



The Holy See

MEMORIAL OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES

18th WORLD DAY OF THE SICK

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Vatican Basilica

Thursday, 11 February 2010

(Video)

Images of the Celebration

Your Eminences,

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In their concise descriptions of Jesus' brief but intense public life, the Gospels testify that he proclaimed the word and healed the sick, a sign par excellence of the closeness of the Kingdom of Heaven. For example, Matthew wrote: "He went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people" (Mt 4: 23; cf. 9: 35). The Church, entrusted with the task of extending Christ's mission in time and space, cannot neglect these two essential tasks: evangelization and the care of the sick in body and in mind. Indeed, God wants to heal the whole of man and in the Gospel the healing of the body is a sign of the deeper recovery that is the forgiveness of sins (cf. Mk 2: 1-12). It is therefore not surprising that Mary, Mother and model of the Church, is invoked and venerated as "*Salus infirmorum* Health of the sick". As the first and perfect disciple of her Son, in guiding the Church on her journey she has always shown special solicitude for the suffering. Witness to this are the thousands of people who go to Marian shrines to invoke the Mother of Christ and find in her strength and relief. The Gospel account of the Visitation (cf. Lk 1: 39-56) shows us how, after the announcement of the Angel, the Virgin did not keep the gift she had received to herself but

immediately set out to go and help her elderly cousin Elizabeth, who was six months pregnant with John. In the support that Mary offered this relative who was experiencing a delicate condition such as pregnancy at an advanced age, we see prefigured the whole of the Church's action in support of life that is in need of care.

The [Pontifical Council for Health-Care Workers](#), established 25 years ago by Venerable Pope [John Paul II](#), is without any doubt a privileged expression of this solicitude. Our thoughts turn with gratitude to Cardinal Fiorenzo Angelini, the first President of the Dicastery and ever an enthusiastic animator of this area of the Church's activity; as well as to Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán who continued and developed this service until a few months ago. I then address my greeting with warm cordiality to the current President, Mons. Zygmunt Zimowski, who has taken on such a significant and important inheritance. I extend it to all the officials and personnel who in the past quarter century have collaborated laudably in this office of the Holy See. I also wish to greet the associations and bodies who see to the organization of the World Day of the Sick, in particular the Italian National Union for Transport of the Sick to Lourdes and International Shrines (UNITALSI) and the Opera Romana Pellegrinaggi. The most affectionate greeting of course, goes to you, dear sick people! Thank you for coming and thank you especially for your prayers, enriched by the offering of your efforts and your suffering. And I then address a greeting to the sick and the volunteers in Lourdes, Fatima, Czestochowa and at the other Marian shrines connected with us, and all those who are following us via radio or television, especially from clinics or from their own homes. May the Lord God who watches constantly over his children give them all comfort and consolation.

The Liturgy of the Word today presents two main themes: the first is Marian in character and links the Gospel and the First Reading, from the last chapter of the Book of Isaiah, as well as the Responsorial Psalm taken from the Judith's canticle of praise. The other theme, which we find in the passage from the Letter of James, is that of the Church's prayer for the sick and, in particular, the sacrament reserved for them. On the Memorial of the apparitions in Lourdes, where Mary chose to manifest her maternal solicitude for the sick, the Liturgy appropriately echoes the *Magnificat*, the canticle of the Virgin who exalts the wonders of God throughout salvation history: the humble and the poor, like all who fear God, experience his mercy which overturns earthly destinies, thus showing the holiness of the Creator and Redeemer. The *Magnificat* is not the canticle of one upon whom fortune smiles, who has always had "the wind in her sails"; rather it is the thanksgiving of one who knows the hardships of life but trusts in God's redemptive work. It is a hymn that expresses the faith tested by generations of men and women who placed their hope in God and were personally committed, like Mary, to helping their brothers and sisters in need. In the *Magnificat* we hear the voice of many Saints of charity; I am thinking in particular of those who spent their life among the sick and suffering, such as Camillus de Lellis and John of God, Damien de Veuster and Benedict Menni. Those who spend a long time beside the suffering know anguish and tears, but also the miracle of joy, the fruit of love.

The Church's motherhood is a reflection of God's tender love of which the Prophet Isaiah speaks: "As one whom his mother comforts, / so I will comfort you; / you shall be comforted in Jerusalem" (Is 66: 13). It is a motherhood that speaks without words, that awakens in hearts consolation, deep joy, a joy that paradoxically lives side by side with pain, with suffering. The Church, like Mary, preserves within her the tragedies of humankind and the consolation of God, she keeps them together on the pilgrimage through history. The Church down the centuries has shown the signs of the love of God who continues to work great things in humble and simple people. Suffering, when accepted and offered up, and solidarity, when sincere and selfless: are these not perhaps miracles of love? Is not the courage to face evil unarmed like Judith with the power of faith and hope in the Lord alone a miracle that God's grace continuously inspires in so many people who spend their time and energy helping those who are suffering? For all these reasons we live a joy that does not forget suffering but rather understands it. In this manner the sick and the suffering in the Church are not only recipients of care and attention, but first and foremost they are protagonists of the pilgrimage of faith and hope, witnesses of the wonders of love, of the Paschal joy that blossoms from Christ's Cross and Resurrection.

In the passage of the Letter of James that was just read, the Apostle asks that the coming of the Lord, now at hand, be steadfastly awaited. In this context he addresses a special exhortation concerning the sick. This placement is very interesting because it reflects the action of Jesus who, in healing the sick, demonstrated the closeness of the Kingdom of God. Illness is seen in the perspective of the last times with the realism of hope that is characteristically Christian: "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise" (Jas 5: 13). Listening to these words seems similar to listening to those of St Paul, when he invites the Corinthians to live all things in relation to the radical newness of Christ, his death and his Resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 7: 29-31). "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man" (Jas 5: 14-15). Here the extension of Christ in his Church becomes clear: it is he who acts through the presbyter; it is his same Spirit who works through the sacramental sign of the oil; it is to him that faith expressed in prayer is addressed. And, as happened to the people healed by Jesus, one might say to every sick person: your faith, sustained by the faith of your brothers and sisters, has saved you.

At the same time this text, which contains the foundation and the praxis of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, also inspired a vision of the role of the sick in the Church an active role in "provoking", so to speak, faithful prayer. "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders". In this [Year for Priests](#), I am pleased to emphasize the bond between the sick and priests, a sort of covenant of evangelical "complicity". Both have a task: the sick must "call" priests and priests must respond, to draw the presence and action of the Risen One and of his Spirit into the experience of illness. And here we can see the full importance of the pastoral care of the sick. Its value is truly incalculable because of the immense good it does, first of all to the sick person and to the priest himself and then also to relatives, acquaintances, the community and, in unknown and mysterious

ways, to the whole of the Church and of the world. In fact, when the word of God speaks of the healing, salvation and health of the sick person, it means these concepts in an integral sense, never separating soul and body. A sick person healed by Christ's prayer through the Church is a joy on earth and in Heaven, a foretaste of eternal life.

Dear friends, as I wrote in my Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, "The true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer" (n. 38). In setting up a Dicastery dedicated to the pastoral health care, the Holy See also wished to make its own contribution to promoting a world that is better able to accept and heal the sick as people. It wanted, in fact, to help them live the experience of sickness in a human way, not by denying it but by offering it meaning. I would like to end these reflections with a thought from Venerable Pope *John Paul II*, to which he witnessed with his own life. In his Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, he wrote: "At one and the same time Christ has taught man *to do good by his suffering* and *to do good to those who suffer*. In this double aspect he has completely revealed the meaning of suffering" (n. 30). May the Virgin Mary help us live this mission to the full.

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