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Pope Francis greets the crowd before celebrating Mass at the Soamandrakizay diocesan field in Antananarivo, Madagascar, Sept. 8, 2019. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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Pope Francis said May 12 that the global coronavirus pandemic has highlighted "deficiencies" in how countries provide healthcare, and called on global leaders to invest in their healthcare systems as "the primary common good."

In a letter to nurses around the world for International Nurses Day, the pontiff thanked healthcare professionals serving during the pandemic for their "testimony of courage and sacrifice … even to the point of putting their own health at risk."

Repeating a phrase the pope has used throughout the pandemic to describe frontline workers and people taking care of others in difficult situations, Francis said nurses are among the "saints next door."

"You are an image of the church as a 'field hospital' that continues to carry out the mission of Jesus Christ, who drew near to and healed people with all kinds of sickness and who stooped down to wash the feet of his disciples," the pope told nurses. "Thank you for your service to humanity!"

Francis did not specifically say how global leaders might invest in healthcare, but said they should strive "to ensure adequate care to everyone, with respect for the dignity of each person."

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Catholic pontiffs have long argued for better global healthcare. In his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris,* Pope John XXIII said that "the first right of the human person, the right to life, entails a right to the means for the proper development of life, such as adequate health care."

Francis had mentioned nurses earlier May 12 during his daily livestreamed Mass. Opening the liturgy at the Vatican's Casa Santa Marta, the pontiff asked people to pray for nurses, saying they had given "an heroic example" during the pandemic.

[Joshua J. McElwee (jmcelwee@ncronline.org) is NCR Vatican correspondent. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]