

To the Academy for Life: abandonment is the worst affliction for the elderly

Vatican City, 5 March 2015 (VIS) - "Palliative care expresses the typically human attitude of caring for each other, especially for those who suffer. It is the demonstration that the human person always remains precious, even when elderly or afflicted by illness. Indeed, the person is in any circumstance valuable to himself and to others, and loved by God. Therefore, when life becomes very fragile and the end of earthly life comes close, we feel the responsibility to look after and accompany the person in the best way possible", said the Pope this morning, as he received in audience the members of the Pontifical Academy for Life, on the occasion of their general assembly on the theme "Assisting the elderly and palliative care".

"The biblical commandment to honour our parents reminds us in a broader sense of our duty to honour all elderly people. God links a dual promise to this commandment: 'so that your life will be long on the fertile land that the Lord your God is giving you'. Obedience to this commandment ensures not only the gift of the land, but above all the possibility of making use of it. ... The precept reveals to us the fundamental pedagogic relationship between parents and children, between the elderly and the young, with reference to the stewardship and transmission of religious teaching and wisdom to future generations. Honour this teaching, and those who transmit it are a source of life and blessing. On the contrary, the Bible severely admonishes those who neglect or mistreat their parents".

"The Word of God is always living and we can see clearly how the commandment proves to be relevant to contemporary society, in which the logic of utility often takes precedence over that of solidarity and gratuitousness, even within families", he continued. "To honour' may be translated as the duty to have extreme respect and take care of those who, on account of their physical or social condition, could be left – or made – to die. Medicine has a special role within society as testimony to the honour due to an elderly person and to every human being. Evidence and efficiency cannot be the only criteria governing the work of doctors, and nor can the rules of healthcare systems and economic profit. A State cannot expect to profit from medicine".

The Bishop of Rome remarked that the Assembly of the Academy for Life has studied new sectors for the application of palliative care which until now have been of valuable assistance to cancer patients. However, it may now be applied to a wide range of illnesses, often linked to old age and characterised by chronic and progressive degeneration. "The elderly need, first and foremost, the care of their families – whose affection cannot be substituted even by the most efficient structures or by the most competent and charitable

healthcare workers”, he emphasised. Palliative care is “an important help for the elderly who, for reasons of seniority, receive less attention in terms of curative medicine and are often neglected. Abandonment is the most serious 'malady' to afflict the elderly, and also the greatest injustice they can suffer; those who have helped us to grow should not be abandoned when they need our help, our love, our tenderness”.

Francis concluded his address by encouraging healthcare professionals and medical students to specialise in this type of care, “which does not have less value on account of the fact that it is not 'lifesaving'. Palliative care involves something equally important: it accentuates the value of the person. Therefore, I urge all those who, in various ways, work in this sector to carry out their task in the spirit of service and recalling that all medical knowledge is truly science, in its most noble sense, only if it may assist the good of mankind, which can never be achieved by opposing life and dignity”.