Vatican

Francis, the comic strip



A terminally ill man in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, is seen with his wife May 4, 2017. He asked the Indonesian court to grant him legal permission for euthanasia. (CNS/Hotli Simanjuntak/EPA)

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Caring for the sick, especially those near death, cannot be reduced simply to giving them medicine, but must include providing healing and comfort that gives their lives value and meaning, Pope Francis said.

"Serene and participatory human accompaniment" of terminally ill patients is crucial at a time when there is a "nearly universal" push for legalizing euthanasia, the pope said Oct. 1.

"Especially in those difficult circumstances, if the person feels loved, respected and accepted, the negative shadow of euthanasia disappears or is made almost nonexistent because the value of his or her being is measured by the ability of giving and receiving love and not by his or her productivity," he told participants in a five-day conference on ethical health care at the Vatican.

The Oct. 1-5 conference was sponsored by the Pontifical Academy for Life and led by Auxiliary Bishop Alberto Bochatey of La Plata, Argentina, and the Health Consensus Foundation, an Argentina-based organization comprised of local and international health care providers, according to the conference website.

The meeting, it said, focused on helping health care managers develop a "concept of bioethics in decision-making."

In his address, the pope told participants that health care, especially in Latin America, is in turmoil due to the economic crisis facing several countries, causing difficulties in developing new treatments and providing adequate access to therapies and medicine.

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Although doctors and health care providers may agree that miracles aren't feasible when it comes to health care, the pope said that the true miracle is "finding a brother in the sick, in the abandoned person in front of us."

"We are called to recognize in those who are on the receiving end the immense value of their dignity as a human being, as a child of God," he said. "It isn't something that can, on its own, undo all the knots that objectively exist in systems, but it will create in us the disposition to untie them in the measure of our possibilities and, additionally, make way for a change of mentality within us and society."

The primary inspiration for people working in the field of health care, the pope added, should be the "search for the common good" which isn't an abstract ideal but "a concrete person, with a face, that suffers many times."

Francis also encouraged them to "be brave and generous" when caring for their patients, "especially the poorest, who will know how to appreciate your efforts and initiatives."

"We must continue to fight to keep this link of profound humanity intact," the pope said, "because no health care institution can replace the human heart or human compassion."