

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS
BENEDICT XVI
FOR THE EIGHTEENTH WORLD DAY OF THE SICK**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The 18th World Day of the Sick will be celebrated in the Vatican Basilica next 11 February, the liturgical Memorial of Our Lady of Lourdes. Its felicitous coincidence with the 25th anniversary of the Institution of the Pontifical Council for Health-Care Workers is another reason to thank God for the ground covered so far in the sector of the pastoral care of health. I sincerely hope that this event will be an opportunity to give a more generous apostolic impetus to the service of the sick and of those who look after them.

With the annual World Day of the Sick, the Church intends to carry out a far-reaching operation, raising the ecclesial community's awareness to the importance of pastoral service in the vast world of health care. This service is an integral part of the Church's role since it is engraved in Christ's saving mission itself. He, the divine Doctor, "went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10: 38). In the mystery of his Passion, death and Resurrection, human suffering takes on meaning and the fullness of light. In his Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, the Servant of God John Paul II offers enlightening words in this regard. "Human suffering, has reached its culmination in the Passion of Christ", he wrote. "And at the same time it has entered into a completely new dimension and a new order: it has been linked to love... to that love which creates good, also drawing it out from evil by means of suffering, just as the supreme good of the Redemption of the world was drawn from the Cross of Christ, and from that Cross constantly takes its beginning. The Cross of Christ has become a source from which flow rivers of living water" (n. 18).

At the Last Supper, before returning to the Father, the Lord Jesus knelt to wash the Apostles' feet, anticipating the supreme act of love on the Cross. With this act he invited his disciples to enter into the same logic of love that is given especially to the lowliest and to the needy (cf. Jn 13: 12-17). Following his example, every Christian is called to relive, in different and ever new contexts, the Parable of the Good Samaritan who, passing by a man whom robbers had left half-dead by the roadside, "saw him and had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back" (cf. Lk 10: 33-35).

At the end of the parable, Jesus said: "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10: 37). With these words he is also addressing us. Jesus exhorts us to bend over the physical and mental wounds of so many of our brothers and sisters whom

we meet on the highways of the world. He helps us to understand that with God's grace, accepted and lived out in our daily life, the experience of sickness and suffering can become a school of hope. In truth, as I said in the Encyclical *Spe salvi*, "It is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed, but rather by our capacity for accepting it, maturing through it and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love" (n. 37).

The Second Ecumenical Vatican Council had already recalled the Church's important task of caring for human suffering. In the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* we read that "Christ was sent by the Father 'to bring good news to the poor... to heal the contrite of heart' (Lk 4: 18), 'to seek and to save what was lost' (Lk 19: 10)... Similarly, the Church encompasses with her love all those who are afflicted by human misery and she recognizes in those who are poor and who suffer, the image of her poor and suffering Founder. She does all in her power to relieve their need and in them she strives to serve Christ" (n. 8). The ecclesial community's humanitarian and spiritual action for the sick and the suffering has been expressed down the centuries in many forms and health-care structures, also of an institutional character. I would like here to recall those directly managed by the dioceses and those born from the generosity of various religious Institutes. It is a precious "patrimony" that corresponds with the fact that "love... needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community" (Encyclical *Deus caritas est*, n. 20). The creation of the Pontifical Council for Health-Care Workers 25 years ago complies with the Church's solicitude for the world of health care. And I am anxious to add that at this moment in history and culture we are feeling even more acutely the need for an attentive and far-reaching ecclesial presence beside the sick, as well as a presence in society that can effectively pass on the Gospel values that safeguard human life in all its phases, from its conception to its natural end.

I would like here to take up the Message to the Poor, the Sick, and the Suffering which the Council Fathers addressed to the world at the end of the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council: "All of you who feel heavily the weight of the Cross" they said, "you who weep... you the unknown victims of suffering, take courage. You are the preferred children of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of hope, happiness, and life. You are the brothers of the suffering Christ, and with him, if you wish, you are saving the world" (*The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, sj). I warmly thank those who, every day, "serve the sick and the suffering", so that "the apostolate of God's mercy may ever more effectively respond to people's expectations and needs" (cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*, Art. 152).

In this Year for Priests, my thoughts turn in particular to you, dear priests, "ministers of the sick", signs and instruments of Christ's compassion who must reach out to every person marked by suffering. I ask you, dear presbyters, to spare no effort in giving them care and comfort. Time spent beside those who are put to the test may bear fruits of grace for all the other dimensions of pastoral care. Lastly I address you, dear sick people and I ask

you to pray and to offer your suffering up for priests, so that they may continue to be faithful to their vocation and that their ministry may be rich in spiritual fruits for the benefit of the whole Church.

With these sentiments, I implore, for the sick, as well as for all who nurse them, the maternal protection of Mary *Salus Infirmorum*, and I wholeheartedly impart the Apostolic Blessing to all.

From the Vatican, 22 November 2009, Solemnity of Christ the King.

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI

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