



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
FOR THE WORLD DAY OF THE SICK
FOR THE YEAR 2002**

1. For some years 11 February, the day on which the Church commemorates the apparition of Our Lady at Lourdes, has fittingly come to be associated with an important event: the celebration of the *World Day of the Sick*. The year 2002 marks the tenth such celebration, which will take place at the well-known Marian pilgrimage centre in South India, the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Health at Vailankanny, known as “the Lourdes of the East” (*Angelus*, 31 July 1988). Sure of the Divine Mother’s unfailing help in their needs, with profound devotion and trust millions flock to this Shrine situated on the shore of the Bay of Bengal amid the calm surroundings of palm groves. Vailankanny attracts not only Christian pilgrims but also many followers of other religions, especially Hindus, who see in Our Lady of Good Health the caring and compassionate Mother of suffering humanity. In a land of such ancient and deep religiosity like India, this Shrine dedicated to the Mother of God is truly a meeting-point for members of different religions, and an outstanding example of interreligious harmony and exchange.

The World Day of the Sick will begin with a moment of intense prayer for all who are suffering pain and infirmity. In this way we will express our solidarity with those who suffer, a solidarity arising from our awareness of the mysterious nature of suffering and its place in God’s loving plan for every individual. The Day will continue with serious reflection and study on the Christian response to the world of human suffering, which seems to grow by the day, not least on account of man-made calamities and unsound choices made by individuals and societies. In re-examining the role and task of Christian health care facilities, hospitals and personnel, this reflection will emphasize and reaffirm the true Christian values which should inspire them. To walk in the footsteps of Jesus, the Divine Healer, who came “that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (*Jn 10:10*) – the theme of the Day’s reflection – implies an unambiguous stance in favour of the culture of life and a total commitment to the defence of life from conception to natural death.

2. Seeking new and effective ways to alleviate suffering is a valid quest, but suffering nevertheless

remains a fundamental fact of human life. In a way it is as deep as man himself and touches upon his very essence (cf. *Salvifici Doloris*, 3). Medical research and treatment neither wholly explain nor fully overcome suffering. In its depth and its many forms it needs to be considered from a perspective which transcends the merely physical. The various religions of humanity have always sought to answer the question of the meaning of suffering, and they recognize the need to show compassion and kindness towards all who are suffering. Thus religious convictions have given rise to systems of medicine to treat and cure diseases, and the history of various religions tells of organized health care of the sick practised from very ancient times.

Even though the Church finds much that is valid and noble in non-Christian interpretations of suffering, her own understanding of this great human mystery is unique. In order to discover the fundamental and definitive meaning of suffering “we must look to the revelation of divine love, the ultimate source of the meaning of everything that exists” (*Salvifici Doloris*, 13). The answer to the question of the meaning of suffering has been “given by God to man in the Cross of Jesus Christ” (*ibid.*, 13). Suffering, a consequence of original sin, takes on a new meaning; it becomes a sharing in the saving work of Jesus Christ (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1521). Through his suffering on the Cross, Christ has prevailed over evil and enables us too to overcome it. Our sufferings become meaningful and precious when united with his. As God and man, Christ has taken upon himself the sufferings of humanity, and in him human suffering itself takes on a redemptive meaning. In this union between the human and the divine, suffering brings forth good and overcomes evil. In expressing my profound solidarity with all those who are suffering, I earnestly pray that the celebration of the World Day of the Sick will be for them a providential moment opening a new horizon of meaning in their lives.

Faith teaches us to seek the ultimate meaning of suffering in Christ’s Passion, Death and Resurrection. The Christian response to pain and suffering is never one of passivity. Urged on by Christian charity, which finds its supreme expression in the life and works of Jesus, who “went about doing good” (*Acts* 10:38), the Church goes out to meet the sick and suffering, bringing them comfort and hope. This is not a mere exercise of benevolence, but is motivated by compassion and concern leading to care and dedicated service. It ultimately involves the unselfish gift of self to others, especially to those who are suffering (cf. *Salvifici Doloris*, 29). The Gospel parable of the Good Samaritan captures very well the noblest sentiments and response of someone confronted with a fellow human being in suffering and need. A Good Samaritan is anyone who stops to attend to the needs of those who are suffering.

3. At this point my thoughts go to the countless men and women all over the world who are active in the field of health care, as directors of health care centres, chaplains, doctors, researchers, nurses, pharmacists, paramedical workers and volunteers. As I mentioned in my Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, on numerous occasions during my visits to the Church in different parts of the world I have been deeply moved by the extraordinary Christian witness of various groups of health care workers, especially those working with the handicapped and the terminally

ill, as well as those contending with the spread of new diseases such as AIDS (cf. No. 36). Through the celebration of the World Day of the Sick, the Church expresses her gratitude and appreciation for the dedicated services of the many priests, religious, and laity engaged in health care, who selflessly minister to the sick, the suffering and the dying, drawing strength and inspiration from their faith in the Lord Jesus and from the Gospel image of the Good Samaritan. The command of the Lord at the Last Supper: “Do this in memory of me”, besides referring to the breaking of bread, also alludes to the body given and the blood poured out by Christ for us (cf. *Lk* 22:19-20), in other words, to the gift of self for others. A particularly significant expression of this gift of self lies in service to the sick and suffering. Hence those who dedicate themselves to this service will always find in the Eucharist an unfailing source of strength and a stimulus to ever renewed generosity.

4. In her approach to the sick and the suffering, the Church is guided by a precise and all-round view of the human person “created in the image of God and endowed with a God-given dignity and inalienable human rights” (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 33). Accordingly, the Church insists on the principle that not all that is technologically feasible is morally admissible. The tremendous progress in medical science and skills in recent times places a supreme responsibility on us all with regard to God’s gift of life – which always remains a gift in all its stages and conditions. We must be vigilant against every possible violation and suppression of life. “We are ... guardians of life, not its proprietors ... From the moment of its conception, human life involves God’s creative action and remains forever in a special bond with the Creator, who is life’s source and its sole end” (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 35).

Solidly rooted in charity, Christian health care institutions continue Jesus’ own mission of caring for the weak and the sick. As places where the culture of life is affirmed and secured, I am confident that they will continue to meet the expectations that every suffering member of humanity has placed in them. I pray that Mary, Health of the Sick, will continue to grant her loving protection to all who are wounded in body and spirit, and will intercede for those who care for them. May she help us to unite our sufferings with those of her Son as we journey in joyful hope to the safety of the Father’s House.

From Castel Gandolfo, 6 August 2001

JOHN PAUL II