



Address to the Plenary Session and to the Study Week on the Subject 'The Biological Problem of Cancer'



In discussing the ravages of cancer and the loneliness it can produce, the Pope warns against the 'temptations' of ending life. He expresses the strong wish that science will find an answer to this terrible scourge and urges the Academy to continue on this path. In expressing this hope he also stresses that this pontifical institution is 'always eager to serve the progress of science for the greater good of humanity'.

If the especially heavy duties which weigh upon our shoulders, particularly at the present time, deprive us, to our great regret, distinguished scholars and teachers, of the satisfaction of speaking to you at leisure, we cannot, however, resist the desire to welcome you and to tell you of the very friendly interest we take in your work. Because of its objectives it is a work of capital importance and it will surely be fruitful, thanks to your incomparable competence and to the methods of this academy.

Your work is concerned this year with the 'biological problem of cancer', that horrible scourge whose very name terrifies us, which incessantly ravages a notable portion of humanity; a dreadful scourge where surgical or radiological treatment in too many cases only postpones the fatal outcome. And until the end, what physical suffering, what moral anguish! In its internal forms, mysteriously hidden, cancer does not ordinarily show its presence until its progress has already made it nearly incurable. Little by little, it silently eats away at vital organs, in many cases rendering difficult or impossible any absorption or assimilation of food for which, moreover, it sometimes causes an insurmountable repugnance. And it pursues its work of destruction until all is consumed.

In other forms it openly devours the flesh of its victims; it disfigures them, mutilates them in so

frightful a fashion that those who, moved by the tenderness of their affection or by the heroism of their charity, approach them, if they can overcome the natural repugnance they feel, are not always able to hide their reactions from the invalid. Those suffering from cancer even seek out the miserable loneliness from which they frequently suffer, by voluntarily shutting themselves up for fear of letting themselves be seen as they are. Deprived by this very isolation from any human consolation, their sadness sometimes leads them to the last extreme of despair, to the temptation of ending a life which only a firm faith in another life of eternal happiness helps them to bear with patience.

This evil appears all the more frightful when one is faced, as he is at least up to now, with the feeling that he is helpless, or nearly so. When from time to time someone imprudently announces news of a sensational discovery which will finally bring about a radical and definitive victory over this pitiless destroyer, there only follows, alas, for those who allow themselves to be deceived, or even ask to be deluded, a crueler and more profound disappointment than the many others that have preceded it.

How much more modest and, therefore, how much higher and surer is your ambition, gentlemen! In reality, a great many hypotheses have been brought forth and many theories have been timidly built up and discreetly proposed. They are certainly not to be belittled because, even if they are not verified, they open the door to new and more effective research. They mark, therefore, some progress, doubtless valuable, but of necessity very slow. You, who have applied yourselves for many years to the conscientious study of cancer, of its manifestations and symptoms, of its nature and its causes or, at least, of the conditions of its origin and development, aspire, each in his own specialty but in constant contact with each other, to continue your advance step by step toward the light which will enable you to seek more easily and to find, first, a remedy which prevents or which alleviates and, finally, one that cures cancer.

Observations carefully made, diligently collected and compared, even if they are not conclusive, nevertheless suggest useful reflections on the nature and possible action of various agents, cancerous, physical or chemical, on the role of the atmosphere, the sun, a man's profession or heredity in the appearance and growth of tumours and in the evolution of a cell from a normal to a malignant state.

These observations, experiments and investigations you know how to pursue assiduously and patiently, and of which the general public often takes little account. They will not, perhaps, give you noisy publicity, but you will merit, as your conscience tells you, the gratitude of generations to come.

It pleases us to praise here the initiative of our Pontifical Academy, under whose auspices you have begun your study week. Always eager to serve the progress of science for the greater good of humanity, it asks you to specify, following its standard methods, 'the points on which agreement has been reached, the points on which agreement could not be reached, the reasons why agreement could not be reached, and suggestions concerning the research that appears most likely to resolve the difficulties'. Your proper intentions and spirit could not, we think, be better expressed.

These are surely the things, distinguished scholars, that ought to encourage you to pursue your

work with the confidence that it is not undertaken in vain. For your work tends, as your programme states with modest assurance, 'to open up, on a scientific basis, perspectives looking towards a biological cure for malignant tumours'.

We wish for you, in your mutual work, happy and fruitful results, asking with all our heart for God's light and blessing on it.