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Pope calls for guaranteed health care for all people

by Sarah Delaney by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Pope Benedict XVI and other church leaders said it was the moral responsibility of nations to guarantee access to health care for all of their citizens, regardless of social and economic status or their ability to pay.

Access to adequate medical attention, the pope said in a written message Nov. 18, was one of the "inalienable rights" of man.

The pope's message was read by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state, to participants at the 25th International Conference of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry at the Vatican Nov. 18-19.

The theme of this year's meeting was "Caritas in Veritate - toward an equitable and human health care."

The pope lamented the great inequalities in health care around the globe. While people in many parts of the world aren't able to receive essential medications or even the most basic care, in industrialized countries there is a risk of "pharmacological, medical and surgical consumerism" that leads to "a cult of the body," the pope said.

"The care of man, his transcendent dignity and his inalienable rights" are issues that should concern Christians, the pope said.

Because an individual's health is a "precious asset" to society as well as to himself, governments and other agencies should seek to protect it by "dedicating the equipment, resources and energy so that the greatest number of people can have access."

"Justice in health care should be a priority of governments and international institutions," he said,

cautioning that protecting human health does not include euthanasia or promoting artificial reproductive techniques that include the destruction of embryos.

Care for human life from conception to its natural end must be a guiding light in determining health care policy, the pope said.

In his own written statement, Bertone had strong words in support of the need for governments to take care of all citizens, especially children, the elderly, the poor and immigrants.

"Justice requires guaranteed universal access to health care," he said, adding that the provision of minimal levels of medical attention to all is "commonly accepted as a fundamental human right."

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Governments are obligated, therefore, to adopt the proper legislative, administrative and financial measures to provide such care along with other basic conditions that promote good health, such as food security, water and housing, the cardinal said.

Private health insurance companies, he said, should conform to human rights legislation and see to it that "privatization not become a threat to the accessibility, availability and quality of health care goods and services."

Bertone recommended that government leaders in poor countries use their limited resources wisely and for the good of their citizens.

The governments of richer nations with good health care available should practice more solidarity with their own disadvantaged citizens and help developing countries promote health care while trying to avoid a "paternalistic or humiliating" way of assisting, the cardinal said.

Bertone warned of the "war of interests" between pharmaceutical companies and developing nations who have little access to medicines because they can't pay for them. He said that those manufacturers should not be driven by "profit as the only objective" in the creation and distribution of medicines.

Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski, president of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry, said in opening remarks that to have good health "is a natural right" recognized by international institutions.

Despite such recognition, he said, great imbalances persist and developing nations find themselves with inadequate structures and without the ability to provide basic medicines to their people. Wealthier countries, on the other hand, have a "technical" approach to the sick, which ignores "the sick person in his entirety and dignity," Zimowski said.

The council, created by Pope John Paul II 25 years ago, will continue the church's mission to serve the sick and promote health for all, the archbishop said.

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