



# The Holy See

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APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO NIGERIA, BENIN  
GABON AND EQUATORIAL GUINEA

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE SICK AND THE OLD  
GATHERED IN SAINT CHARLES BORROMEO HOSPITAL**

*Onitsha (Nigeria)*

*Saturday, 13 February 1982*

*Dear friends,*

I am happy to be with you this afternoon, you, the sick and the old. You are precious in the eyes of God. Your lives have a deep meaning for society and for me. -My joy is all the greater because I am meeting you in this famous hospital called after Saint Charles Borromeo, whose name was given to me by my parents at Baptism. My predecessor Paul VI visited this place in 1962 when it was at the building stage, and he contributed to its construction. I can see the loving gesture of the Church in Onitsha in naming this hospital after Saint Charles Borromeo, the apostle of Milan and the patron of your first Archbishop of Onitsha, Charles Heerey, C. S. Sp., who departed this life in 1967.

1. As long as we are on our earthly pilgrimage, suffering and sickness will exist. They are a part of our human condition, and ultimately they are the results of original sin, but they are not necessarily the fault of the individual. There are many people of different ages who suffer through no fault of their own. Children, in particular, are vulnerable to suffering, often caused by the thoughtlessness or negligence of adults. The reality of sickness and malnutrition in the lives of millions of children is a fact that calls for attention and action. And the condition of the retarded child makes us think about the very meaning of human life. Old age too brings its own difficulties and physical weakness.

2. Although God allows suffering to exist in the world, he does not enjoy it. Indeed, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, loved the sick; he devoted a great part of his earthly ministry to healing the sick and comforting the afflicted. Our God is a God of compassion and consolation.

And he expects us to take the ordinary means to prevent, relieve and remove suffering and sickness. Therefore we have preventive health care programmes; we have doctors, nurses, paramedicals and medical institutions of many kinds. Medical science has made much progress.

We should take advantage of all this.

3. But even after all these efforts, suffering and sickness still exist. A Christian sees meaning in suffering. He bears such suffering with patience, love of God, and generosity. He offers it all to God, through Christ, especially during the Sacrifice of the Mass. When the sick person receives Holy Communion he unites himself with Christ the Victim. When suffering is associated with Christ's Passion and redemptive death, then it has great value for the individual, for the Church and for society. This is the meaning of those wonderful words of Saint Paul on which we must meditate over and over again: "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".

I also know personally what it means to be sick and to stay in hospital for a long time, and how it is possible to comfort and support others who share the same lot of confinement and suffering, and how necessary it is to pray for the sick and to show them one's loving concern. In this connection, I am happy to note that you have in this hospital a beautiful chapel with the Blessed Sacrament reserved, and that there is a resident chaplain. Jesus himself wants to be your consolation and strength, through his Eucharistic presence and through the ministry of his priests.

4. You who are advanced in age are senior citizens. You have borne the heat of the day in life's struggle and have gathered much knowledge, wisdom and experience. Please share these generously with the younger generation. You have something very important to offer to the world; and your contribution is purified and enriched through the patience and love that are yours, when you are united with Christ. Old age slows down the body and brings weakness and sometimes sickness. Our response includes medical attention and Christian patience. In union with Christ you are called to thank God the Father for having given you human life and for having called you to live both in this world and for ever in union with Christ.

5. In Nigeria you have the beautiful cultural value of the extended family system. The sick and the old are not abandoned by their children, their nephews and nieces, their cousins or other kindred.

The wide umbrella of charity has a roof for all. This is a precious heritage that must be maintained.

This ideal is under pressure, especially in the cities and towns, where the old are sometimes cut off from the extended family. The abandonment and solitude of the old results when a great cultural value has been taken away and has been replaced by something totally un-African.

6. To the doctors, the nurses, the paramedicals and all others who care for the sick in Nigeria, not forgetting the various medical and nursing councils, professional and administrative, I express my esteem and gratitude. Your humanitarian concern is worthy of great praise. Your Christian charity merits everlasting life. Jesus himself made concern for the sick something on which our judgment and eternal reward depend: "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom

prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for... I was sick and you visited me”.

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