

Juan de DIOS VIAL CORREA

THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMY FOR LIFE

The *Pontificia Academia Pro Vita* was created by His Holiness John Paul II with the *motu proprio* *Mysterium vitae* made public on 11 February 1994, the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. The activities of the Academy were started on 12 June 1994 in Rome.

On that date, the Directive Council, together with some members who happened to be in Rome, had the joy of being received by His Holiness. The Directive Council convened to draw the first lines of action of the new institution and discuss the tasks that had to be addressed first.

The Academy will consist of seventy members, about forty of whom have already been appointed. They come from all parts of the earth, which is a clear indication of the fact that problems concerning life have essentially worldwide implications, while at the same time they exhibit features peculiar to each region.

Members have been chosen so that many scientific disciplines and social activities are represented. Human life is not mere biology, nor can its present dilemmas be understood by the more classical approaches of medicine and biology. The problem of life such as mankind is facing it in the present century demands the joint efforts of theology, human and social sciences, medicine, and natural sciences, together with social activities of promotion and defence. The mission of the Academy is set up in *Mysterium vitae*.

It (the Academy) will have the specific responsibility of studying, informing and forming in the main problems of biomedicine and law which are directly related to the promotion and defence of life, especially in the direct relation between them and Christian morals as taught by the Church (No. 4).

The proper perspective for the understanding of this task is described in the *motu proprio* *Dolentium hominum*: “to explain and spread the teachings of the Church in health matters, and to favour their penetration in the practice of health care” (No. 6). This requires:

the adequate formation of health operators in matters of morals and bioethics so that it may become manifest that science and technical applications, when placed at the service of the human being and its fundamen-

tal rights, make a contribution to the integral good of man, and to the fulfillment of the divine project of salvation (*Mysterium vitae*, No. 3).

The opening words of the *motu proprio* are very rich in their teaching. They remind us that there is “a mystery of life, of human life in particular” (No. 1). We Christians know that this mystery can be illuminated only in the Mystery of the Incarnate Word. The secularized world turns its back on this road and deals with human life using reductionist criteria that threaten to destroy it under the pretence of surmounting suffering.

The Church looks first to the dignity of the human being and to the integrity of its calling. While taking full consideration of scientific data, the Church must, by the command of Christ, illuminate the conscience of man with respect to the moral requirements that have their origin in man’s nature and which seek to bring the person to fulfillment.

It is precisely this awareness of the value of the person which makes us look upon scientific and technical advances with the greatest interest as they open new and fascinating perspectives. At the same time, however, it makes us aware of new moral questions “that may not be overlooked without risking steps that may be irreparable...” (*Mysterium vitae*, No. 1).

It is in this maze of new questions that “the Church cannot but encounter science” (*Mysterium vitae*, No. 4). This necessary and fascinating encounter is the field of action that is reserved for the Academy.

When things are seen in this light, some aspects of the structure and organization of the Academy are understood more clearly. The presence of its members throughout the world should allow it to perceive the pulse of life as it is both fostered and threatened on the surface of the globe. The way in which members of the Academy will be chosen is aimed at creating a place of encounter for diverse disciplines, so that the task of unfolding the meaning of human life is not appropriated by any of them, and each may benefit from all.

The Academy is an autonomous entity, closely linked, however, to the Holy See through the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral of Health Operators. This provides a link, so that the Academy may communicate with those who hold responsibility in the Church and in scientific and health organizations. It should also help in the formation of a culture of life. By doing this in faithful observance of magisterial teachings, the Academy takes part in a central commitment to the contemporary Church. This commitment has been stressed by His Holiness John Paul II with moving words and with the high example of his constant pastoral work in the promotion and defence of life. This is what is expressed in a document which must be signed by every new member of the Academy. This document is called the “Pledge of the Servants of Life” and it consists essentially in a solemn reaffirmation of our fidelity to the Church.

It should be clear that the action of the Academy is inspired by the sacred nature of human life. "Sacred" means, from ancient times up to the present, that in which a persisting and authentic reality becomes manifest.

The Incarnate Word was made present in human life and through human life. Life was then revealed as the manifestation of the love of God which moves worlds. "*L'amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle.*" The voice of the Church is the only voice today that brings to man's mind the awareness of this immense dignity. Only the Church can say of itself that it accomplishes an essential act of its mission "in the loving and generous reception of every human life, especially when it is feeble or sick" (*Christifideles laici*, No. 38). This is because only the Church looks toward the nucleus of personal reality where God loves man for his own sake.

The fulfillment of the mission of the Academy will require the collaboration and generous cooperation of many from whom constant and dedicated work will be demanded.

It will require, above all, an unflinching fidelity to the teaching of the Holy Church, a never-dimmed awareness that the Academy lives to serve the Church in its mission to man, which is the imitation of Him who taught this. He came so that we "may have life and have it to the full" (Jn 10 : 10).

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Pontifical Academy for Life