



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO CUBA (JANUARY 21-26, 1998)

MEETING WITH THE SICK AND SUFFERING

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

Shrine of St Lazarus, El Rincón

Saturday 24 January 1998

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*¹ In visiting this noble land, I could not fail to meet with *the sick and suffering*, because *Christ is very close to all who suffer*. I greet you with the deepest affection, beloved who are sick, especially those from the nearby Hospital of Dr Guillermo Fernández-Baquero, here today in this Shrine of St Lazarus, the friend of the Lord. In greeting you, I also greet those throughout Cuba who are most afflicted, the elderly who are alone, all who are suffering in body or in spirit. In the words I speak and the affection I feel, I want to reach out to all who heed the Lord's exhortation: "I was sick and you visited me" (*Mt 25:34*). You are accompanied by the tender love of the Pope, the solidarity of the Church and the fraternal warmth of all men and women of goodwill. I greet the *Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul*, who work in this centre and in them I greet the other consecrated religious, belonging to various religious institutes, who work lovingly in other parts of this beautiful island to alleviate the sufferings of whoever is in need. The community of the Church is very grateful to you because this is your way of contributing to the concrete mission stemming from your particular charism — that "the Gospel come to life through charity, which is the glory of the Church and the sign of her fidelity to the Lord" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 82). I wish to greet also the *doctors, nurses and other assistants*, who with such competence and dedication use the resources of science to alleviate suffering and pain. The Church values your work because, stirred by the spirit of service and solidarity with your neighbour, it recalls the work of Jesus who "*cured the sick*" (*Mt 8:16*). I am aware of the great efforts being made in Cuba in the field of health care, despite the economic constraints which the country is enduring.² I come as a pilgrim of truth and hope to this Shrine of St Lazarus, as one who experiences in his own flesh the meaning and value which suffering can have when it is accepted by drawing near in trust to God who is "rich in mercy". This place is sacred to Cubans, because here grace is experienced by those who go in faith to Christ with the assurance we find in St Paul: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (*Phil 4:13*). At this point, we can repeat the words with which Martha, the sister of Lazarus, expressed her confidence to Jesus and so

obtained the miracle of the raising of her brother: *"I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him"* (Jn 11:22) and the profession she then made: *"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world"* (Jn 11:27).³ Dear brothers and sisters, in one form or another all human beings experience pain and suffering in their lives and this cannot but lead them to pose a question. *Pain is a mystery*, often inscrutable to reason. *It forms part of the mystery of the human person*, which alone comes clear in Jesus Christ who reveals to man man's true identity. Christ alone enables us to know the meaning of all that is human. "Suffering", as I wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, "can be transformed and changed with a grace which is not exterior but interior ... yet this interior process does not always develop in the same way.... Christ responds neither directly nor abstractly to human questioning about the meaning of suffering. Human beings come to know his saving response in so far as they share in the sufferings of Christ. The response which comes from this sharing is before all else a call. It is a vocation. Christ does not explain in some abstract way the reasons for suffering, but says first of all: 'Follow me', 'Come', *with your suffering share in this work of salvation of the world*, which is realized through my suffering, by means of my Cross" (n. 26). This is the true meaning and value of suffering, of the pain which is physical, moral and spiritual. This is the Good News which I wish to pass on to you. To our human questioning, the Lord responds with a call, with a special vocation which is grounded in love. Christ comes to us not with explanations and reasons which might either anaesthetize or alienate us. Instead, he comes to us saying: "Come with me. Follow me on the way of the Cross. The Cross is suffering". *"Whoever wants to be a follower of mine, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me"* (Lk 9:29). Jesus Christ has taken the lead on the way of the Cross. He has suffered first. He does not drive us towards suffering but shares it with us, wanting us to have life and to have it in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10). Suffering is transformed when we experience in ourselves the closeness and solidarity of the living God: *"I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last ... I shall see God my Saviour"* (Jb 19:25-26). With this assurance comes inner peace, and from this a spiritual joy, quiet and deep, springing from the "Gospel of suffering" which understands the grandeur and dignity of human beings who suffer with a generous spirit and offer their pain *"as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God"* (Rom 12:1). This is why those who suffer are no burden to others, but with their suffering contribute to the salvation of all. Suffering is not only physical. There is also suffering of the soul, such as we see in those who are isolated, persecuted, imprisoned for various offences or for reasons of conscience, for ideas which though dissident are nonetheless peaceful. These prisoners of conscience suffer an isolation and a penalty for something for which their own conscience does not condemn them. What they want is to participate actively in life with the opportunity to speak their mind with respect and tolerance. I encourage efforts to reinsert prisoners into society. This is a gesture of high humanity and a seed of reconciliation, a gesture which honours the authority promoting it and strengthens social harmony in the country. To all of you who are detained, to your families who suffer the pain of separation and long for your return, I send my heartfelt greeting, urging you not to succumb to pessimism or discouragement. Dear brothers and sisters, Cubans need this interior strength, the deep peace and joy which spring from the "Gospel of suffering". Let this be your generous offering so that Cuba "may see God face to face", that Cuba may walk in the light of his face towards the eternal and universal kingdom, that all Cubans, from the very depths of their being, may say: *"I know that my Redeemer lives"* (Jb 19:25-26). This Redeemer is none other than Jesus Christ our Lord.⁴ The Christian dimension of suffering reaches beyond its deeper meaning and its redemptive character. Pain is a call to love, which means that it ought to engender solidarity, self-giving, generosity in those who suffer and in those called to accompany and aid them in their distress. The parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:29ff.), which puts before us the Gospel of solidarity with our suffering neighbour, "has become one of the essential elements of moral culture and of universally human civilization" (*Salvifici doloris*, n. 29). In effect, Jesus in this parable teaches us that *our neighbour is anyone we meet on our way who is wounded and in need of help*. He must be helped in an appropriate way

in the evil that has befallen him, and we must care for him until he is fully recovered. Families, schools and other educational institutions, even if only for humanitarian motives, need to work perseveringly to awaken and refine this sensitivity to the suffering neighbour, whom the Samaritan of the Gospel symbolizes. The eloquence of the parable of the Good Samaritan, as of the entire Gospel, is in real terms this: human beings must feel personally called to *witness to love in the midst of suffering*. "Institutions are very important, indeed indispensable; but no institution can of itself substitute for the human heart, human understanding, human love, human initiative, when it is a question of going to meet the suffering of another" (ibid., n. 29). This is true of physical suffering, but it is even more true of the many kinds of moral suffering, and when it is primarily the soul that is suffering. This is why when persons suffer in their soul, or when the soul of a nation suffers, the pain must be a summons to solidarity, to justice, to the building of a civilization of truth and love. An eloquent sign of this will to love in the face of pain and death, in the face of imprisonment or isolation, in the face of enforced family separations or the emigration which divides families, would be for each social agency, each public institution, as well as every person who holds responsibility in the field of health care and care for the needy and the re-education of prisoners, to respect and ensure respect for the rights of the infirm, the marginalized, the detained and their families, indeed the rights of all who suffer. To this end, *pastoral work in the field of health care and prison ministry* must be given the opportunity to perform its mission of service to the infirm, the imprisoned and their families. Indifference in the face of human suffering, passivity before the causes of pain in the world, cosmetic remedies which lead to no deep healing of persons and peoples: these are grave sins of omission, in the face of which every person of goodwill must be converted and listen to the cry of those who suffer.⁵ Beloved brothers and sisters, in the anguished moments of our personal, family or social life, the words of Jesus help us in our trials: "*My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want*" (Mt 26:39). In faith, the poor who suffer encounter the strength of Christ who says to them through the mouth of St Paul: "*Your grace is enough for me*" (2 Cor 12:9). No suffering is lost, no pain is without significance. God takes it all to himself, just as he accepted the sacrifice of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. At the foot of the Cross, her arms cast wide and her heart pierced through, there stands our Mother, the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows and of Hope, who welcomes us in her motherly embrace, spreading grace and compassion. She is the sure way to Christ, who is our peace, our life, our resurrection. Mary, Mother of all who suffer, mercy for the dying, warming embrace for all who are disheartened: look upon your Cuban children who are passing through the difficult test of pain and show them Jesus, the blessed fruit of your womb! Amen.