



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
FOR THE 12th WORLD DAY OF THE SICK
(SHRINE OF LOURDES, FRANCE, FEBRUARY 11, 2004)**

To my Venerable Brother

Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán

*President of the Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care*¹. 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. This Shrine was chosen because in 2004 is the 150th Anniversary of the proclamation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. It was on 8 December 1854 with the Dogmatic Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* that my Predecessor, Bl. Pius IX of happy memory, affirmed that "the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God" (*DS*, 2803). At Lourdes, speaking in the native dialect, Mary said: "*Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou*" [I am the Immaculate Conception].² With these words, did not the Blessed Virgin wish to express the link that unites her to health and to life? If death entered the world because of original sin, by the merits of Jesus Christ, God preserved Mary free from every stain of sin, and salvation and life came to us (cf. Rom 5: 12-21). The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception introduces us into the heart of the mystery of Creation and Redemption (cf. Eph 1: 4-12; 3: 9-11). God wanted to give life in abundance to the human creature (cf. Jn 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. Rom 5: 19). Entire humanity was heavily involved in this closure towards God. In view of Christ's merits, only Mary of Nazareth was conceived without original sin and was completely open to the divine design so that the Heavenly Father was able to accomplish in her the project that he had for mankind. The Immaculate Conception introduces the harmonious interlacing between the "yes" of God and the "yes" that Mary pronounced without reserve when the angel brought the heavenly announcement (cf. Lk 1: 38). Her "yes" in the name of humanity re-opened the doors of Heaven to the world, thanks to the Incarnation of the Word of God in her womb by the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 1: 35). In this way, the original project of creation was restored and strengthened in Christ; the Virgin Mother also shares in this project.³ The keystone of history lies here: with the Immaculate Conception of Mary began the great work of Redemption that was brought to

fulfilment in the precious blood of Christ. In him, every person is called to achieve the perfection of holiness (cf. Col 1: 28). The Immaculate Conception is, therefore, the promising dawn of the radiant day of Christ, who with his death and Resurrection was to restore full harmony between God and humanity. If Jesus is the source of life that conquers death, Mary is the attentive mother who comes to meet the needs of her children, obtaining for them the health of soul and body. This is the message that the Shrine of Lourdes constantly re-proposes to the devout and to pilgrims. This is also the meaning behind the healings of body and spirit that take place at the grotto of Massabielle. On that 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.

4. 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. n. 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" (II Cor 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?" (Mt 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" (Col 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 splendour of the Resurrection.

5. At the foot of the Cross Mary, made Mother of humanity, suffers in silence, participating in her Son's suffering, ready to intercede so that every person may obtain salvation (cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* [11 February 1984], n. 25; ORE, 20 February 1984, p. 6). At Lourdes, it is not difficult to understand Mary's unique participation in the salvific role of Christ. The prodigy of the Immaculate Conception reminds believers of a fundamental truth: it is possible to reach salvation only through docile participation in the project of the Father, who wanted to redeem the world through the death and Resurrection of his only-begotten Son. Through Baptism, the believer becomes part of this design of salvation and is freed from original sin. Sickness and death, although present in earthly existence, lose their negative sense, and in the light of faith, corporal death, overcome by Christ's death (cf. Rom 6: 4), becomes the required passage for entering the fullness of immortal life.

6. In our time, great progress has been made in the scientific understanding of life, a fundamental gift of God of which we are the administrators. Life is to be welcomed, respected and defended from its beginning until its natural end; the family, cradle of each newborn life, must be protected with it. Today, "genetic engineering" is spoken of, referring to the extraordinary possibility that modern science offers to intervene in the very sources of life. Every authentic progress in this field is to be encouraged, provided that it always respects the rights and dignity of the person from his or her conception. Indeed, no one can claim the right to destroy or indiscriminately manipulate the life of the human being. A specific duty of workers in the field of Health Pastoral Care is to sensitize those

who work in this delicate sector so that they always engage to put themselves at the service of life. On the occasion of the World Day of the Sick I wish to thank all of the members of Health Pastoral Care, especially the Bishops from the different Episcopal Conferences who help in this sector; the chaplains, parish priests and the other priests who are engaged in this field; the religious orders and congregations; volunteers and those who do not tire of offering a consistent witness to the death and Resurrection of the Lord in the face of suffering, pain and death. I would like to extend my gratitude to health-care workers, medical and paramedical personnel, researchers - especially those dedicated to discovering new treatments - and to those employed in the production of medicines to be made available also to the poor. I entrust all of you to the Most Holy Virgin, venerated at the Shrine of Lourdes as the Immaculate Conception. May she help every Christian to witness that the only authentic answer to pain, suffering and death is Christ our Lord, who died and rose for us. With these sentiments, I willingly send to you, Venerable Brother, and to those participating in the celebration of the World Day of the Sick, a special Apostolic Blessing. *From the Vatican, 1 December 2003* **JOHN PAUL II**
