Aandacht voor ouderen met degeneratieve ziekten

Address to participants in the 28th International Conference sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers

Paul VI Audience Hall
23 November 2013
Pope Francis

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Thank you for your welcome! I cordially greet you all.

Today I would like to repeat that the elderly have always been and still are protagonists in the Church. Today more than ever the Church must set an example for the whole of society that, despite their inevitable and sometimes grave “ailments”, the elderly are always important; indeed, they are indispensable. They carry the memory and wisdom of life to hand down to others, and they participate fully in the Church’s mission. Let us remember that, in God’s eyes, human life always retains its value far beyond any discriminating vision.

The increased life expectancy which developed over the course of the 20th century has entailed that a growing number of people are facing neurodegenerative diseases, which are often accompanied by a deterioration of the cognitive capacities. These diseases push the socio-health care world both to the horizons of research, and to those of assistance and care in social facilities, as well as in the family, which remains the privileged place of warmth and closeness.

The provision of adequate assistance and services which respect the dignity, identity and needs of patients is important, but the support of those who assist them, whether family members or healthcare professionals, is also important. This is only possible within the context of trust and within an atmosphere of a mutually respectful relationship. Lived in this way, care becomes quite an enriching experience, both professionally and humanly; otherwise, it becomes all too similar to cold, basic “physical protection”.

It therefore becomes necessary to be committed to a form of assistance that, alongside the traditional biomedical model, offers spaces of dignity and freedom, far, far away from closure and silence, that torture of silence! Silence is so often transformed into torture. People who live in assisted care are often surrounded by this sense of enclosure and silence. Within this perspective, I would like to stress the importance of the religious and spiritual aspect. Indeed, this is a dimension that remains vital even when cognitive faculties have been reduced or lost. It is a matter of implementing a special pastoral approach in order to accompany the religious life of elderly patients with serious degenerative diseases in various forms, to ensure that their minds and hearts do not interrupt their dialogue and relationship with God.

I would like to conclude by greeting the elderly. Dear friends, you are not only recipients of the good news of the Gospel message; in virtue of your Baptism you shall always be its heralds in the truest sense. Each day you can live as witnesses of the Lord, in your families, in your parishes and in your habitual meeting places, by making Christ and his Gospel known, especially to the younger generations. Remember that it was two elderly people who recognized Jesus in the Temple and proclaimed him with joy, with hope. I entrust all of you to the protection of Our Lady, and I thank you from my heart for your prayers. Now, all together let us pray to Our Lady for all

healthcare workers, for the sick, for the elderly and then let us receive the blessing (Hail Mary…).