



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS

BENEDICT XVI

FOR THE SIXTEENTH WORLD DAY OF THE SICK

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. On 11 February, Memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Lourdes, the World Day of the Sick will be celebrated, a propitious occasion to reflect on the meaning of pain and the Christian duty to take responsibility for it in whatever situation it arises. This year this significant day is connected to two important events for the life of the Church, as one already understands from the theme chosen, "*The Eucharist, Lourdes and Pastoral Care for the Sick*": the 150th anniversary of the apparitions of the Immaculate Mary at Lourdes, and the celebration of the [International Eucharistic Congress at Quebec in Canada](#). In this way, a remarkable opportunity to consider the close connection that exists between the Mystery of the Eucharist, the role of Mary in the project of salvation, and the reality of human pain and suffering is offered to us.

The 150 years since the apparitions of Lourdes invite us to turn our gaze towards the Holy Virgin, whose Immaculate Conception constitutes the sublime and freely-given gift of God to a woman so that she could fully adhere to divine designs with a steady and unshakable faith, despite the tribulations and the sufferings that she would have to face. For this reason, Mary is a model of total self-abandonment to God's will: she received in her heart the eternal Word and she conceived it in her virginal womb; she trusted in God and, with her soul pierced by a sword (cf. Lk 2: 35), she did not hesitate to share the Passion of her Son, renewing on Calvary at the foot of the Cross her "yes" of the Annunciation. To reflect upon the Immaculate Conception of Mary is thus to allow oneself to be attracted by the "yes" which joined her wonderfully to the mission of Christ, Redeemer of humanity; it is to allow oneself to be taken and led by her hand to pronounce in one's turn "*fiat*" to the will of God, with all one's existence interwoven with joys and sadness, hopes and disappointments, in the awareness that tribulations, pain and suffering make rich the meaning of our pilgrimage on the earth.

2. One cannot contemplate Mary without being attracted by Christ and one cannot look at Christ

without immediately perceiving the presence of Mary. There is an indissoluble link between the Mother and the Son generated in her womb by the work of the Holy Spirit, and this link we perceive in a mysterious way in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, as the Fathers of the Church and theologians have pointed out from the early centuries onwards. "The flesh born of Mary, coming from the Holy Spirit, is bread descended from heaven", observed St Hilary of Poitiers. In the Bergomensium Sacramentary of the ninth century we read: "Her womb made flower a fruit, a bread that has filled us with an angelic gift. Mary restored to salvation what Eve had destroyed by her sin". And St Peter Damiani observed: "That body that the Most Blessed Virgin generated, nourished in her womb with maternal care, that body, I say, without doubt and no other, we now receive from the sacred altar, and we drink its blood as a sacrament of our redemption. This is what the Catholic faith believes, this the holy Church faithfully teaches". The link of the Holy Virgin with the Son, the sacrificial Lamb who takes away the sins of the world, is extended to the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. Mary, observes the Servant of God John Paul II, is a "woman of the Eucharist" in her whole life, as a result of which the Church, seeing Mary as her model, "is also called to imitate her in her relationship with this most holy mystery" (Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 53). In this perspective one understands even further why in Lourdes the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary is joined to a strong and constant reference to the Eucharist with daily celebrations of the Eucharist, with adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament and with the blessing of the sick, which constitutes one of the strongest moments of the visit of pilgrims to the grotto of Massabielle.

The presence of many sick pilgrims at Lourdes, and of the volunteers who accompany them, helps us to reflect on the maternal and tender care that the Virgin expresses towards human pain and suffering. Associated with the Sacrifice of Christ, Mary, *Mater Dolorosa*, who at the foot of the Cross suffers with her divine Son, is felt to be especially near by the Christian community, which gathers around its suffering members who bear the signs of the passion of the Lord. Mary suffers with those who are in affliction, with them she hopes, and she is their comfort, supporting them with her maternal help. And is it not perhaps true that the spiritual experience of very many sick people leads us to understand increasingly that "the Divine Redeemer wishes to penetrate the soul of every sufferer through the heart of his holy Mother, the first and the most exalted of all the redeemed"? (John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, n. 26).

3. If Lourdes leads us to reflect upon the maternal love of the Immaculate Virgin for her sick and suffering children, the next International Eucharistic Congress will be an opportunity to worship Jesus Christ present in the Sacrament of the Altar, to entrust ourselves to him as Hope that does not disappoint, to receive him as that medicine of immortality which heals the body and the spirit. Jesus Christ redeemed the world through his suffering, death and Resurrection, and he wanted to remain with us as the "bread of life" on our earthly pilgrimage. "*The Eucharist, Gift of God for the Life of the World*": this is the theme of the Eucharistic Congress and it emphasises how the Eucharist is the gift that the Father makes to the world of his Only Son, incarnated and crucified. It is he who gathers us around the Eucharistic table, provoking in his disciples loving care for the

suffering and the sick, in whom the Christian community recognises the Face of its Lord. As I pointed out in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*: "Our communities, when they celebrate the Eucharist, must become ever more conscious that the sacrifice of Christ is for all, and that the Eucharist thus compels all who believe in him to become "bread that is broken' for others" (n. 88). We are thus encouraged to commit ourselves in the first person to helping our brethren, especially those in difficulty, because the vocation of every Christian is truly that of being, together with Jesus, bread that is broken for the life of the world.

4. It thus appears clear that it is specifically from the Eucharist that pastoral care in health must draw the necessary spiritual strength to come effectively to man's aid and to help him to understand the salvific value of his own suffering. As the Servant of God John Paul II would write in the already quoted Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, the Church sees in her suffering brothers and sisters as it were a multiple subject of the supernatural power of Christ (cf. n. 27). Mysteriously united to Christ, the one who suffers with love and meek self-abandonment to the will of God becomes a living offering for the salvation of the world. My beloved Predecessor also stated that: "The more a person is threatened by sin, the heavier the structures of sin which today's world brings with it, the greater is the eloquence which human suffering possesses in itself. And the more the Church feels the need to have recourse to the value of human sufferings for the salvation of the world" (*ibid.*). If, therefore, at Quebec the mystery of the Eucharist, the gift of God for the life of the world, is contemplated during the World Day of the Sick in an ideal spiritual parallelism, not only will the actual participation of human suffering in the salvific work of God be celebrated, but the valuable fruits promised to those who believe can in a certain sense be enjoyed. Thus, pain, received with faith, becomes the door by which to enter the mystery of the redemptive suffering of Jesus and to reach with him the peace and happiness of his Resurrection.

While I extend my cordial greetings to all sick people and to all those who take care of them in various ways, I invite the diocesan and parish communities to celebrate this coming World Day of the Sick by appreciating to the full the happy coinciding of the 150th anniversary of the apparitions of Our Lady at Lourdes with the International Eucharistic Congress. May it be an occasion to emphasise the importance of the Holy Mass, of adoration of the Eucharist and of the cult of the Eucharist, so that chapels in our health-care centres become a beating heart in which Jesus offers himself unceasingly to the Father for the life of humanity! The distribution of the Eucharist to the sick as well, done with decorum and in a spirit of prayer, is true comfort for those who suffer, afflicted by all forms of infirmity.

May the next World Day of the Sick be in addition a propitious occasion to invoke in a special way the maternal protection of Mary over those who are weighed down by illness, on health-care workers and workers in pastoral health care! I think in particular of priests involved in this field, women and men religious, volunteers and all those who with active dedication are concerned to serve in body and soul the sick and those in need. I entrust all to Mary, Mother of God and our Mother, the Immaculate Conception. May she help everyone in testifying that the only valid

response to human pain and suffering is Christ, who by rising defeated death and gave us life that knows no end. With these feelings, from my heart I impart to everyone my special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 11 January 2008

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