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Promoting empathy in society to help people with rare diseases

Vatican City, 29 April 2016 – "In my ministry I frequently meet people affected by so-called 'rare' diseases. These illnesses affect millions of people throughout the world, and cause suffering and anxiety for all those who care for them, starting with family members, said Pope Francis this morning as he received in audience the participants in the Third International Conference on the Progress of Regenerative Medicine and its Cultural Impact, held in the New Synod hall from 28 to 30 April and organised by the Pontifical Council for Culture for the "Stem for Life Foundation" (SFLF).

In his address, the Holy Father emphasised that patients with illnesses of this type frequently do not receive sufficient attention, "because investing in them is not expected to produce substantial economic returns." He went on to analyse three aspects of the task performed by the Pontifical Council for Culture, the SFLF and the Vatican Science and Faith Foundation.

The first is "increasing sensitivity". "It is fundamentally important that we promote greater empathy in society. ... We know that we cannot always find fast cures to complex illnesses, but we can be prompt in caring for these persons, who often feel abandoned and ignored. We should be sensitive towards all, regardless of religious belief, social standing or culture."

The second aspect, "research", can be seen in two inseparable actions: education and genuine scientific study. "From this pedagogical perspective, it is necessary in medical and life sciences to offer interdisciplinary courses which provide ample room for a human formation supported by ethical criteria. Research, whether in academia or industry, requires unwavering attention to moral issues if it is to be an instrument which safeguards human life and the dignity of the person. Formation and research, therefore, aspire to serve higher values, such as solidarity, generosity, magnanimity, sharing of knowledge, respect for human life, and fraternal and selfless love."

The final aspect examined by the Pope was that of "ensuring access to care". "In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*", he explained, "I highlighted the value of human progress today, citing areas such as health care, education and communications. I also strongly emphasised, however, the need to oppose an economy of exclusion and inequality that victimises people when the mechanism of profit prevails over the value of human life. This is why the globalisation of indifference must be countered by the globalisation of empathy".

"We are called to make known throughout the world the issue of rare diseases, to invest in appropriate education, to increase funds for research, and to promote necessary legislation as well as an economic paradigm shift. In this way, the centrality of the human person will be rediscovered." The Holy Father concluded, "Thanks to coordinated efforts at various levels and in various sectors, it is becoming possible not only to find solutions to the sufferings which afflict our sick brothers and sisters, but also to secure access to care for them."
