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Pope Francis receives a drawing from a child during a meeting with staff and patients from the Vatican-owned Bambino Gesù pediatric hospital in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall March 16, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Cutting-edge science and medical research cannot benefit only the privileged few but must be placed at the service of those most in need, Pope Francis said.

Meeting with the staff and patients from the Vatican-owned Bambino Gesù pediatric hospital in Rome March 16, the pope stressed the importance of "excellence in biomedical research," but said it must be done "with special attention to the most fragile, such as patients with serious, rare or ultra-rare diseases."

"So that science and expertise do not remain the privilege of the few, I urge you to continue to make the fruits of your research available to all, especially where they are most needed," he wrote, praising the hospital for its training programs with doctors and nurses from Africa and Asia.

The pope was greeted with applause and cheers from the many children present as he entered the Paul VI Audience Hall using a wheelchair. Vatican News reported that among the approximately 200 children and parents were children from countries at war, such as Ukraine and Gaza, who are receiving treatment at Bambino Gesù that they were unable to get in their home countries.

Some adults in the crowd were dressed as clowns with red noses and wearing lab coats; Francis was given his own red nose while greeting the crowd after his speech.

The pope told them that due to persistent cold symptoms, an aide -- Msgr. Filippo Ciampanelli -- would read his speech.

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Francis wrote that when he visits the Bambino Gesù hospital he feels the contrasting sensations of pain and hope.

"I feel pain for the suffering of the sick children and of their parents, but at the same time I feel a great hope seeing all that is done there to cure them," he wrote.

Consistently ranked among the best pediatric hospitals in Europe, the Bambino Gesù is the largest pediatric hospital and research center in Europe. The Vatican signed an agreement Feb. 8 to move the Vatican-owned hospital to the site of a now-closed Italian hospital by 2030. The new location would give the hospital at least four times as much space for patient rooms, clinics, offices and research labs.

Working at Bambino Gesù "is not work like any other: it is a mission that each one exercises in a different way," the pope wrote.

"For some, it entails the dedication of a lifetime," he said. "For others, the offering of their time in volunteer work; for others still, the gift of their blood, their milk -- for hospitalized infants whose mothers cannot provide it -- up to the gift of organs, cells and tissues."

Francis praised the "kindness and closeness" hospital staff offer to families accompanying their children through illness and stressed the need to continue receiving families of sick children in facilities linked to the hospital. "There is no care without relationship, closeness and tenderness, at all levels," the pope wrote.

He also recalled the hospital's origins as a gift. Founded in 1869 by Duchess Arabella Salviati, the hospital was donated to Pope Pius XI in 1924, and the pope encouraged the hospital staff to make the same spirit of giving "an indispensable element of your being and acting."