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Message of Pope Francis to Participants in the General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy For Life on the occasion of the 20th Anniversary of its Founding

20 February 2014
Pope Francis

To my Venerable Brother Bishop Carrasco de Paula, President of the Pontifical Academy for Life

I extend my cordial greetings to you, to Your Eminences, and to all the participants in the General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of its founding. On this occasion our grateful thoughts turn to Blessed John Paul II, who established this Academy, as well as to all of the Presidents who have promoted its activity and all those who, throughout the world, collaborate in its mission. The specific task of the Academy, as expressed in the Motu Proprio Vitae Mysterium, is "to study and to provide information and training about the principle problems of law and biomedicine pertaining to the promotion and protection of life, especially in the direct relationship they have with Christian morality and the directives of the Church's Magisterium" (L'Osservatore Romano, English edition, 9 March 1994, n. 4). In this way, you strive to make known to people of goodwill that science and technology, when placed at the service of the human person and his or her fundamental rights, contribute to the integral good of the person.

The work that you are carrying out over the course of these days has the theme: "Aging and Disability". It is an extremely relevant topic, which is close to the Church's heart. In fact, in our societies we find the tyrannical dominion of an economic logic that excludes and sometimes kills, and of which so many today are victims, beginning with our elderly. "We have created a 'throw away' culture which is now spreading. It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society's underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised — they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the 'exploited' but the outcast, the 'leftovers'" (Evangelii Gaudium, n. 53). The socio-demographic situation of the aged clearly reveals to us this exclusion of the elderly, especially when he or she is ill, disabled or vulnerable for any reason. One too often forgets, in fact, that human relationships are always relationships of mutual dependence, which is manifest to different degrees over the course of a person's life and which becomes most apparent in old age, illness, disability and suffering in general. And this requires that, in interpersonal relationships such as those which exist in a community, we offer the necessary help, in order to seek to respond to the need the person presents at that moment. However, at the basis of discrimination and exclusion there lies an anthropological question: what is man's worth and what is the basis of his worth? Health is certainly an important value, but it does not determine the value of a person. Furthermore, health in and of itself is no guarantee of happiness: for this may occur even in the presence of poor health. The fullness towards which every human life tends is not in contradiction with a condition of illness and suffering. Therefore, poor health and disability are never a good reason for excluding or, worse, for eliminating a person; and the most serious privation that elderly persons undergo is not the weakening of the body and the disability that may ensue, but abandonment and exclusion, the privation of love.

The family, instead, is the teacher of acceptance and solidarity: it is within the family that education substantially draws upon relationships of solidarity; in the family one learns that the loss of health is not a

reason for discriminating against human life; the family teaches us not to fall into individualism and to balance the 'I' with the 'we'.

It is there that "taking care of one another" becomes a foundation of human life and a moral attitude to foster, through the values of commitment and solidarity. The witness of the family is crucial, before the whole of society, in reaffirming the importance of an elderly person as a member of a community, who has his or her own mission to accomplish and who only seemingly receives with nothing to offer. "Whenever we attempt to read the signs of the times it is helpful to listen to young people and the elderly. Both represent a source of hope for every people. The elderly bring with them memory and the wisdom of experience, which warns us not to foolishly repeat our past mistakes" (ibid., n. 108).

A society truly welcomes life when it recognizes that it is also precious in old age, in disability, in serious illness and even when it is fading; when it teaches that the call to human fulfillment does not exclude suffering; indeed, when it teaches its members to see in the sick and suffering a gift for the entire community, a presence that summons them to solidarity and responsibility. This is the Gospel of life which, through your scientific and professional competence, and sustained by grace, you are called to spread.

Dear friends, I bless the work of the Academy for Life, which is often demanding since it requires that you go against the tide, but which is always extremely valuable since it seeks to join scientific rigour and respect for the human person. I have been able to observe this by becoming more familiar with your work and publications; and I hope that you preserve this same spirit in your ongoing service to the Church and to the whole human family. May the Lord bless you and may Our Lady protect you always.

From the Vatican, 19 February 2014