



The Holy See

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

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

1. The next World Day of the Sick, 11 February 1999, according to what is becoming an established tradition, will have its most solemn celebration at an important Marian shrine.

Because of circumstances of time and place, the choice of the shrine of Our Lady of Harissa, on the hill overlooking Beirut, will acquire a rich and varied meaning. The land that hosts this shrine is Lebanon, which, as I have already had occasion to point out, "is more than a country: it is a message of freedom and an example of pluralism for East and West" (Rome, 7 September 1989, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XII/2, p. 176.)

From the shrine of Harissa, the watchful statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary looks out over the Mediterranean coast, so close to the land where Jesus went "preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people" (*Mt* 4:23). Nearby is the region which preserves the bodies of the martyrs Cosmas and Damian, who, in accepting Christ's command to "preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick" (*Lk* 9:2), did so with such generosity that they earned the title of the *holy moneyless doctors*: in fact, they practised medicine without pay.

In the preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, 1999 will be dedicated to a more attentive reflection on God the Father. In his First Letter, the Apostle John reminds us that "God is love" (1 *Jn* 4:8, 16). How could reflection on this mystery not intensify the theological virtue of charity, in its twofold reality as love of God and neighbour?

2. In this perspective, as we approach the end of the second millennium of the Christian era, the Church's preferential option for the poor and for those who are suffering in body and soul will assume the nature of a "journey of authentic conversion" to the Gospel. This will certainly lead to a

growing quest for unity among all men and women, in order to build the civilization of love (cf. Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, nn. 50-52), under the sign of the Mother of Jesus, “the perfect model of love towards both God and neighbour” (*ibid.*, n. 54).

Today, what place on earth could be better than Lebanon to symbolize unity among Christians and the encounter for all human beings in the communion of love? Lebanon, in addition to being a place where Catholic communities of different traditions and various Christian communities live in harmony, is also the crossroads of many religions. As such, it is well suited to serve as a laboratory “for building together a future of coexistence and co-operation in view of the human and moral growth” of peoples (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *A New Hope for Lebanon*, n. 93).

The World Day of the Sick, whose meeting point will be in Lebanon, invites the universal Church to ask herself about her service towards that condition which, by highlighting more than any other the limitations and frailty of human creatures, also calls for their mutual solidarity. The Day thus becomes an important time to think of the Father and a necessary reminder of the primary commandment of love, for our observance of which we will all be called to give an account (cf. *Mt* 25:31-46). The model to inspire us was indicated by Jesus himself in the figure of the Good Samaritan, the keyword for fully understanding the commandment to love our neighbour (cf. *Lk* 10:25-37).

3. The next World Day of the Sick, then, must be characterized by a heightened awareness of the duty of charity, which will not fail to be emphasized by the gathering for reflection, study and prayer at the shrine of Our Lady of Harissa — a pilgrimage destination for all the Lebanese Christian communities of the various Churches, as well as for devout Muslims. The need for unity will be increased by that “*ecumenism of works*”, which, in caring for the sick, the suffering, the marginalized, the poor and the destitute, is the most urgent and, at the same time, least arduous form of ecumenism, as experience now shows. On this journey it will be possible not only to seek “*full unity*” among those who profess to be Christian, but also to be open to interreligious dialogue in a place like Lebanon, where different religious beliefs “have in common a certain number of indisputable human and spiritual values”, which can also spur people, “beyond the important differences between the religions”, to discern first and foremost what unites them (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *A New Hope for Lebanon*, nn. 13-14).

4. No petition rises from the human heart with greater intensity than the request for health and salvation. Thus it should come as no surprise that human solidarity at all levels is an urgent priority that can and must be fostered in the field of health. It is therefore urgently necessary “to make a serious and thorough study of the organization of health-care services in the institutions, with a concern to make them places for giving ever greater witness of love for mankind” (*ibid.*, n. 102).

In turn, the response expected by those who suffer should be adapted to the recipient's condition, who longs above all for the gift of sympathetic understanding, supportive love and generous

dedication to the point of heroism.

May contemplation of the mystery of God's fatherhood give hope to the sick and become a school of loving concern for those who care for them.

5. To the *sick* of every age and condition, to the victims of every kind of infirmity, disaster and tragedy, I extend my invitation to throw themselves into God's fatherly arms. We know that life is a gift given to us by the Father as a sublime expression of his love, and that it continues to be a gift from him in every circumstance. All our most responsible choices, whose objective, because of our limitations, can sometimes seem obscure and uncertain, must be guided by this conviction. The psalmist's invitation is based on it: "*Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved*" (Ps 55 [54]:22).

Commenting on these words, St Augustine wrote: "What will you worry about? What will you be anxious for? He who made you will take care of you. Will he who took care of you before you came into being not take care of you now, when you are what he wanted you to be? Because now you are a believer; you are walking on the way of justice. Will he, then, who causes his sun to rise on the good and the evil, and his rain to fall on the just and the unjust, not take care of you? Will he neglect, forsake or desert you who are already just and live by faith? On the contrary, he blesses you, he helps you, he gives you what you need, he defends you from adversity. In giving you gifts, he consoles you so that you will persevere. In taking them from you, he corrects you, so that you will not perish; the Lord cares for you; do not be anxious. He who created you supports you; do not fall from your Creator's hand; if you fall from the hand of your Maker, you will break. Your good will will help you stay in the hands of your Creator.... Abandon yourself to him; do not think that you are about to fall into the void; do not imagine such a thing. He has said: 'I will fill the heavens and the earth'. He will never fail you; do not fail him; do not fail yourself" (*Enarr. in Psalmos* 39, 26, 27: CCL 38, 445).

6. To *health-care workers*: — doctors, pharmacists, nurses, chaplains, men and women religious, administrators and volunteer workers — called by their vocation and profession to be guardians and servants of human life, I once again point to Christ's example: sent by the Father as the supreme proof of his infinite love (cf. *Jn* 3:16), he has taught man "to do good by his suffering and to do good to those who suffer", thus completely revealing "in this double aspect the meaning of suffering" (Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, n. 30).

In the school of those who suffer, may you understand through loving kindness the profound reasons for the mystery of suffering. May the pain you witness be the measure of the dedicated response expected of you. And in rendering this service to life, be open to the collaboration of all, because "the issue of life and its defence and promotion is not a concern of Christians alone.... Life certainly has a sacred and religious value, but in no way is that value a concern only of believers" (Encyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae*, n. 101). And just as the suffering ask only for help,

so accept everyone's help when it is offered as a loving response.

7. I extend a pressing invitation to the *ecclesial community* to make the year of the Father one of practical charity, a charity of works, through the full involvement of all ecclesial institutions. St Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Ephesians that love is the way to God. Faith and love are the beginning and the end of life; faith is the beginning and love is the end (cf. *PG*, V, 651). All the virtues conspire with these two to lead man to perfection. St Augustine, for his part, teaches: "If therefore you cannot read all the pages of Scripture one by one, nor unroll the volumes that contain God's Word, nor penetrate all the mysteries of Sacred Scripture, have love, on which everything depends. Thus you will know not only what you would have learned there, but also what you have not yet been able to learn" (*Sermo* 350, 2-3: *PL* 39, 1534).

8. On this World Day of the Sick, may the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Harissa, be close with her sublime example to all who are suffering; may she inspire all who bear witness to the Christian faith through service to the sick; may she guide everyone with a motherly hand to the house of the Father of all mercy. May she who has watched over the agonizing suffering of the Lebanese people instil in the world, through the hope that has blossomed again in that land, a renewed trust in the healing power of love, and may she gather them all, like lost children, under her mantle. May the new millennium which is about to begin open an era of renewed trust in man, the supreme creation of God's love, who in love alone will rediscover the meaning of his own life and destiny.

From the Vatican, 8 December 1998.