Editorial

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Pope John Paul II welcoming the Executive Editor-in-Chief of *Fetal Diagnosis and Therapy* at the 'Fetus as a Patient' 2000 Annual Congress hosted by Prof. Cosmi, Rome (center of the picture).

Our International Society, 'Fetus as a Patient', was established in 1984 by Prof. Kurjak and colleagues from around the world in response to the rapid development of fetal medicine starting at that time. From the beginning, emphasis was placed on spreading knowledge not only about diagnostic opportunities in utero, but also to improve therapeutic abilities in the prenatal period of human life. This ambition was courageous and at the same time, in the middle of the 1980s, farsighted, because new

approaches in therapy had only just been proven to be successful internationally. The purpose of the enthusiastically established 'Fetus as a Patient' Society meetings was not so much to provide a forum for short scientific presentations on medical and biologic progress in prenatal medicine, because this is better covered by the International Fetal Medicine and Surgery Society (IFMSS) which also supports our journal *Fetal Diagnosis and Therapy*. In contrast to the IFMSS, the 'Fetus as a Patient' Society is more

an association of internationally recognized board members from areas such as obstetrics, neonatology, perinatal pathology, basic sciences and medical technology whose main duties are to attend the annual congresses of the Society for review of lectures and to participate in post-graduate courses which take place primarily, but not exclusively, in developing countries. The international annual congresses which have taken place so far were in Dubrovnik (A. Kurjak), Jerusalem (J. Schenker), Matuse (K. Maeda), Bari (V. D'Addario), Detroit (I. Zador), Paris (S. Uzan), Bonn (M. Hansmann), Oulu (P. Jouppila), Fuji (H. Takeuchi), Brijuni (A. Kurjak), New York (M. Divon), Grado (G.P. Mandruzzato), Basel (W. Holzgreve), Amsterdam (H.P. van Geijn), New York (F.A. Chervenak), Fiuggi (E.V. Cosmi and G.C. Di Renzo) this year, and in the year 2001 in Pattaya City, Chonburi (K. Vairojanavong).

The postgraduate courses, which started in 1987, were held in Manila (C. Almirante), Barcelona (J. Carrera), Jakarta (G.H. Wiknjosastro), Ankara (F. Saracoglu), Cairo (M. Mahran), Bari (V. D'Addario), Bali (G.H. Wiknjosastro), Pattaya City (K. Vairojanavong), Seoul (B. Hi Woo), Prague (Z. Hajek), Sardinia (G.B. Mellis), Antalya (C. Sen), Bari (V. D'Addario), and Cairo (M. Mahran).

Anybody who has ever or repeatedly experienced the didactically excellent presentations by the board members and the intense discussion following these lectures is convinced of the purpose of these meetings which particularly attract young doctors.

A special treat for the participants of the millennium year 2000 congress, organized by E.V. Cosmi and G.C. Di Renzo in Fiuggi was a private papal audience for the participants in Vatican City, where some of the board members could speak to Pope John Paul II. The Pope expressed his pleasure with the convention theme 'The Fetus as a Patient', because as he said, 'With its focus upon the fetus as the subject of medical intervention and therapy, your congress considers the fetus in its full human dignity, a dignity which the unborn child possesses from the moment of conception'. The Holy Father was quoting from his own Instruction *Donum vitae* (En-

cyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae*, 60) that 'the human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception, and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life'. He supported the aims of the 'Fetus as a Patient' Society by recognizing that 'the fetal therapies now emerging in the medical, surgical and genetic fields offer new hope of saving the lives of those suffering from pathologies which are either incurable or very difficult to treat after birth'. The Pope condemned as 'gravely illicit' the practice of the so-called 'embryo-reduction' especially after assisted reproductive technologies by saying that 'the (fetus) must be ... defended and nurtured in the mother's womb because of its inherent dignity, a dignity which belongs to the embryo and is not something conferred or granted by others, whether the genetic parents, the medical personnel or the state'. He very much supported our attempts to move from prenatal diagnosis to therapy by concluding to the fetal diagnosis and therapy specialists gathered in Vatican City on April 3, 2000, 'Distinguished guests, you are specialists in accompanying the wondrous and delicate beginnings of human life in the mother's womb. Therefore, you know best how Catholic moral teaching strengthens and supports a natural ethic, based upon respect for the inviolability of every human life. Catholic moral teaching sheds a guiding light on questions connected with the delicate process of life's dawning, so full of hope and rich in promise for later life, and a field now ripe for the marvellous discoveries of medical science.' Everybody in the room, whether Catholic or not and even regardless of certain disagreements with the Vatican's teaching, felt the moral authority of this man, who challenges each of us with constantly high ethical standards which he even conveyed to some of us in our national languages in personal conversations during the private audience. It is good to know for the 'Fetus as a Patient' Society and for everybody involved with fetal therapy based on precise prenatal diagnosis that we are recognized by an outstanding moral authority in this complicated word.