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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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Your Eminences
Your Excellencies
Board Members
Doctor Haas
Friends,

Thank you for your invitation to deliver the keynote address at this twenty-sixth bioethics workshop for Bishops. The fruitful cooperation between the National Catholic Bioethics Center and the Knights of Columbus over all these years has been a great benefit to the bishops of the United States, Mexico, Canada and Central America. As President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, I would very much like to see this service offered to other bodies of bishops around the world and would appreciate your assistance in making that service a reality.

It is truly encouraging to see your intense and passionate efforts in the service of life, whose sacredness we must continually recognize and call to mind every chance we get in every activity— cultural, social, political and religious. Your commitment in organizing and supporting effective community witness for life, and your leadership in initiatives that actively defend human life and the dignity of the person reveal a commitment that must be clearly appreciated, maintained and, as I just said, instilled in others.

Today, we are called to a very careful discernment of the “signs of the times.” We must be able to recognize the positive features of the new culture of individual freedom and dignity that has grown up in our history as a flowering of the seed planted by Christianity. We must also be very clear-headed and resolute in confronting the contradictions of extreme individualism and moral relativity that put at risk the humanity of that freedom and personal dignity.

For the first time in history man thinks himself able to unhinge the connection that has always been considered an essential aspect of life and of human society: namely, the indissoluble bond that links marriage between a man and a woman with the idea of family, and with life. What God hath joined together, man today, and not only in Western culture, thinks himself able to put asunder and deconstruct. And the individual as if maddened with a dream of omnipotence, thinks himself able to restructure that relationship in his own way for his own use and enjoyment.

In a world that is ever more complex yet ever more borderless and fluid—thanks to technology, the economy and a quest for efficiency, we are faced with a cultural and social construct of relationless individuals who in the worship of their own autonomy day by day destroy the memories of the roots and relationships that formed them. Freedom cannot grow, and human beings cannot flourish when their roots dry up and are destroyed.

We need to develop a holistic understanding of human life—life which has its very beginnings in the generative relationship between man and woman. It was for this reason that the Holy Father decided to bring the Pontifical Academy for Life into a closer relationship with the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, and to have both of them work closely with the Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life. This was not just an administrative reorganization. It reflects his anthropologic vision of the tasks that he decided to assign to each of the three institutions.

If what drives us is the acquisition of greater power and the satisfaction of our own desires, we will be unable to appreciate the value of stable relationships, of care and assistance to others, of welcome and solidarity. I think an awareness of this point is the anthropologic key that opens for us an understanding of the serious matters that you will be examining in the coming days: transgenderism, the ideological take-over of gender questions, biotechnology, assisted suicide. I have recently written a book about this subject and it has been published in Italian and Spanish. It is called “Sorella Morte” and it will soon appear in English as well.

In a special way, new technologies, by reason of the satisfaction that they bring, their complexity, and their great efficiency, have become the touchstone by which today’s ethical challenges are judged. The search for operational perfection—as measured by technical efficiency—is more and more becoming the way that life in all its complexity is being judged. Using the means at our disposal today, the human being—and really all forms of life—can be

analyzed, studied and manipulated in its least detail. The possibility for that level of manipulation of sensory/motor, neuro-cognitive and genetic-evolutionary structures opens up new and undesirable horizons that we must learn to encompass intellectually in a way that makes possible ethical-humanistic solutions that are equal to the enormous possibilities, both positive and negative, for civil society and more generally for all forms of human interaction.

Technologically advanced society is preparing for a qualitative leap. Science today is able to intervene in the life of each individual and on future generations without necessarily offering any improvement in the conditions for human existence. Man's desire to rule over nature soon becomes a desire in every heart to control, shape and empower the biological self, and the only reality worth relying on seems today to be the life that man believes he can build with his own hands.

The promise of a longer life, and even of immortality, is the most convincing argument that technological society can offer. Who of us would give up the possibility of a longer, healthier life just so as not to exceed the traditional "natural" life expectancy of "threescore and ten" years? Why should we turn down the possibility that technology offers of overcoming all limits? Let me give you three points to think about:

1. A number of studies predict that in the future health care will be one of the central elements of Western economies by reason of the development of efficient preventive medicine protocols in addition to the traditional treatment of acute and chronic illness.
2. With technology, we will soon be able to manage all the variables connected with human reproduction, variables that until now have been left to "nature" or "chance." Why should we still leave reproduction to chance and in addition burden it with the potentially limiting circumstances of the binding affective relationship known as marriage when we can manage the entire process all by ourselves?
3. The development of robotics and the increasing integrating of man and machine reopens the question of how we can speak today about "nature." Does it still make sense to speak about a basic "human nature" and if so, how do we do so in a way that is not merely defensive in a world where everyone else believes in technology, at least on a practical level?

The answer to these questions is, obviously crucial. We must ask ourselves if the possible responses are already preconditioned by language that is deeply influenced by a culture that is immanentistic and scientific and that has monopolized our thinking, making it no longer

able to appreciate other dimensions of reality. There are other questions, and I have alluded to some of them in the full text of my presentation that will be distributed to you. Certainly, we must ask ourselves whether we can fully understand the challenges that we are facing and still remain within the linguistic and cultural horizons of technology, or whether instead we also need a “conversion” of our minds and language, opening ourselves to broader horizons that are able to put in their proper place all the potentialities that can form humanity.

In this situation, “We’re all in the same boat.” to paraphrase Blaise Pascal, and thus we are all called to a new sense of responsibility for building ever-broader alliances with other persons, cultures, religions and ethical perspectives that are united in not wanting to see the sun go down on humanity.

It is in this framework that we can see the wisdom of Pope Francis in broadening the mandate and mission of the Pontifical Academy for Life and of having it coordinate closely with the John Paul II Institute as well as with the new Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life. We need a new culture, one that is able to gather and add value to all those traditions that are able to speak with truth about the human condition and promote concrete actions within the diverse and dissimilar circumstances where the meaning and value of life is questioned.

If we want to respond to the challenges facing us, we shouldn’t think that we are being called to a conflict but rather to a rebuilding, a reconstruction of what it means to be human. Thus, while there are of course certain enemies to identify, we must first get to know our companions on the journey. The Church has a great treasury of human wisdom that can inspire all cultures to a new humanism. And like the talent in the Gospel, it can bring profit to all humanity. In this optic—and I’m referring to only one aspect of this new humanism, the covenant between man and woman as an indispensable resource for humanity must be rediscovered. This covenant, which gives strength not only to marriage and family, is a resource that the Church must seek out, encourage and support. It is likewise the most effective response to ideologies of separation or indifference. The alliance between man and woman must take hold of the tiller of history, of statecraft, and of the economy, in society and in the Church. This is the message of creation when God entrusted to the covenant between man and woman the care for creation and responsibility the generations.

As can be seen from this last example, the work is complex, but it cannot be postponed. For this reason, we must examine thoroughly the questions, the ideas and the objections that our

society raises, and we must free our discussions from reductionist frameworks; we must challenge clichés, and we must return to a passionate love of human truth. We must keep sight of both immanence and transcendence, awareness and mystery, perfection and imperfection, power and weakness, limits and desire for the infinite, efficiency and mercy.

We must understand—and understand doesn't always mean agree with—the wrenching contradictions in which modern man lives. For this reason, it is helpful to call to mind the picture of a “field hospital” used by Pope Francis.

The reference to a hospital is a telling metaphor for hospitality, a concept that is key for anyone who wants to think how to welcome, care for, and support others at every stage of their lives. The idea of hospitality always implies recognizing the other, someone who is welcomed for who he is, a foreigner, healthy or sick, to our liking or not. We have no claim on him. Only one who treats another just like himself, who opens his heart, and his home, can bear witness to that highest quality of life, sacredness, which is the first and genuine source of equality.

I assure you that the Academy for Life and the John Paul II Institute, together, mean to answer this challenge, bringing to bear all the cultural energy that comes from the presence of scholars and experts in many fields— theology, philosophy, social sciences, medicine—from all over the world, who can treat those serious anthropological injuries that are both cause and effect of new forms of desertion and violence against human life, life that is more and more at the mercy of technology and hateful greed.

To continue its commitment to resolving the difficulties facing today's world, once the Academy's membership is in place, it will address many of these questions in its General Assembly next October. The theme of that meeting will be “Accompany Life—New Responsibilities in a Technological Age.” It is the beginning of a project to be shared with all men of good will, and it will call on all the resources of our humanity, empowered as it is by the saving words of the Gospel.

In an age marked by too much technology, avarice, power and materialism, the word “accompany” makes us think of companionship, sharing, and the path we tread together. For sure we are to establish effective accompaniment for life at every one of its stages. For sure we must stand against whatever weakens or still worse destroys life or threatens its dignity. Without fail, and quickly, we are to learn the art of encounter and sharpen our ability to rebuild relationships, to build up open communities, to provide the means to change lives and social

mores. The Church's store of human wisdom can indeed help in accomplishing these tasks, for the benefit of individuals, groups and the whole human family.

To close my presentation this evening, I hope that your work in these days will be fruitful and I hope that the bond between the Pontifical Academy for Life—whose new membership will include a number of Americans—and the National Catholic Bioethics Center will become even stronger and more productive for each of us, for the Church and for all of society today.

Thank you very much.

