

MATER CARE INTERNATIONAL

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Speech of Mgr. Pietro Parolin

Under-Secretary for Relations with the States

of Secretary of State

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Friends,

To all of you gathered here today from various parts of the world – doctors, gynaecologists and obstetricians – I extend cordial greetings. At the opening of this conference, it is a great honour for me to address you. In particular, I thank Dr Robert Walley, founder and Executive Director of Mater Care International, for his kind invitation. Thanks to the meetings I have had with him in the Secretariat of State I have come to know better the work of Mater Care and I have become more aware of how valuable and delicate this work is in today's circumstances. Your concerns and your commitment to the safeguarding of human life are also the concerns and commitment of the Holy See in their international activity.

1. This year we commemorate two important anniversaries: the 40th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Over these days your reflections and discussions are dedicated to these anniversaries. *Humanae vitae*, with its profound anthropological vision, sheds light on and provides direction for the interpretation and political application of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Though demanding, we know how important it is to defend the superior requirements of the Christian vocation in the exercise of one's medical and obstetric profession, because it is only in this way that an integral

understanding of human dignity can be affirmed and transmitted. Still relevant today is Pope Paul VI's recommendation to Catholic doctors to persevere in promoting "solutions which accord with faith and right reason .., regarding it as part of their professional duty to obtain all the necessary knowledge in this delicate area, with a view to being able to provide prudent advice and wise direction to couples who consult them, rightly expecting it of them" (Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae*, 27).

2. One of the aims of this Conference is to develop conclusions drawn from medical sciences and moral thought with a view to strengthening the application of ethical principles in the medical and obstetric profession as reference points and guidelines in a context of dominant ethical relativism. Such relativism threatens man. Unfortunately it is regarded by some as one of the principal conditions for democracy, because it is supposed to guarantee tolerance and mutual respect. "But were this so," says Pope Benedict XVI, "the majority would become the ultimate source of law". True rationality, however, "is not guaranteed by the consent of a large number, but only by the openness of human reason to creative Reason and to the common listening to this Source of our rationality". We are completely convinced of what *Gaudium et Spes* states in no. 89: "the Church, by virtue of her divine mission, preaches the Gospel and dispenses the treasures of grace to all peoples. In this way she contributes to strengthening peace throughout the world, establishing knowledge of the divine and natural law as a solid basis for fraternal solidarity between individuals and nations. For this reason, the Church must be present in the community of peoples to promote and encourage mutual cooperation among peoples."

The Holy See - primarily the Pope, and then their collaborators – has made numerous interventions and appeals to sustain activities of the international community aimed at safeguarding human rights, while stressing always that such rights cannot be fully defended or promoted without an integral

understanding of the human person. The emphasis on the pre-eminent and basic right to life – from conception to natural death – follows from this. The right to life therefore remains a basic priority of the international presence of the Holy See, which is actively involved in efforts to stem the spread of the “culture of death”, promoted by certain social structures which seek to present the suppression of life as “legal”. Such is the case with abortion and euthanasia. In this context, I am pleased to recall that Mater Care International was founded in order to confront the “culture of death”, so widespread today, and to promote the application by specialists in the medical field of the teachings of Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*. Today, there are not infrequent efforts to have recognized as human rights certain claims of individuals or groups which have no reference to principles of natural ethics. At the headquarters of international institutions, an ambiguous language is ever more frequently employed, with the risk of passing off understandings which could cause grave harm and serve to justify attacks on human dignity and on the rights of persons, especially in reference to life and the family. One might mention, for example, the use of expressions such as “reproductive rights and services”, which include abortion, the manipulation of unborn life and utilitarian notions of human life. We are therefore facing the important challenge of building peace from its foundations which is “respect for all human rights, whether connected with the material and economic dimension or with the spiritual and interior dimension of human existence in this world”. The Holy See, therefore, constantly emphasises that respect for human dignity and rights is the most profound ethical basis for promoting peace and the development of international relations corresponding to the genuine needs and hopes of all the peoples of the world. Neglect of, disregard for or partial adherence to this principle give rise to conflict, environmental degradation and social and economic injustice.

Strong action in the delicate area of health is also necessary in the international arena, in order to stimulate attentiveness and interest with regard to the ethical

and spiritual aspects linked to the programmes of the agencies of the United Nations, the World Bank, regional organizations and those of different countries. Certain themes merit special attention. Without seeking to be exhaustive, I would like to mention the following: the ethics of biomedical and biological research; social responsibility and health; equity, justice and solidarity in the health area; the so-called sexual and reproductive health; macroeconomics and health; innovation in health; intellectual property rights and health.

3. The world needs to recognize fully the ethical dimension of man. The Church has an important part to play here. It is significant that while the presence of the Church on the international scene is criticised by some as an interference in political affairs, on the other hand this presence is requested especially in the more delicate and important sectors of human intercourse such as the promotion of peace, interreligious dialogue, socio-economic development etc... In multiple invitations, expressed by political authorities, heads and officials of international organizations, personalities from academic institutions etc., the Church hears the call to be present in a way consistent with her responsibility. She speaks (even when often alone) in the international arena demanding respect for human life and dignity, convinced that only when the integral dimension of man is recognized, can a responsible use of freedom be placed at the service of peace and development.

4. The Holy See, as is well known, is an independent spiritual authority endowed with a special status as an international subject comparable to a state in its dealings with other states¹. Its mission is not political. It reaches beyond the physical borders of a single country and its principal aim is to proclaim the gospel and serve the cause of peace and justice among peoples. In this sense the Holy See represents a dimension which, although essential to the life of nations,

¹ With Resolution 53/314 of 14 July 2004, the General Assembly of the United Nations, unanimously and by acclamation, recognized the international presence of the Holy See, giving it a solemn, formal and definitive recognition to its Observer status, which it enjoyed since 1964. This juridical act of the United Nations specifies, in substance, that the Holy See as an Observer at the General Assembly, enjoys the same rights as member states, except logically the right to active and passive election, a right which the Holy See does not seek.

does not fall fully under the jurisdiction of states. From this perspective the Holy See's participation in international activities is justified. As an authority which is *super partes* it places before Christians and men and women of goodwill the ethical values that should guide international agencies in their political action, rising above particular interests and political alliances.

5. The international sphere is indeed a place for Christian commitment, something which paragraph 90 of the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council described in the following terms: "An outstanding example of international activity on the part of Christians is their contribution, either individually or collectively, to organizations set up, or being set up, to foster cooperation between nations". This commitment requires constant dedication to ethical formation so as to be able to offer adequate proposals for new situations that arise. Educating one's conscience enables one to assist others in their desire to come to know the truth. This education entails following the path that leads through the successive stages of life with an open mind and heart so as to accept the fundamental duties on which the lives of individuals and communities are based. "The formation of a *true* conscience, because it is founded on the truth, and *upright*, because it is determined to follow its dictates without contradictions, without betrayal and without compromises, is a difficult and delicate undertaking today, but indispensable"².

In this context we can place the topic of conscientious objection, which will be one of the principal issues for discussion during this Conference. We are aware, as you have written in your Announcement, "Conscientious objection has long been a tenet of civilized societies and the rights of those who object to abortion have been accepted until these times." Please be assured that this testimony which you have expressed can count on my encouragement and the support of my prayers.

² Benedict XVI, Address to the participants in the General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life, 24 February 2007.

Today's open society offers an exceptional opportunity for promoting ideas and values. There are many organizations with a Catholic or Christian identity making the most of these circumstances to proclaim the truth of the Gospel. Today's priorities, however, on account of their global complexity and interrelated cultural background cannot be adequately addressed by a single person or by individual organizations. The multidimensional aspect of today's challenges clearly calls for better cooperation and new and more adequate strategies and methods. In other words, this challenge is a call to responsible and active Christians to seek, as much as possible, effectiveness through convergent and coordinated actions.

In this context I want to speak about one particular initiative. Last year the project of a *Forum* for Catholic-inspired International NGO's was launched. It is inspired by two fundamental considerations:

1) the first one the need to give new life and impulse to the task that was at the origin of the participation of the first Catholic NGO's in intergovernmental agencies and organizations: to ensure the presence and contribution of the various Catholic or Catholic-inspired associations, which operate within their own autonomy and responsibility, but are guided in their fundamental ideas and values by the Magisterium of the Church. These organizations through their consultative status, and with the assistance of international centres, seek influence in the international arena where fundamental issues are at stake concerning human life, the family, solidarity and the authentic well-being of peoples, nations and mankind.

2) secondly the need to ensure a closer relationship and a more effective cooperation both among the different Catholic or Catholic-inspired NGO's themselves and their relations with the Holy See, which are mediated through

the Section for Relations with States of the Secretariat of State and especially through the Holy See's Permanent Observers.

The Forum was launched in December 2007. Some ninety Non-Governmental Church-related Organizations came together in Rome together with representatives of the Holy See. The founding aim was clearly stated. The *Forum* intends to foster dialogue, interaction and cooperation between Catholic-inspired NGO's among themselves and with the Holy See on the international level in a spirit of communion and with full respect for each subject's legitimate autonomy. The *Forum* brings together "Catholic NGO's or Catholic-inspired NGO's present in the international arena and willing to unite their efforts to those of the Holy See. *It does not intend to create a 'Catholic bloc', but encourages freedom of initiative and responsibility with due respect for legitimate autonomy.* This cooperation should serve the good of all people and the whole human person". The participating NGO's are in possession of, or intend to obtain, consultative status and they operate at the level of international agencies through lobbying or advocacy on important international questions. Other international scientific institutions are naturally free to offer their contribution and professional expertise in these areas. The participants in the Forum are asked to be highly professional in their actions and in their Catholic identity so as to render more accessible and intelligible the truth of the Gospel message that they intend to convey.

The process initiated by the first Forum meeting continues. It has generated mutual knowledge and trust among the various entities willing to cooperate in the Forum project and with the representatives of the Holy See at international agencies. It is hoped that networks based around particular topics or themes will begin to develop in order to offer, from a Catholic perspective, more comprehensive and constructive contributions to the principal problems currently under discussion.

Naturally, the impact that Catholic-inspired NGO's will have on the international scene, and likewise the impact which you doctors, obstetricians and professional people committed to the defence of life will have, depends on the authenticity of a life of faith. This authenticity comes from seeing oneself called to be an instrument and co-operator of the Creator of life, guided by right reason, enlightened by Truth itself. Besides this testimony of a consistent life of faith, it is important to safeguard the *sensus ecclesiae* and the relationship with the local Church.

In this great struggle you are not alone. Be assured that the Holy See will always be eager to support you and to advise you according to its competence, and on the basis of its experience.

Thank you for your attention.