

Over het ongeboren leven: geen mens is ongeschikt voor het leven

Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to participants in the conference “Yes to Life! - taking care of the precious gift of life in its frailty” organized by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life

Pope Francis
25 May 2019

Your Eminences, Dear Brother Bishops and Priests, Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Good morning and welcome. I greet Cardinal Farrell and I thank him for his words of introduction. My greeting also goes to all taking part in this international Conference, “Yes to Life! Taking Care of the Precious Gift of Life in its Frailty”, organized by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, and by the Foundation Il Cuore in una Goccia, one of the groups that work daily in our world to welcome children born in conditions of extreme frailty. These are children that the throw-away culture sometimes describes as being “unfit for life”, and thus condemned to death.

No human being can ever be unfit for life, whether due to age, state of health or quality of existence. Every child who appears in a woman’s womb is a gift that changes a family’s history, the life of fathers and mothers, grandparents and of brothers and sisters. That child needs to be welcomed, loved and nurtured. Always! Even when they are crying, like that baby over there... (applause). Some people might think: “But, the baby is crying... they should leave”. No, this is music that all of us need to hear. (I think the baby heard that applause and thought it was for him!) We need to hear the sound always, even when the baby is a little annoying: Also in church: let children cry in church! They are praising God. Never, never chase a child out because he or she is crying. Thank you for your witness.

When a woman discovers that she is expecting a child, she immediately feels within her a deep sense of mystery. A woman who becomes a mother knows this. She is aware of a presence growing within her, one that pervades her whole being. Now she is not only a woman but also a mother. From the very beginning, an intense, interactive dialogue takes place between her and the child. Scientists call this “cross-talk”. It is a real and intense relationship between two human beings communicating with one another from the very first moments of conception, and it leads to a mutual adjustment as the child grows and develops. This ability to communicate is not only on the part of the woman; even more, the child, as an individual, finds ways to communicate his or her presence and needs to the mother. Thus, this new human being immediately becomes a son or daughter, and this moves the woman to connect with her child with all her being.

Nowadays, from the very first weeks, modern prenatal diagnosis techniques can detect the presence of malformations and illness that may at times seriously endanger the life of the child and the mother’s peace of mind. Even the suspicion of an illness, and especially the certainty of a disease, changes the experience of pregnancy and causes deep distress to women and couples. A sense of isolation, helplessness and concern about the eventual suffering of the child and the whole family, all this is like a silent cry, a call for help in the darkness, when faced with an illness whose outcome cannot be foreseen with certainty. Every illness takes its own course, nor can physicians can always know how it will affect each individual.

Yet, there is one thing that medicine knows well, and that is that unborn children with pathological conditions are little patients who can often be treated with sophisticated pharmacological, surgical and support

interventions. It is now possible to reduce the frightening gap between diagnoses and therapeutic options. For years, that has been one of the reasons for elective abortion and abandonment of care at the birth of many children with serious medical conditions. Foetal therapies on the one hand, and perinatal hospices on the other, achieve surprising results in terms of clinical care, and they provide essential support to families who embrace the birth of a sick child.

These possibilities and information need to be made available to all, in order to expand a scientific and pastoral approach of competent care. For this reason, it is essential that doctors have a clear understanding not only of the aim of healing, but also of the sacredness of human life, the protection of which remains the ultimate goal of medical practice. The medical profession is a mission, a vocation to life, and it is important that doctors be aware that they themselves are a gift to the families entrusted to them. We need doctors who can establish a rapport with others, assume responsibility for other people's lives, be proactive in dealing with pain, capable of providing reassurance, and always committed to finding solutions respectful of the dignity of each human life.

In this sense, perinatal comfort care is an approach to care that humanizes medicine, for it entails a responsible relationship to the sick child, who is accompanied by the staff and his or her family in an integrated care process. The child is never abandoned, but is surrounded by human warmth and love.

This is particularly necessary in the case of those children who, in our current state of scientific knowledge, are destined to die immediately after birth or shortly afterwards. In these cases, treatment may seem an unnecessary use of resources and a source of further suffering for the parents. However, if we look at the situation more closely, we can perceive the real meaning behind this effort, which seeks to bring the love of a family to fulfilment. Indeed, caring for these children helps parents to process their mourning and to understand it not only as loss, but also as a stage in a journey travelled together. They will have had the opportunity to love their child, and that child will remain in their memory forever. Many times, those few hours in which a mother can cradle her child in her arms leave an unforgettable trace in her heart. And she feels, if I may use the word, realized. She feels herself a mother.

Unfortunately, the dominant culture today does not promote this approach. On a social level, fear and hostility towards disability often lead to the choice of abortion, presenting it as a form of "prevention". However, the Church's teaching on this point is clear: human life is sacred and inviolable, and the use of prenatal diagnosis for selective purposes must be strongly discouraged. It is an expression of an inhumane eugenic mentality that deprives families of the chance to accept, embrace and love the weakest of their children.

Sometimes we hear people say, "You Catholics do not accept abortion; it's a problem with your faith". No, the problem is pre-religious. Faith has nothing to do with it. It comes afterwards, but it has nothing to do with it. The problem is a human problem. It is pre-religious. Let's not blame faith for something that from the beginning has nothing to do with it. The problem is a human problem. Just two questions will help us understand this clearly. Two questions. First: is it licit to eliminate a human life to solve a problem? Second: is it licit to hire a killer to resolve a problem? I leave the answer to you. This is the point. Don't blame religion for a human issue. It is not licit. Never, never eliminate a human life or hire a killer to solve a problem.

Abortion is never the answer that women and families are looking for. Rather, it is fear of illness and isolation that makes parents waver. The practical, human and spiritual difficulties are undeniable, but it is precisely for this reason that a more incisive pastoral action is urgently needed to support those families who accept sick children. There is a need to create spaces, places and "networks of love" to which couples can turn, and to spend time assisting these families.

I think of a story that I heard of in my other Diocese. A fifteen-year-old girl with Down syndrome became

pregnant and her parents went to the judge to get authorization for an abortion. The judge, a very upright man, studied the case and said "I would like to question the girl". [The parents answered:] "But she has Down syndrome she doesn't understand". [The judge replied:] "No, have her come". The young girl sat down and began to speak with the judge. He said to her: "Do you know what happened to you". [She replied:] "Yes, I'm sick". [The judge then asked:] "And what is your sickness?" [She answered:] "They told me that I have an animal inside me that is eating my stomach, and that is why I have to have an operation". [The judge told her:] "No, you don't have a worm that's eating your stomach. You know what you have? It's a baby". The young girl with Down syndrome said: "Oh, how beautiful!" That's what happened. So the judge did not authorize the abortion. The mother wanted it. The years passed; the baby was born, she went to school, she grew up and she became a lawyer. From the time that she knew her story, because they told it to her, every day on her birthday she called the judge to thank him for the gift of being born. The things that happen in life... The judge is now dead and she has become a public prosecutor. See what a beautiful thing happened! Abortion is never the response that women and families are looking for.

Thank you, then, to you who are working for all this. Thank you, in particular, families, mothers and fathers, who have welcomed life that is frail - and I emphasize that word "frail" - for mothers, and women, are specialists in situations of frailty: welcoming frail life. And now, all of you are supporting and helping other families. Your witness of love is a gift to the world. I bless you and keep you in my prayer. And I ask you, please, to pray for me.