

Pope's Message for 14th World Day of the Sick

The World Day of the Sick was celebrated on February 11.

Included here is the message of Benedict XVI as well as a testimony of John Paul II and a testimony of Saint Josemaría about the Christian meaning of sickness.

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Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI

For the XIV World Day of the Sick

Adelaide, Australia, Feb. 11, 2006

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The World Day of the Sick will be held on Feb. 11, 2006, the liturgical memorial of the Blessed Virgin of Lourdes.

Last year this Day was held in the Marian sanctuary of Mvolyé in Yaoundé, and on that occasion the faithful and their pastors, in the name of the whole of the continent of Africa, reaffirmed their pastoral commitment to the sick. The next World Day of the Sick will be in Adelaide, in Australia, and the events will culminate in the celebration of the Eucharist in the cathedral dedicated to St. Francesco Saverio, the untiring missionary of the populations of the East.

On that occasion, the Church intends to bow with special solicitude to the suffering, calling the attention of public opinion to the problems connected with mental disturbance, which by now afflicts one-fifth of mankind and constitutes a real and authentic social health care emergency.

Remembering the attention that my venerated predecessor Pope John Paul II gave to this annual event, I, too, dear brothers and sisters, would like to make myself spiritually present at the World Day of the Sick, so as to pause to reflect, in harmony with those taking part, on the situation of the mentally ill in the world and to call for the commitment of the Church communities to bear witness to the tender mercy of God towards them.

In many countries, legislation in this field does not yet exist and in other

countries a precise policy on mental health is absent. It should also be observed that the prolongation of armed conflicts in various areas of the world, the succession of terrible natural catastrophes, and the spread of terrorism, in addition to causing a shocking number of deaths, have also created mental traumas in not a few survivors, whose recovery at times is difficult.

And in countries with high economic development, the experts recognize that at the origin of new forms of mental disturbance we may also find the negative impact of the crisis of moral values. This increases the sense of loneliness, undermining and even breaking down traditional forms of social cohesion, beginning with the institution of the family, and marginalizing the sick, and especially the mentally ill, who are often seen as a burden for their families and the community.

I would like here to thank those who work in various ways and at various levels to ensure that the spirit of solidarity does not decline and that people persevere in looking after these brothers and sisters of ours, basing themselves on human and Gospel-based ideals and principles. I thus encourage the efforts of those who work to ensure that all mentally ill people are given access to necessary forms of care and treatment. Unfortunately, in many parts of the world the services for these sick people are lacking, insufficient or in a state of decay.

The social context does not always accept the mentally ill, with their limitations, and for this reason, as well, difficulties are encountered in securing the human and financial resources that are needed. One perceives the need to integrate in a better way the tandem appropriate therapy and a new sensitivity

towards disturbance so as to enable workers in this sector, in a more effective way, to help these sick people and their families, who on their own would not be able to take care of their relatives in difficulty in an adequate way. The next World Day of the Sick is a suitable occasion to express solidarity to families who have mentally sick people dependent upon them.

I would here like to address myself to you, dear brothers and sisters burdened by illness, so as to invite you to offer your condition of suffering, together with Christ, to the Father, certain that every ordeal received with resignation is meritorious and draws the benevolence of God upon the whole of mankind. I express my appreciation to those who help and care for you in residential centers, day hospitals and wards providing diagnosis and treatment, and I

exhort them to strive to ensure that medical, social and pastoral assistance for those in need which respects the dignity specific to every human being is never absent.

The Church, in particular through the work of chaplains, will not fail to offer you her own help, being well aware that she is called to express the love and care of Christ for those who suffer and for those who look after them. I commend pastoral workers and voluntary associations and organizations to support -- in practical forms and through practical initiatives -- those families who have mentally ill people dependent upon them, in relation to whom I hope that the culture of welcoming and sharing will grow and spread, as a result, also, of suitable laws and health-care programs that envisage sufficient resources for their practical application. The training and updating of the personnel who work

in such a very delicate sector of society is as urgent as ever before.

Every Christian, according to his specific task and specific responsibility, is called to make his contribution so that the dignity of these brothers and sisters of ours is recognized, respected and promoted. "Duc in altum!" This invitation of Christ to Peter and the Apostles I address to the Church communities spread throughout the world and in a special way to those who are at the service of the sick, so that, with the help of "Mary Salus Infirmorum," they may bear witness to the goodness and the paternal solicitude of God. May the Holy Virgin comfort those who are afflicted by illness and support those who, like the Good Samaritan, soothe their corporeal and spiritual wounds!

I assure each one of you that you will be remembered in my prayers, and I

willingly impart my Blessing on you all.

From the Vatican, Dec. 8, 2005

John Paul II Among the Sick in Lourdes

On February 11, 2004, Pope John Paul II joined the sick people gathered in Lourdes to place himself in the hands of Our Lady on the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of her Immaculate Conception. The following passages are taken from his message for that World Day of the Sick.

The World Day of the Sick, an event held on a different Continent each year, takes on a singular meaning this time. Indeed, it will take place in Lourdes, France, site of the apparition of the Blessed Virgin on 11 February 1858, which since that time has become the destination of many pilgrimages. In that

mountainous region, Our Lady wished to demonstrate her maternal love, especially towards the suffering and the sick. Since then, she continues to be present through her solicitude.

The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception introduces us into the heart of the mystery of Creation and Redemption (cf. Ephesians 1: 4-12; 3: 9-11). God wanted to give life in abundance to the human creature (cf. John 10:10), on the condition, however, that his initiative would be met by a free and loving response. Man tragically cut off vital dialogue with the Creator, refusing this gift with the disobedience that led to sin. To the "yes" of God, source of the fullness of life, the "no" of man was placed in opposition, motivated by proud self-sufficiency, harbinger of death (cf. Romans 5:19).

The keystone of history lies here: with the Immaculate Conception of Mary began the great work of Redemption that was brought to fulfillment in the precious blood of Christ. In him, every person is called to achieve the perfection of holiness (cf. Colossians 1:28).

On this site, since the day of the apparition to Bernadette Soubirous, Mary has "healed" pain and sickness, also restoring many of her sons and daughters to health of body. She has worked much more surprising miracles, however, in the souls of believers, preparing them for the encounter with her Son Jesus, the authentic answer to the deepest expectations of the human heart. The Holy Spirit, who covered her with his shadow at the moment of the Incarnation of the Word, transforms the soul of countless sick people who turn to her. Even when they do not obtain the gift of bodily health, they

are able to receive another that is much more important: the conversion of heart, source of peace and interior joy. This gift transforms their existence and makes them apostles of the Cross of Christ, standard of hope, even amid the hardest and most difficult trials.

In the Apostolic Letter "Salvifici Doloris" I noted that suffering belongs to the ups and downs of men and women throughout history, who must learn to accept and go beyond it (cf. No. 2: [11 February 1984]; L'Osservatore Romano English Edition [ORE], 20 February, p. 1). And yet how can they, if not thanks to the Cross of Christ?

In the death and Resurrection of the Redeemer human suffering finds its deepest meaning and its saving value. All of the weight of humanity's affliction and pain is summarized in the mystery of a God who, taking on

our human nature, was humiliated "for our sake ... to be sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21). On Golgotha he was burdened with the sin of every human creature, and in solitude and abandonment he called out to the Father: "Why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

From the paradox of the Cross springs the answer to our most worrying questions. Christ suffers for us. He takes upon himself the sufferings of everyone and redeems them. Christ suffers with us, enabling us to share our pain with him. United to the suffering of Christ, human suffering becomes a means of salvation; this is why the believer can say with St. Paul: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (Colossians 1:24). Pain, accepted with faith, becomes the

doorway to the mystery of the Lord's redemptive suffering; a suffering that no longer takes away peace and happiness since it is illuminated by the splendor of the Resurrection.

From the Vatican, 1 December 2003

"I am asking him to cure you if it's his will"

Speaking in an interview about the Founder of Opus Dei, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo recalled how St. Josemaria had encouraged one of his daughters who was suffering a painful illness.

On December 18, 1972, the Father went to visit a young Sicilian numerary, Sofia Varvaro, who was a patient in a Rome hospital. Doctors had given up hope of curing her of pancreatic cancer. To console and encourage her, he spoke to her about heaven. It was a highly emotional conversation.

"Father," she confided, "sometimes I'm afraid of not making it to the end because I have so little to go on."

The Father immediately replied: "My daughter, don't be afraid! Jesus is waiting for you! I'm asking God to cure you if it's his will. Sometimes it's hard to accept that divine will if we don't understand it, but Our Lord must be laughing a little at us because he loves us and cares for us like our dad and with a mother's heart. Understand? Tomorrow, along with the sacred Host I'll place you on the paten and offer you to Our Lord. As for you, whether you're here or in heaven, always be closely united to the Father, to the Father's intentions, because I need you to be completely united to my petition."

Sofia told him that she had prayed a lot for the fruitfulness of his recent trip to Spain and Portugal.

"My daughter, you have helped me greatly! I never felt alone. Now, after seeing you, I know that you'll keep helping me from heaven--and here on earth, too, if Our Lord leaves you here. Pray intensely that what is afflicting the Church--it makes me suffer so much--may end. I depend on all of you. I feel your prayers and your affection accompanying me."

"Father, thank you for your help, and for the help of everyone in the Work."

"It can't be any other way! We're very united, and I feel responsible for each one of you. I suffer when you aren't well; it's very hard on me, but I love Our Lord's will. As we are truly a family, your affection makes me happy, and I think it must make all of you happy, too, that the Father loves you so much."

"Father, I want to make it to the end, but sometimes the pain is very great and it wears me out."

"I know, my daughter, I understand you very well. Ask Our Lady to help you; tell her: 'Monstra te esse Matrem!' [show that you are a Mother] or simply say 'Mother!' and it's enough. She can never leave us. Besides, we are never alone: you are supporting the rest of us, and we are closely united to you. Ask to be cured, but accepting God's will, and be content with whatever He wants. The Church needs our lives. Pray for all the priests in the Church, and especially for those in the Work, not because we are holier than the others, but that we carry out well our blessed responsibilities, really exhausting ourselves. 'Force' Our Lord; tell him: 'My Jesus, it's for your Church!' and offer it all. 'It's for the Work, so that we can always serve You more.' My daughter, you have to

be more united to Our Lord every day."

"Father, it's been a long time since I've been able to attend Mass."

"My daughter, your whole day is a Mass as you consume yourself closely united to Our Lord. Don't worry. Our Lord is in you; he never leaves. Pray a lot. Speak to Our Lady and St. Joseph. Have confidence in St. Joseph, our Father and Lord; he leads us along the path toward the intimacy he had with his Son."

As he left her room, without hiding his own suffering, the Father slowly repeated the ejaculation "Fiat, adimpleatur, laudetur et in aeternum superexaltetur iustissima atque amabilissima Voluntas Dei super omnia. Amen. Amen! [Above all, may the most just and most lovable will of God be done, be fulfilled, be praised, and exalted forever. Amen. Amen!]

I've reconstructed this entire conversation by using the testimony and recollections of several people who were present because each phrase is an extraordinary example of how the Father practiced human affection and supernatural outlook, always intimately linked.

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