Vatican
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Pope Francis places his hand on a woman religious' forehead.

Pope Francis blesses a religious sister at the end of a meeting at the Vatican with representatives of the Religious Association of Social and Health Institutes April 13, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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Failing to provide needed medication to elderly people is a "hidden and progressive euthanasia," Pope Francis said.

"So often, an elderly person needs four or five medicines, and they can only get two. This is a progressive euthanasia, because they are not given what they need to care for themselves," the pope told the leaders of religious institutes working in health care.

While financial reasons sometimes prevent elderly people from receiving the medicine they need, he said that "everyone has the right to medicine."

The pope met at the Vatican April 13 with members of the Religious Association of Social and Health Institutes, which represents more than 250 hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers and other health care centers operated by religious institutes throughout Italy.

Especially in countries like Italy, which has universal health care, the pope said Christian organizations have "the duty to defend the right to care, especially for the weakest members of society," such as the elderly and those whose medical needs are cast aside due financial or cultural reasons.

"There are people who, due to a lack of means, are not able to care for themselves," he said. "People have difficulty accessing health services due to very long waiting lines, even for urgent and necessary visits."

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"These are the most important for us," said the pope. "These are the ones at the front of the line."

Christian health care institutions which were created "to care for those that nobody wanted to touch," he said, calling on the representatives to take care of those left behind by today's "throwaway culture."

Francis underscored the increased need for intermediate care in response to the "growing tendency of hospitals to discharge the sick in a short time," a practice that he said addresses a patient's immediate problems but not longer-term illnesses.

Intermediate care often refers to inpatient treatment centers for individuals who require medical attention but not the continuous care and supervision provided by a hospital.

Francis urged the leaders of religious institutes not to neglect the spiritual needs of the sick they serve, their patients' families and the health care workers they employ.

He also told them to keep the spirit of their institutes' founders alive, "not to defend the past, but to build a present and future to announce God's closeness to the sick, especially those who are most disadvantaged and marginalized by the logic of profit."