspire doctors – He who in a certain way said He was your colleague, as a doctor sent by the Father to heal humanity – always to seek the good of others, to spend themselves generously, to fight for a more supportive world. May He inspire all to be close to those who suffer. Closeness, that very important and much needed attitude. The Lord also implemented it, closeness, in our midst. May He inspire everyone to be close to those who suffer, to the little ones above all, and to put the weak in first place, so that they can may nurture a more human society and relationships characterized by gratuitousness, rather than opportunity.

I invoke God's blessing on all your activities, and I entrust you to the Virgin Mary, so that with the affection of a mother she may watch over you, doctors and all the sick. As I assure you that I accompany you with my prayer, I also ask you to pray for me. Thank you!
