



MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER POPE JOHN PAUL II FOR THE FIRST ANNUAL WORLD DAY OF THE SICK

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. The Christian community has always paid particular attention to the sick and the world of suffering in its multiple manifestations. In the wake of such a long tradition, the universal Church, with a renewed spirit of service, is preparing to celebrate the first World Day of the Sick as a special occasion for growth, with an attitude of listening, reflection, and effective commitment in the face of the great mystery of pain and illness. This day, which, beginning in February 1993, will be celebrated every year on the commemoration of Our Lady of Lourdes, for all believers seeks to be "a special time of prayer and sharing, of offering one's suffering for the good of the Church and of reminding everyone to see in his sick brother or sister the face of Christ who, by suffering, dying and rising, achieved the salvation of mankind" (Letter Instituting the World Day of the Sick, 13 May 1992, n. 3).

The day seeks, moreover, to involve all people of good will. Indeed, the basic questions posed by the reality of suffering and the appeal to bring both physical and spiritual relief to the sick do not concern believers alone, but challenge all mankind, marked by the limitations of the mortal condition.

2. Unfortunately, we are preparing to celebrate this first World Day in circumstances which are in some respects dramatic: the events of these months, while bringing out the urgency of prayer to entreat divine aid, recall us to the duty of implementing new and swift measures to assist those who suffer and cannot wait.

The sick and suffering are before our eyes

Before the eyes of all are the very sad images of individuals and whole peoples who, lacerated by war and conflicts, succumb under the weight of easily avoidable calamities. How can we turn our gaze from the imploring faces of so many human beings, especially children, reduced to a shell of their former selves by hardships of every kind in which they are caught up against their will because of selfishness and violence? And how can we forget all those who at health-care facilities — hospitals, clinics, leprosariums, centres for the disabled, nursing homes — or in their own dwellings undergo the calvary of sufferings which are often neglected, not always suitably relieved, and sometimes even aggravated by a lack of adequate support?

3. Illness, which in everyday experience is perceived as a frustration of the natural life force, for believers becomes an appeal to "read" the new, difficult situation in the perspective which is proper to faith. Outside of faith, moreover, how can we discover in the moment of trial the constructive contribution of pain? How can we give meaning and value to the anguish, unease, and physical and psychic ills accompanying our mortal condition? What justification can we find for the decline of old age and the final goal of death, which, in spite of all scientific and technological progress, inexorably remain?

Yes, only in Christ, the incarnate Word, Redeemer of mankind and victor over death, is it possible to find satisfactory answers to such fundamental questions.

In the light of Christ's death and resurrection illness no longer appears as an exclusively negative event; rather, it is seen as a "visit by God", an opportunity "to release

love, in order to give birth to works of love towards neighbour, in order to transform the whole of human civilization into a civilization of love" (Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, n. 30).

The history of the Church and of Christian spirituality offers very broad testimony of this. Over the centuries shining pages have been written of heroism in suffering accepted and offered in union with Christ. And no less marvellous pages have been traced out through humble service to the poor and the sick, in whose tormented flesh the presence of the poor, crucified Christ has been recognized.

4. The World Day of the Sick — in its preparation, realization and objectives — is not meant to be reduced to a mere external display centring on certain initiatives, however praiseworthy they may be, but is intended to reach consciences to make them aware of the valuable contribution which human and Christian service to those suffering makes to better understanding among people and, consequently, to building real peace.

Indeed, peace presupposes, as its preliminary condition, that special attention be reserved for the suffering and the sick by public authorities, national and international organizations, and every person of good will. This is valid, first of all, for developing countries — in Latin America, Africa and Asia — which are marked by serious deficiencies in health care. With the celebration of the World Day of the Sick, the Church is promoting a renewed commitment to those populations, seeking to wipe out the injustice existing today by devoting greater human, spiritual, and material resources to their needs.

A transcendent vision of man is needed

In this regard, I wish to address a special appeal to civil authorities, to people of science, and to all those who work in direct contact with the sick. May their service never become bureaucratic and aloof! Particularly, may it be quite clear to all that the administration of public money imposes the serious duty of avoiding its waste and improper use so that available resources, administered wisely and equitably, will serve to ensure prevention of disease and care during illness for all who need them.

The hopes which are so alive today for a humanization of medicine and health care require a more decisive response. To make health care more humane and adequate it is, however, essential to draw on a transcendent vision of man which stresses the value and sacredness of life in the sick person as the image and child of God. Illness and pain affect every human being: love for the suffering is the sign and measure of the degree of civilization and progress of a people.

5. To you, dear sick people all over the world, the main actors of this World Day, may this event bring the announcement of the living and comforting presence of the Lord. Your sufferings, accepted and borne with unshakeable faith, when joined to those of Christ take on extraordinary value for the life of the Church and the good of humanity.

For you, health-care workers called to the highest, most meritorious and exemplary testimony of justice and love, may this Day be a renewed spur to continue in your delicate service with generous openness to the profound values of the person, to respect for human dignity, and to defence of life, from its beginning to its natural close.

For you, Pastors of the Christian people, and to all the different members of the Church community, for volunteers, and particularly for those engaged in the health-care ministry, may this World Day of the Sick offer stimulus and encouragement to go forward with fresh dedication on the way of service to tried, suffering humanity.

6. On the commemoration of Our Lady of Lourdes, whose shrine at the foot of the Pyrenees has become a temple of human suffering, we approach — as she did on Calvary, where the cross of her Son rose up — the crosses of pain and solitude of so many brothers and sisters to bring them comfort, to share their suffering and present it to the Lord of life, in spiritual communion with the whole Church.

May the Blessed Virgin, "Health of the Sick" and "Mother of the Living", be our support and our hope and, through the celebration of the Day of the Sick, increase our sensitivity and dedication to those being tested, along with the trusting expectation of the luminous day of our salvation, when every tear will be dried forever (cf. Is 25:8). May it be granted to us to enjoy the first fruits of that day from now on in the superabundant joy — though in the midst of all tribulations (cf. 2 Cor 7:4) — promised by Christ which no one can take from us (Jn 16:22).

I extend my Blessing to all!

From the Vatican, 21 October 1992