



**The Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture and the Cura Foundation's
Fifth International Vatican Conference**

**Video Address of His Holiness Pope Francis
to Participants of the Fifth International Conference
“Exploring the Mind, Body & Soul:
How Innovation and Novel Delivery Systems Improve Human Health”**

Broadcasted on Saturday, May 8, 2021 at 1:00 PM

Dear Friends,

I am pleased to address all of you taking part in this international Conference entitled “Mind, Body and Soul”, a topic which for centuries has engaged research and reflection in the effort to understand the mystery of the human person. I greet and thank Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, the organizers of this Conference, the Presidents of the “Cura” and the “Science and Faith” Foundations, and the various speakers.

Your Conference unites philosophical and theological reflection to scientific research, especially in the field of medicine. Before all else, this allows me to express our gratitude to all who are personally and professionally committed to the care of the sick and the support of those most in need. All of us are grateful in these days to those working tirelessly to combat the pandemic, which continues to claim many lives, yet at the same time has represented a challenge to our sense of solidarity and authentic fraternity. For this reason, concern for the centrality of the human person also demands reflection on models of health care that are accessible to all the sick, without disparity.

The programme of your Conference is centred on the three fundamental areas indicated in its title: *mind, body and soul*. These three categories differ somewhat from those of the “classical” Christian vision, whose best-known model is that of the person, understood as an inseparable unity of body and soul, the latter being endowed with intellect and will (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1703-1705). Yet that vision is not exclusive. Saint Paul, for example, speaks in terms of “spirit, soul and body” (*1 Thess 5:23*), a tripartite model that was subsequently taken up by many Church Fathers and various modern thinkers. Your own division, to my mind, rightly indicates that certain dimensions of our being, nowadays all too often disjoined, are in fact profoundly and inseparably interrelated.

The biological stratum of our existence, expressed in our *corporeity*, represents the most immediate of these dimensions, albeit not the easiest to understand. We are not pure spirits; for each of us, everything starts with our body, but not only: from conception to death, we do not simply *have* a body; we *are* a body. Christian faith tells us that this will also be true in the resurrection. The history of medical research presents us, in this regard, with one dimension of the fascinating journey of human self-discovery. This is not only the case

with what might be called “Western” academic medicine, but also with the rich diversity of medicines in the various world civilizations. The sciences have surely opened up a horizon of knowledge and interactions unthinkable only a few centuries ago.

Thanks to interdisciplinary studies, we can come to appreciate better the dynamics involved in the relationship between our physical condition and the state of our habitat, between health and nourishment, our psycho-physical wellbeing and the care of the spiritual life – also through the practice of prayer and meditation – and finally between health and sensitivity to art, and especially music. It is no accident that medicine serves as a bridge between the natural and the human sciences, so much so that in the past it could be defined as *philosophia corporis*, as we see in a manuscript kept in the Vatican Apostolic Library.

A broader vision and a commitment to interdisciplinary research thus makes possible greater knowledge which, applied to the medical sciences, translates into more sophisticated research and increasingly suitable and exact strategies of care. We need but think of the vast field of research in genetics, aimed at curing a variety of diseases. Yet this progress has also raised a number of anthropological and ethical issues, such as those dealing with the manipulation of the human genome aimed at controlling or even overcoming the aging process, or at achieving human enhancement.

Similarly important is a second dimension, that of the *mind*, which makes possible our self-understanding. The fundamental question which you are seeking to address is one that for centuries has led mankind to seek the essence of what makes us human. At present, the essence of our humanity often tends to be identified with the brain and its neurological processes. Nonetheless, despite the vital importance of the biological and functional aspects of the brain, these do not provide an overarching explanation of all those phenomena that define us as human, many of which are not “measurable” and thus transcend the materiality of the body. We cannot possess a mind without cerebral matter, yet the mind cannot be reduced to mere materiality of the brain. We need to be attentive lest the two be equated.

In recent decades, thanks to the interplay between the natural and human sciences, increasing efforts have been made to grasp more fully the relationship between the material and nonmaterial dimensions of our being. As a result, the mind-body question, which for centuries had been prevalently the domain of philosophers and theologians, is now also of interest to those studying the mind-brain relationship.

In a scientific context, the use of the term “mind” can present certain difficulties; consequently, there is a need to understand and describe this reality in an interdisciplinary way. The term “mind” is generally used to indicate a reality ontologically distinct from, yet capable of interacting with, our biological substratum. Indeed, “mind” usually indicates the entirety of the human faculties, particularly in relation to the formation of thought. A timely question remains the origin of those human faculties, such as moral sensitivity, meekness, compassion, empathy and solidarity, which find expression in philanthropic gestures, disinterested concern for others, and the aesthetic sense, to say nothing of the search for the infinite and the transcendent. As you see, this is a very complex and interdependent issue.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as in the Greek philosophical tradition, these human traits are associated with the transcendent dimension of the human person, identified with the immaterial principle of our being, that of the *soul*, the third theme of your Conference. While it is true that over the course of time, this term has taken on various meanings in different cultures and religions, the notion we have inherited from classical philosophy considers the soul to be the constituent principle organizing the body as a whole and the origin of our intellectual, affective and volitional qualities, including the moral conscience. The Scriptures, and philosophical and theological reflection in particular, have employed the concept of “soul” to define our uniqueness as human beings and the specificity of the person, which is irreducible to any other living being and includes our openness to a supernatural dimension and thus to God. This openness to the transcendent, to something greater than ourselves, is constitutive, and it testifies to the infinite worth of each human person. Put in a more commonplace way, it is like a window that looks out upon and opens up to a broader horizon.

Dear friends, I am pleased that students from various universities throughout the world, Catholic and non-Catholic, are taking part in this event. I encourage you to undertake and pursue interdisciplinary research involving various centres of study, for the sake of a better understanding of ourselves and of our human nature, with all its limits and possibilities, while always keeping in mind the transcendent horizon to which our being tends. I ask God to bless your work and I express my hope that you will always retain your enthusiasm, and indeed your wonderment, before the ever deeper mystery of man. For as Saint Augustine, echoing the Bible, tells us in words that remain ever timely: “Man is truly a vast abyss” (*Confessions* IV, 14, 22). Thank you.