

HOMILY FOR THE WHITE MASS FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Springfield, Illinois

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**The Teaching of Pope Francis Must Be Understood in Its Fullness,
Not the Media's Sound Bites**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is a good for us to gather for this White Mass for the special intention of the healthcare profession. I commend you for your dedicated work of being instruments of God's mercy and healing. In this way, you continue and collaborate in the mission that Jesus entrusted to the Apostles, as we heard in today's Gospel passage from Saint Luke, "to cure diseases . . . to proclaim the Kingdom of God, and to heal the sick" (Lk 9:1).

I also wish to encourage you in your efforts. I know that such encouragement is greatly needed for the important work that you do in a secular culture that is increasingly hostile to the values of Catholic healthcare. I also realize that some of you may be discouraged by media reports in the past few days about some recent comments regarding an interview with Pope Francis that make it appear that the Holy Father's

resolve in the struggle to uphold these values is weakening and, as a result, that the teaching of the Catholic Church will soon be relaxed. I do not blame the Pope for such discouragement; I blame the news reports that only report selected passages of the Pope's remarks that fit their editorial narrative and their political agenda.

The teaching of Pope Francis must be understood in its fullness, not just the media's sound bites. I wish to encourage you today by focusing on some very important words of Pope Francis that the media have not generally reported, but which should indeed give you encouragement. The Pope speaks frequently in public and often at great length, such as his recent 12,000 word interview, so obviously I cannot repeat all of his words here. Therefore, I strongly encourage you to read his recent interview in full, which was published in several Jesuit publications.¹

From the media reports, you are probably aware that Pope Francis said, in that interview, that "We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that." But immediately after that, he added, "But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context. The

teaching of the church, for that matter, is clear and I am a son of the church, but it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time.”²

Indeed, we must also talk about the doctrine of our faith, which is why we have Catholic schools, religious education, colleges and universities. We must also talk about caring for the sick and the elderly, which is why we have Catholic hospitals, health care institutions, nursing homes and retirement centers. We must also talk about the poor, which is why we have Catholic Charities, St. Vincent de Paul Societies and other social service agencies. We must also talk about helping people around the world in times of crisis and emergencies, which is why we have Catholic Relief Services. We must also talk about caring for the needs of immigrants, which is why we have Catholic Refugee and Migration Services. The list goes on and on.

You may not be aware, because of the lack of media reports, that last Friday, one day after his lengthy interview was made public, Pope Francis soundly condemned abortion in an address that he delivered to a group of Catholic doctors. The Holy Father said, “Every unborn child, though unjustly condemned to be aborted, has the face of the Lord, who even

before his birth, and then as soon as he was born, experienced the rejection of the world.”

Pope Francis condemned the “throwaway culture” abortion promotes, saying, “Our response to this mentality is a ‘yes’ to life, decisive and without hesitation. ‘The first right of the human person is his life. He has other goods and some are precious, but this one is fundamental -- the condition for all the others.’”

The Holy Father described a contradiction whereby scientists pursue cures for diseases but snuff out human life in abortion. He said, “On the one hand we see progress in the field of medicine, thanks to the work of scientists who passionately and unreservedly dedicate themselves to the search for new cures. On the other hand, however, we also encounter the risk that doctors lose sight of their identity in the service of life.”³

To some, the juxtaposition of these quotes may seem contradictory,⁴ but they are perfectly consistent with Catholic Church teaching, which not only stresses the truth about sin, but also the mercy of God’s love. Pope Francis is reminding people of the latter, that we cannot simply talk about sin without also taking about the redemption that Christ offers us through His death on the cross.

Contrary to the media's wishes, the Pope did not change the Church's teaching about the sinfulness of abortion, contraception and homosexual acts, but he was emphasizing that such sins can be forgiven. Thus, it is true to say, even after the Pope's remarks, that, abortion is a sin, contraception is a sin, homosexual acts are sinful, but the Pope is also saying that these statements do not end the conversation. We must also speak of God's mercy to those who feel burdened by the guilt of these sins.

The Pope expressed this essential message in these words: "The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. And the ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all. The confessor, for example, is always in danger of being either too much of a rigorist or too lax. Neither is merciful, because neither of them really takes responsibility for the person. The rigorist washes his hands so that he leaves it to the commandment. The loose minister washes his hands by simply saying, 'This is not a sin' or something like that. In pastoral ministry we must accompany people, and we must heal their wounds."⁵

This is a key point which the secularists are missing: they think that stressing God's mercy means that sins are no longer sins. On the contrary,

God's mercy is a great gift of grace precisely because sins *are* sins and they call for repentance and forgiveness.

Note from the interview, when he was asked to describe himself, Pope Francis said simply, "I am a sinner." After a brief pause, he amplifies this self-identity in the understanding of a Christian who has been saved by Christ, saying, "I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon." Then he gives a beautiful example referring to St. Matthew (whose feast day we celebrate today), saying that in Rome he often visited the Church of St. Louis of France, and he went there to contemplate the painting of "The Calling of St. Matthew," by Caravaggio. Referring to this painting, the Pope said, "That finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew. That's me. I feel like him. Like Matthew. It is the gesture of Matthew that strikes me: he holds on to his money as if to say, 'No, not me! No, this money is mine.' Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze. And this is what I said when they asked me if I would accept my election as pontiff. I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I accept in a spirit of penance."⁶

So, far from saying that we shouldn't treat sins as sins, we are saying that our recognition and condemnation of sin does not stop there, but rejoices in the mercy of Christ the Redeemer.

That is why our condemnation of the sin of abortion does not stop there, but includes Project Rachel, which is the Church's loving outreach of reconciliation and healing for those who are struggling with the guilt, grief and pain that follows an abortion.⁷

That is why our condemnation of the sin of contraception does not stop there, but includes pastoral care and education for parents who wish to learn about natural family planning in accord with the teachings of the Church.⁸

That is why our condemnation of the sin of homosexual activity does not stop there, but includes offering group support and spiritual direction through programs such as the Courage Apostolate for those struggling with same-sex attraction who seek help living in accord with the virtue of chastity.⁹

That is why we do not passively resign ourselves to any kind of sin and give in to the devil's temptations without the struggle of a spiritual battle, but when we do sin, we can take comfort in the mercy and

forgiveness of the Sacrament of Penance. In the words of Pope Francis, “This is also the great benefit of confession as a sacrament: evaluating case by case and discerning what is the best thing to do for a person who seeks God and grace. The confessional is not a torture chamber, but the place in which the Lord’s mercy motivates us to do better.”¹⁰

As we heard in today’s first reading, Ezra expressed shame for the “wicked deeds of the people, saying that their “guilt reaches up to heaven,” but then rejoiced that “mercy came to us from the LORD, our God, who . . . gave us a stake in his holy place; thus our God has brightened our eyes and given us relief in our servitude” (Ez 9:5-9).

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20130919_1.htm. This article is also published in the following journals of the Society of Jesus:

■ [A Svív \(Hungary\)](#)

■ [America \(United States of America\)](#)

■ [Brotéria \(Portugal\)](#)

■ [Choisir \(Switzerland\)](#)

■ [Études \(France\)](#)

- [La Civiltà Cattolica \(Italy\)](#)
- [Mensaje \(Chile\)](#)
- [Razón y fe \(Spain\)](#)
- [Sic \(Venezuela\)](#)
- [Signum \(Sweden\)](#)
- [Stimmen der Zeit \(Germany\)](#)
- [Streven \(Belgium\)](#)
- [Anoichtoi Orizontes \(Greece\)](#)
- [Obnovljeni Zivot \(Croatia\)](#)
- [Viera a Zivot \(Slovakia\)](#)

² <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

³ See, <http://www.lifenews.com/2013/09/20/pope-francis-slams-abortion-in-new-comments-unborn-babies-unjustly-condemned/>.

⁴ See, for example, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/20/pope-blasts-abortion-after-0_n_3961888.html.

⁵ <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

⁶ <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

⁷ <http://www.noparh.org/>.

⁸ See, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/>.

⁹ See, <http://couragerc.net/>.

¹⁰ <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.