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Audience with members of the Religious Association of Social and Health Institutes (ARIS)

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Religious Association of Social and Health Institutes (ARIS), to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I thank the President, Fr. Virginio Bebber, for his words, and I welcome you all. I greet the director of the Health Pastoral Office of the Italian Episcopal Conference.

I am pleased to meet your Association, engaged in the management of healthcare structures of Christian inspiration, comparable to the inn of the good Samaritan (cf. *Lk 10:25-37*), where the sick can receive “the oil of consolation and the wine of hope”. [1] I express my appreciation for the good work done in the many health-related institutes present in Italy, and I encourage them to keep going with the perseverance and imagination of charity, typical of many founders who gave them life.

Religious healthcare in Italy has a beautiful, centuries-long history. The Church has done a great deal, through healthcare, to listen and pay attention to the poor, weak and abandoned sectors of society. In this field, there has been no lack of authoritative witnesses, who have been able to recognize and serve the sick and suffering Christ up to the complete giving of the self, even with the sacrifice of life. Think of Saint Camillus de Lellis, Saint Josephine Vannini, Saint Joseph Moscati, Saint Agostina Pietrantonio and many others. Grateful for the past, we therefore feel called to inhabit the present with active commitment and a prophetic spirit. In the health sector, the throwaway culture can show its painful consequences more than elsewhere, sometimes in an obvious way. When the sick person is not placed at the centre and considered in his or her dignity, attitudes are generated that can even lead to speculation on the misfortunes of others,[2] and this must make us vigilant.

Let us ask ourselves in particular: what is the task of healthcare institutions of Christian inspiration in a context,

such as that of Italy, where there is a national health service that is universal in its vocation, and therefore called upon to provide care for all? To answer this question, it is necessary to recover the founding charism of Catholic healthcare – the founding charism of Catholic healthcare, I stress this – so as to apply it in this new historical situation, also aware that today, for various reasons, it is increasingly difficult to maintain the existing structures. It is necessary to undertake pathways of discernment and to make courageous decisions, recalling that our vocation is to stay on the frontier of need: that is our vocation, on the frontier of need. As a Church, we are required to answer above all to the healthcare demands of the poorest, the excluded and those, who for economic or cultural reasons, see that their needs are not met. These are the most important for us, those who are first in line: these.

The return of “health poverty” is assuming major proportions in Italy, especially in regions marked by more difficult socio-economic situations. There are people who, due to a lack of means, are unable to care for themselves, for whom even the cost of a co-payment is a problem: that too is a problem; and there are people who have difficulty in accessing health services because of very long waiting lists, even for urgent and necessary visits. The need for intermediate care is also growing, given the increasing tendency of hospitals to discharge patients after a short time, favouring the treatment of the more acute phases of the illness over that of chronic pathologies: as a result, these, especially for the elderly, are becoming a serious problem also from the economic point of view, with the risk of promoting courses of action that do not respect the very dignity of the person. An elderly person has to take these medicines, and if in order to save money or for a certain reason they do not give him these medicines, this is a hidden and progressive euthanasia. We must say this. Every person has a right to medicine. And many times – I think of other countries, in Italy I don't know this much, in other countries I do – the elderly have to take four to five medicines and only manage to get two: this is a progressive euthanasia, because they are not given what they can take for treatment.

Christian-inspired healthcare has a duty to defend the right to care, especially of the weakest segments of society, giving priority to the places where people suffer the most and are cared for the least, even if this may require the conversion of existing services to new ones. Every sick person is by definition fragile, poor, in need of help, and sometimes those who are rich find themselves more alone and abandoned than those who are poor. But it is clear that today there are different opportunities for those who have money to access care than those who are poorer. So, thinking of so many congregations, born in different historical periods with courageous charisms, let us ask ourselves: what would these founders and foundresses do today?

Religious hospitals have above all the mission to care for those who are discarded by the health economy and a certain contemporary culture. This has been the prophecy of so many health institutions of Christian inspiration, starting with the birth of the hospitals themselves, created precisely to care for those no-one wanted to touch. May this also be your testimony today, sustained by competent and clear management, capable of combining research, innovation, dedication to the least, and an overall vision.

Reality is complex and you can face it adequately only if healthcare institutions of religious inspiration have the courage to join together and to form a network, rejecting any competitive spirit, uniting skills and resources and possibly forming new legal subjects, through which the smallest realities in particular can be helped. Do not be afraid to take new paths, take risks: risk, so as to avoid our hospitals being alienated merely for economic reasons – this is a danger, isn't it? – and it is also a current one: here in Rome, I can send you the list – to avoid them being alienated, thus eliminating a heritage that has been cherished for so long and enhanced by so many sacrifices. Precisely in order to achieve these two pressing goals, and at the request of the Catholic-inspired healthcare institutions themselves, the *Pontifical Commission for the Activities of Public Legal Persons of the Church in the Healthcare Sector* was established in December 2015, with which I invite you to collaborate actively and constructively.

Finally, I would like to recommend that you accompany the people you receive in your institutions with holistic care, that does not neglect the spiritual and religious assistance of the sick, their families and healthcare workers. Also in this regard, healthcare institutions of Christian inspiration should be exemplary. And it is not merely a question of offering sacramental pastoral care, but rather of providing full attention to the person. No-one, no-one should feel alone in illness! On the contrary, everyone should be supported in their questions of meaning and helped to walk the sometimes long and tiring road of infirmity with Christian hope.

Dear brothers and sisters, keep alive the charism of your founders, not so much to imitate their gestures, but rather to welcome their spirit; not so much to defend the past, but to build a present and a future in which to proclaim, by your presence, God's closeness to the sick, especially those who are most disadvantaged and marginalized by the logic of profit. May Our Lady accompany you. From my heart I bless you and I bless your work. And I remind you, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.
