



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER FOR THE SIXTH WORLD DAY OF THE SICK

February 11, 1998

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

1. The celebration of the next *World Day of the Sick*, on February 11, 1998, will take place at the Sanctuary of Loreto. The place chosen, recalling the moment when the Word became flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the work of the Holy Spirit, invites us to set our gaze upon the mystery of the Incarnation.

On my repeated pilgrimages to this "first Sanctuary of an international scope dedicated to the Virgin and, for a number of centuries, the true Marian heart of Christendom" (*Letter to the Most Rev. Pasquale Macchi*, Pontifical Delegate for the Sanctuary of Loreto, August 15, 1993), I have always felt the special closeness of the sick who come here trustfully in great numbers. "Moreover, where could they be better received, if not in the house of Her whom the 'Loreto litanies' themselves bring us to invoke as the 'health of the sick' and the 'consoler of the afflicted'?" (*Ibid.*)

The choice of Loreto, therefore, harmonizes well with the long tradition of the Church's loving attention to those suffering in body and in spirit. It will not fail to enliven the prayer which the faithful, trusting in Mary's intercession, offer up to the Lord for the sick. This important occasion also gives the Church community the opportunity to pause in devout recollection before the Holy House, the *icon* of such a basic event and mystery as is the Incarnation of the Word, to receive the light and strength of the Spirit, who transforms man's heart into a *dwelling of hope*.

2. "*And the Word became flesh*" (*Jn 1:14*). In the Sanctuary of Loreto, more than elsewhere, it is possible to sense the profound meaning of these words of John the Evangelist. Within the walls of the Holy House, in an especially forceful manner Jesus Christ, "God with us," speaks to us of the Father's love (cf. *Jn 3:16*), which in the redemptive Incarnation was manifested in the loftiest way.

God Himself, in search of man, became man, building a bridge between divine transcendence and the human condition. "Though divine in nature, he did not regard his equality with God as a treasure to be grasped, but stripped himself. . . , becoming obedient unto death, and death on a cross" (*Ph 2:6-8*). Christ did not come to remove our afflictions, but to share in them and, in taking them on, to confer upon them a salvific value: by becoming a partaker in the human condition, with its limits and its sorrows, He redeemed it. The salvation accomplished by Him, already prefigured in the healings of the sick, opens up *horizons of hope* for all who find themselves in the difficult time of suffering.

3. "*By the work of the Holy Spirit.*" The mystery of the Incarnation is the work of the Spirit, who in the Trinity is "the love-Person, the uncreated gift. . . , the eternal source of every favor proceeding from God in the order of creation, the direct principle and, in a certain sense, the subject of God's self-communication in the order of grace" (Encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 50). 1998 is dedicated to Him, the second year of immediate preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000.

Poured forth into our hearts, the Holy Spirit brings us to perceive ineffably the "nearby God" revealed to us by Christ: "And your being children is proven by the fact that God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of his Son, who cries out, 'Abba, Father'" (*Ga 4:6*). He is the true *guardian of the hope* of all human creatures, and especially of those who "possess the first fruits of the Spirit" and "await the redemption of their bodies" (cf. *Rm 8:23*). In man's heart the Holy Spirit, as the liturgical Sequence for the Solemnity of Pentecost proclaims, becomes the true "father of the poor, giver of gifts," and "light of hearts"; He becomes the "sweet guest of the soul" who brings "repose" in weariness, "shelter" in the "heat" of the day, and "comfort" in the midst of the preoccupations, struggles, and dangers in every period. It is the Spirit who gives the human heart the strength to face difficult situations and overcome them.

4. "*In the womb of the Virgin Mary.*" When we contemplate the walls of the Holy House, we seem to be hearing still the echo of the words with which the Mother of the Lord gave her assent and her cooperation to God's salvific project: *ecce*, generous abandonment; *fiat*, trusting submission. Having become *pure capacity for God*, Mary made her life constant cooperation with the saving work carried out by her Son, Jesus.

In this second year of preparation for the Jubilee, Mary must be contemplated and imitated "above all, as the woman docile to the voice of the Spirit, the woman of silence and listening, the *woman of hope*, who, like Abraham, was able to accept God's will, 'hoping against all hope' (*Rm 4:18*)" (Apostolic Exhortation *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 48). On declaring Herself to be the *servant of the Lord*, Mary knew She was also placing Herself at the service of his love for men. By her example, She helps us to understand that the unconditional acceptance of God's sovereignty places man in an attitude of complete openness. In this way, the Virgin becomes the icon of watchful attention and compassion towards those suffering. Significantly, after having generously listened to the Angel's message, She went in haste to serve Elizabeth. Later on, in the

embarrassing situation of the spouses at Cana She would grasp the appeal to intervene to assist them, thus becoming an eloquent reflection of God's provident love. The Virgin's *service* was manifested to a maximum degree in her sharing in the suffering and death of her Son when, at the foot of the cross, She accepted her mission as Mother of the Church.

In looking at Her, the *Health of the Sick*, many Christians over the course of the centuries have learned to robe their care of the sick in maternal tenderness.

5. The contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation, evoked with such immediacy by the House in Loreto, enlivens faith in the saving work of God, who in Christ has freed man from sin and death and opened his heart to hope in the new heavens and the new earth (cf. *2 P* 3:13). In a world lacerated by sufferings, contradictions, selfishness, and violence, the believer lives in the awareness that "all creation moans and suffers until the present in birth pangs" (*Rm* 8:22) and takes on the commitment to be a witness to the Risen Christ in word and deed.

For this reason, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, I invited believers to value "the signs of hope present at the close of this century, in spite of the shadows often concealing them from our sight," and to reserve special attention for the "progress made by science, technology, and, above all, medicine in service to human life" (no. 46). The successes achieved in overcoming diseases and relieving sufferings must not, however, lead us to forget the numerous situations in which the centrality and dignity of the human person are ignored and trampled upon, as occurs when health care is regarded in terms of profit and not as generous service, when the family is left alone in the face of health problems, or when the weakest groups in society are forced to endure the consequences of unjust neglect and discrimination.

On the occasion of this *World Day of the Sick*, I wish to exhort the Church community to renew its commitment to transforming human society into a "*house of hope*," in collaboration with all believers and man of good will.

6. This commitment requires that the *Church community* live out communion: only where men and women, through listening to the Word, prayer, and celebration of the sacraments, become "one single heart and one single soul" do fraternal solidarity and the sharing of goods grow, and what St. Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth of becomes a reality: "If one member suffers, all the members suffer together" (*1 Co* 12:26).

As she prepares for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the Church is called to intensify her efforts to translate the communion suggested by the Apostle's words into concrete projects. Dioceses, parishes, and all communities in the Church should devote themselves to presenting the subjects of health and illness in the light of the Gospel; encourage the advancement and defense of life and the dignity of the human person, from conception until natural death; and make the preferential option for the poor and the marginalized concrete and visible—as regards the latter, the victims of

the new social maladies, the disabled, the chronically ill, the dying, and those who are forced by political and social disorder to leave their land and live in precarious or even inhuman conditions should be surrounded with loving attention.

Communities able to live out an authentic Gospel *diakonia* by seeing "their Lord and Master" in the poor and the sick constitute a bold announcement of the resurrection and contribute to effectively renewing hope "in the definitive coming of the Kingdom of God."

7. Dear *people who are ill*, a special place is reserved for you in the Church community. The condition of suffering in which you live and the wish to recover health make you particularly sensitive to the value of hope. To the intercession of Mary I entrust your aspiration to bodily and spiritual well-being, and I exhort you to enlighten and elevate it with the theological virtue of *hope*, a gift of Christ.

It will help you to give a new meaning to suffering, transforming it into a *way of salvation*, an occasion for evangelization and redemption. Indeed, "suffering can also have a positive meaning for man and for society itself, called as it is to become a form of sharing in the salvific suffering of Christ and in his joy as the risen one and, therefore, a power for sanctification and the upbuilding of the Church" (*Christifideles Laici*, 54; cf. Encyclical *Salvifici Doloris*, 23). Your experience of pain, modeled on Christ's and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, will proclaim the victorious power of the Resurrection.

8. The contemplation of the Holy House naturally leads us to dwell upon the *Family of Nazareth*, where trials were not lacking: in a liturgical hymn it is described as "experienced in suffering" (*Roman Breviary*, Office of Readings for the Solemnity of the Holy Family). That "holy and sweet dwelling" (*ibid.*) was, however, also rendered joyful by the most transparent joy.

My wish is that from that home the gift of serenity and trust may reach every human family wounded by suffering. While inviting the ecclesiastical and civil community to assume responsibility for the difficult situations in which many families find themselves, under the burden imposed by the illness of a relative, I remind you that the Lord's command to visit the sick is addressed first of all to the relatives of the ill. When carried out in a spirit of loving self-donation and supported by faith, prayer, and the sacraments, the care of sick relatives can be transformed into an irreplaceable therapeutic instrument for the ill and become an occasion for everyone to discover precious human and spiritual values.

9. In this context, my thoughts turn particularly to *health care and pastoral workers*, both professionals and volunteers, who continuously live in proximity to the needs of the sick. I wish to exhort them always to maintain a lofty conception of the task entrusted to them, without letting themselves be overcome by difficulties and incomprehension. To dedicate oneself to the world of health care does not mean only to combat evil, but, above all, to promote the quality of human life.

Moreover, the Christian, in the awareness that "the glory of God is living man," honors God in the human body, both under the captivating aspects of strength, vitality, and beauty and under those of fragility and decline. He always proclaims the transcendent value of the human person, whose dignity remains intact even in the experience of pain, illness, and aging. Thanks to faith in Christ's victory over death, he trustingly awaits the moment when the Lord "will transfigure our mortal body to conform it to his glorious body, by virtue of the power he has to subject all things to himself" (*Ph* 3:21).

Unlike those who "lack hope" (cf. *1 Th* 4:13), the believer knows that the time of suffering represents an occasion for new life, grace, and resurrection. He expresses this certainty through therapeutic dedication, a capacity for accepting and accompanying, and sharing in the life of Christ communicated in prayer and the sacraments. To take care of the sick and dying, to help the *outward man* that is decaying so that the *inward man* may be renewed day by day (cf. *2 Co* 4:16)—is this not to cooperate in that *process of resurrection* which the Lord has introduced into human history with the paschal mystery and which will be fully consummated at the end of time? Is this not to account for the hope (cf. *1 P* 3:15) which has been given to us? In every tear which is dried there is already an announcement of the last times, a foretaste of the final plenitude (cf. *Rv* 21:4 and *Is* 25:8).

Aware of this, the Christian community strives to care for the sick and promote the quality of life, cooperating with all men of good will. It performs this delicate mission in service to man, both in respectful, but firm discussion with the forces manifesting different moral views and by a positive contribution to legislation on the environment, support for equitable distribution of health resources, and the promotion of greater solidarity between rich and poor peoples (cf. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 46).

10. To Mary, Consoler of the afflicted, I entrust those who suffer in body and in spirit, together with health workers and all who generously devote themselves to care of the sick.

To You, Virgin of Loreto, we trustfully turn our gaze.

We ask You, "our life, our sweetness, *our hope*," for the grace to be able to await the dawn of the third millennium with the same sentiments which throbbed in your heart as you awaited the birth of your Son, Jesus.

May your protection free us from pessimism, causing us to glimpse, in the midst of the shadows of our time, the luminous traces of the Lord's presence.

To your tenderness as a mother we entrust the tears, sighs, and hopes of the sick. May the balm of consolation and hope beneficently descend upon their wounds. May their pain, united to Jesus', be transformed into an instrument of redemption.

May your example lead us to turn our existence into continuous praise of God's love. Make us attentive to the needs of others, solicitous in bringing aid to those suffering, and capable of accompanying those who are alone, and make us builders of hope where man's dramas are being consummated.

At every stage of our way, with a mother's affection show us "your Son, Jesus, O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary."

Amen.

From the Vatican, June 29, 1997, Solemnity of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul.