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1986 World Catholic Medical Congress

A Report
by Dr. Chicot Vas
President, FIAMC

Some few hundred Catholic doctors from the six continental areas converged on Buenos Aires, Argentina, on August 8, 1986, to attend the XVI World Congress of the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations (FIAMC) which was held for five days. The assembled delegates represented 30 national affiliates and seven additional countries were admitted as observers. The Holy See was represented by His Eminence, Eduardo Cardinal Pironio, president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity and also the Pontifical Commission for the Apostolate of Health Workers.

The Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, in a special message conveyed by Cardinal Pironio, greeted and blessed the assembled delegates from all over the world. His Holiness referred to the developments in the field of Health Care since October, 1982, when he attended in person one of the sessions of the XV FIAMC Congress held in Rome. The establishment of a permanent secretariat in Rome was greeted with pleasure as was also the extension of FIAMC activities in Africa through the first Pan African Congress of Catholic Doctors in Ghana in February, 1986, and the consolidation of FIAMC in Latin America through the World Congress held in Argentina.

It was stated in the Papal message that the international federation—FIAMC—“brings about an ever more effective Catholic involvement in health care and an ever more consistent witness of Catholic doctors with regard to today’s extremely delicate challenges in the area of bio-medical ethics.

Referring to the theme of the FIAMC Congress, “Progress of Medicine and Respect for Human Life”, the Holy Father stated that there was an impelling need to ensure that “human dignity and the sacredness of human life be reaffirmed as the very center of health care and the indispensable condition for progress in medicine.” As health care had become a major economic factor in many countries, the papal letter advised Catholic doctors to help make “the full health of the person” the goal and “criterion by which progress in medicine is to be measured”, rather than financial considerations such as “commercial loss and gain.” The Holy Father also

encouraged Catholic medical associations to support each other "in giving a truly Christian witness of professional competence and ethical standards."

Cardinal Pironio, in his own address, spoke of the great work being done by Catholic doctors in very many parts of the world. He emphasized that the doctor treating patients must be imbued with faith, hope and love for the patients. He remarked that it was particularly important that we have not only good Catholic doctors, but good Catholics who are also good and competent doctors. Cardinal Pironio reviewed briefly the activities of FIAMC, of which he was intimately aware because of his leadership in the Pontifical Council and the Commission, closely linked with FIAMC. He complimented the office-bearers of FIAMC for their dedication and expressed happiness at the progress of the FIAMC Bio-Medical Ethics Centre in Bombay.

The XVI FIAMC Congress was inaugurated by Dr. Chicot J. Vas (India), president of FIAMC. In his inaugural address, he pledged loyalty and obedience to the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, on the part of the FIAMC at a time when it was "not much in fashion among us Catholics". Recalling the Gospel passages (Luke 10: 1-12 and 17-20) describing the sending out of the 72 disciples by our Lord, Dr. Vas stated that FIAMC, among others, continued the mission of those disciples as their successors. Catholic doctors, he stated, "may not be called to the task of direct evangelization, but the aims of FIAMC clearly indicate the duty to study and spread Christian principles in the medical profession." He continued: "We live today in a world where we are faced with the secular Marxism of the East and a secular humanism in the West. It is in such a world that we have to exercise our apostolate. We cannot afford to be second to anyone in the matter of professional excellence and technical competence. Neither can we afford to forget that we shall be like lambs in the midst of wolves, that the principles we stand by will not always bring us popularity, nor gain wide acceptance; on the contrary, our principles may, at times, invite ridicule and scorn and be vehemently opposed, sometimes subtly, at other times not so subtly."

Others in Attendance

Among others present at the inauguration of the Congress was His Eminence, Juan Carlos Cardinal Aramburu, primate of Argentina, who had earlier in the day officiated as the chief celebrant at a concelebrated Mass in the beautiful Metropolitan Cathedral of Buenos Aires. Among the government leaders present was the Secretary of the Ministry of Health.

The scientific or academic sessions of the Congress were devoted to detailed considerations of three topics from the global point of view. These were;

- i) advances in genetics and their ethical implications;

- ii) euthanasia and the insidious international campaign of the promoters, and
- iii) the teaching of ethics to medical students and the updating of ethical concepts and knowledge among Catholic doctors, both young and old.

The discussions were conducted in a most cordial atmosphere with keynote papers being presented in the morning sessions by experts in the field of medicine, law, theology and philosophy, invited from all the continents of the world. During the afternoon sessions, "Round Table" discussions were held with speakers presenting information on the situation prevailing in their own continental region. While ample time was permitted for discussions from the floor during all the sessions, it is undoubtedly true that discussion periods at international congresses cannot ever be long enough. This is indeed the attraction of such meetings with the discussion spilling over into the coffee and meal breaks or social functions. Many new contacts are made, collaboration arrangements established and friendship fostered among individuals across the world, leading to programs for the exchange of scientists in training, information, bulletins or research materials.

The Indian contribution to the academic program was a paper entitled "Genetic Counseling: Genetic Evaluation — The Ethics of Chance" by Dr. Eustace J. de Souza, executive director of the FIAMC Bio-Medical Ethics Centre, Bombay, and the president of the Indian Federation of Medical Guilds presented in absentia. Two other reports were presented by Dr. C. J. Vas in the round table sessions: a "Commentary on Euthanasia on the Asian Scene" and "Teaching of Ethics to Medical Students in Asia."

FIAMC Resolutions

The conclusions of this meeting of minds in Argentina were well summed up in the resolutions which were unanimously approved. These read:

We in the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations (FIAMC) meeting in Buenos Aires on Aug. 8-12, 1986, on the occasion of the XVI Congress, do reaffirm the fact that human life is sacred and begins at conception with its unique genetic complement. We acknowledge and accept the teaching of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church and will accordingly direct our future study and investigations in the field of genetics. We stress that the feminine organism is the most prodigious laboratory and the most appropriate sanctuary in which a human being can be conceived.

We affirm that life is a gift from God and merits complete and absolute respect; never can the doctor wilfully perform an act which ends life. We agree that it is not necessary to prolong life by exceptional means when death is inevitable.

Ethical aspects must be discussed in depth, and for this purpose intensification of interdisciplinary dialogue and the existence of pregraduate courses are needed.

The same applies to the post-graduate level, having in mind concrete situations and tasks. Teachers and doctors of universities and hospitals, especially in Catholic institutions, must be conscious of their responsibilities and have exemplary behavior.

We reject a moral of 'pure conscience' in which the individual sets his own guidelines, because this would mean rejecting all morals. Medicine should be subordinated to ethics, as all other sciences.

As with all national and international organizations, (and FIAMC is no exception) a business meeting was also held at which the reports of the president, secretary general and treasurer were submitted and approved. New members were welcomed into FIAMC: Rwanda, Tanzania, Netherlands, Uruguay and Chile — all joining the ever-growing circle of FIAMC and happily giving witness as Catholic doctors on the international scene.

The executive committee had strongly recommended that all member federations assist the international secretariat in establishing a computerized list of Catholic doctors all over the world by sending in names and addresses of their members, so that valuable information may be circulated to them from time to time.

A report submitted by the FIAMC Bio-Medical Ethics Centre to the general assembly was well received. The members were particularly appreciative of the ethical recommendations for the Catholic doctor, the report on the difficulties faced by young Catholic doctors wishing to specialize in obstetrics and gynecology and who rightfully refuse to perform abortions resulting in their rejection from training programs in many countries. Copies of the first-ever production of *ALIVE*, a pictorial information booklet on brain death for non-medical people, were eagerly seized.

Vatican Office, Financial Concern

The recent allocation of an office for FIAMC in the Vatican was noted with pleasure, but the financial situation of FIAMC caused great concern all around. The executive committee emphasized the fact that FIAMC is in need of a budget somewhere between 10 and 20 thousand U.S. dollars for an effective program of action. Without this, worthwhile work is not possible and without activity, donations are not available. Truly, it is a chicken and egg story. The general assembly and executive committee, therefore, appealed to the worldwide community of Catholic doctors to rise to the occasion and increase their contributions to FIAMC. Some of the proposals ranged between one and five U.S. dollars per individual annually. Such a contribution would certainly ensure a viable organization, capable of giving service to its members and also representing them internationally in Catholic and professional circles.

The general assembly also witnessed the leadership of FIAMC being eagerly passed on by the incumbent president, who did not wish to be

considered for re-election because of indifferent health. Dr. T. P. Linehan (England), the Secretary General, who was also nominated for election, was therefore elected president unanimously. During the subsequent elections, the following were appointed to hold office for a period of four years until the XVII Congress in 1990, scheduled for the Federal Republic of Germany:

President: —	Dr. T. P. Linehan (England)
Vice-President: —	Dr. Hugo Obiglio (Argentina)
Secretary General: —	Prof. W. Osswald (Portugal)
Treasurer: —	Dr. J. Kluyskens (Belgium)

No congress of FIAMC is complete, however, without the spiritual and social events. All the delegates were privileged to be taken to the Shrine of Our Lady of Lujan to pay homage. The devotion and faith of the thousands who flocked there could not possibly be described, but certainly left an unforgettable impression.

The social occasions organized for the delegates were many — informal luncheons and dinners and musical evenings when the visitors were introduced to the Argentinian melodies interestingly orchestrated by the doctors, their families and friends. Above all was the final banquet to satisfy the connoisseur, bringing together old and new friends for the last time at the concluding XVI FIAMC Congress; an occasion for the outgoing president to thank one and all for their contributions over the preceding four years; to pass on the old and magnificent Chain of Office to the incoming president and to welcome the new executive committee with a prayer that all will be well, and that FIAMC will grow and flourish as never before.