



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO NURSING SISTERS**

Thursday, 1 October 1998

Dear Sisters,

1. It is a joy for me to be able to meet you during this congress dedicated to reflecting on "*The Consecrated Woman in the World of Health on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*". I extend a special thanks to the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Assistance to Health-Care Workers, which, in response to my wish, has organized this timely initiative and included it in its programme of preparation for the forthcoming *Jubilee*. I affectionately greet all of you present here, with a special thought for the President of the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health-Care Workers, Archbishop Javier Lozano Barragán, whom I thank for his cordial words.

In watchful expectation of the new millennium, you wish to reflect deeply on your mission to serve the suffering, by focusing more intently on Christ to draw from him the inspiration, courage and ability to be totally dedicated to those who critically experience the limitations of the human condition. Indeed, you know that what you do for the suffering acquires meaning and effectiveness insofar as your work is guided by the Holy Spirit and reflects the distinctive features of the *divine Samaritan of souls and bodies*.

The Church looks with admiration and gratitude to you, consecrated women, who, by caring for the sick and the suffering, are involved in an apostolate that is more important than ever. Your service helps to prolong in time the ministry of mercy carried out by Christ who "went about doing good and healing all" (Acts 10:38). A great number of your sisters, down the centuries, "have given their lives in service to victims of contagious diseases, confirming the truth that dedication to the point of heroism belongs to the prophetic nature of the consecrated life" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 83). The loving dedication which urges you to assist the Lord's suffering members confers a nobility on your

apostolate which escapes neither God's eyes nor human consideration.

2. Like the sisters who have gone before you, you too are called to adapt your care of the sick to the changing conditions of the times. Today in fact, the health-care structures in which you work are confronting you with rapid changes and unprecedented challenges. If, on the one hand, the progress of science and technology and the growth of the administrative disciplines have opened up new opportunities to the practice of medicine and the distribution of care, on the other, they have not failed to create serious ethical problems concerning birth, death and relations with the suffering. From the anthropological standpoint, if progress in the concept of health and sickness has advanced positively to the point that it recognizes the spiritual dimension of these existential experiences, this does not alter the fact that a secularized concept of health and sickness is spreading in many areas, with the sad result that people are prevented from experiencing their time of suffering as an important opportunity for human and spiritual growth.

These profound changes have altered the face of the world of suffering and health and call for a new Christian response. How can we harmonize technical and ethical imperatives? How can we triumph over the tendency to indifference, the lack of compassion, respect and appreciation of life in all its phases? How can we promote health that is humanly worthy? How can we provide a Christian presence which, in collaboration with the good elements already present in society, will help spread in the world of suffering and health authentic human values based on the Gospel, which give priority to the defense and support of the young and the poor?

These questions express as many challenges, which you and the whole Ecclesial Community are called to answer.

3. The first task of your consecrated life in the joyous and engaging experience of Christ is to remind the People of God and the world of the Lord's merciful face. Before the power of your charism can shine in your work and service goals, it must be resplendent in a newness of life that reproduces Jesus' distinctive features. Is it not true that the Church needs consecrated men and women who, through their persons and their lives, manifest the fruitful motherhood that distinguishes her? Now, the Church's fruitfulness is not dependent on the efficiency of her work, but on the authenticity of your dedication to Christ crucified.

Your entire life as consecrated women must therefore be imbued with God's friendship, so that you can be *the heart and hands* of Christ for the sick, thus revealing that faith which enables you to recognize the Lord himself in the sick and becomes the well-spring of your spirituality.

4. Secondly, your presence in the world of suffering and health must express the richness of your feminine nature. It is undeniable, in fact, that women's vocation to motherhood makes you more sensitive to others' needs and talented in giving an appropriate response. When in addition to these natural gifts there is a conscious attitude of altruism and, especially, the power of faith and

Gospel love, then true miracles of dedication are performed. The most important expressions of love — sensitivity, gentleness, gratitude, sacrifice, concern and the generous gift of self to the suffering — bear witness to the love of a God who is close, merciful and ever faithful. A hero of charity to the sick, Camillus de Lellis, invited people to ask the Lord first for the grace of *motherly affection* for one's neighbour, in order to serve the sick with that loving care which a mother devotes to her only child when sick.

5. Awareness of the mission to which you are called of serving the sick and promoting health must spur you, dear sisters, to be faithful and innovative in exercising your apostolate of merciful love.

Far from clashing, these two attitudes — fidelity and creativity — must be harmonized through wise discernment. Just as barricading yourselves in outmoded positions would be contrary to the spirit of your founders and foundresses, so too abandoning, without necessary study, apostolates that have become difficult because of current sociocultural conditions would be just as opposed to the charisms of your institutes. For this reason, dear sisters, I invite you to remain faithfully at the side of those suffering in hospitals and other health-care institutions, invigorating your care of the sick with Gospel spirit.

May your decisions always give priority to care for the sick who are most neglected. May your vision and your work be generously extended to Third World countries deprived of the most basic resources for dealing with sickness and promoting health. May your participation in the new evangelization about health and sickness be expressed in a courageous proclamation of Christ, who by his Death and Resurrection enabled man to transform the experience of suffering into a moment of grace for himself and for others (cf. *Salvifici doloris*, nn. 25-27). May collaboration with the laity, based on an authentic sharing in your charisms, become an effective way to respond, in words and deeds inspired by the Gospel, to the old and new forms of poverty and disease which afflict the society of our time.

6. In carrying out your apostolate, may the Immaculate Virgin, revered as *Health of the Sick*, be an example to you. An image of God's tenderness, she shows herself attentive to the needs of others, loving in her response to them and rich in compassion. Looking to her, always strive to be deeply sensitive, ready to make your presence a witness of tenderness and self-giving that reflects the provident goodness of God.

With these wishes, I cordially impart my Blessing to you, and willingly extend it to all the sisters of your congregations.

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