



The Holy See

FEAST OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES **HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II** 11 February 1979

Beloved Brothers and Sisters,

1. I greet all of you who are present here today. I greet you in a particularly cordial way and with great emotion. Precisely today, 11 February, the day on which the liturgy of the Church recalls every year the apparition of the Our Lady at Lourdes, I greet you, who are accustomed to go on pilgrimage to that sanctuary, and you, who help sick pilgrims: priests, doctors, nurses, and members of the health, transportation, and welfare services. I thank you because you have filled St Peter's Basilica today and honour the Pope with your presence, making him almost a participant in your annual pilgrimages to Lourdes, in your community, your prayer, your hope and also in all your personal renunciation and that mutual donation and sacrifice, which characterize your friendship and solidarity. This Basilica and St Peter's Chair need your presence. This presence of yours is necessary for the whole Church, for the whole of mankind. The Pope is grateful, immensely grateful, to you for this. In fact, today's meeting is certainly accompanied by the joy which springs from a living faith, but also by considerable effort and sacrifice.

2. The Lord Jesus, in today's Gospel, meets a man who is seriously ill: a leper, who begs him: "if you will, you can make me clean" (Mk 1:41). And immediately afterwards, Jesus forbids him to spread the news of the miracle, that is, to speak of his cure. And although we know that "Jesus went about...preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity" (Mt 9:35), the restriction, the "reservation" of Christ with regard to the cure he had brought about, is significant. Perhaps there is here a distant anticipation of that "reservation", that caution with which the Church examines all supposed miraculous cures, for example, those that have taken place at Lourdes for over a hundred years. It is well known to what severe medical controls each of them is subjected. The Church prays for the health of all the sick, of all the suffering, of all the incurables humanly condemned to irreversible infirmity. She prays for the sick and she prays with the sick. She is extremely grateful for every cure, even if it is partial and gradual. And at the same time, with her whole attitude she makes it understood — like Christ — that cure is something exceptional, that from the point of view of the divine "economy" of salvation it is an extraordinary and almost "supplementary" fact. 3. This divine economy of salvation — as Christ revealed — is certainly manifested in the liberation of man from that evil, which "physical" suffering is. It is manifested even more, however, in the interior transformation of that evil, which spiritual suffering

is, in "salvific" good, in the good that sanctifies the one who suffers and, through him, also others. And, therefore, the text of today's liturgy, on which we must dwell today above all, are not the words: "I will; be clean", but the words: "Be an imitator of me". It is St Paul who addresses the Corinthians with these words: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." (1 Cor 11:1). Earlier than he, Christ himself had many times said: "come and follow me" (cf Mt 8:22; 19:21; Mk 2:14; Lk 18:22; Jn 21: 22). These words do not have the power to cure, they do not liberate from suffering. But they have a transforming power. They are a call to become a new man, to become particularly like to Christ, in order to find in this likeness, through grace, all the interior good in that which in itself is an evil, which makes one suffer, which limits, which perhaps humiliates or is embarrassing. Christ who says to suffering man "come and follow me", is the same Christ who suffers: the Christ of Gethsemane, the scourged Christ, Christ crowned with thorns, Christ on the way of the cross, Christ on the cross... It is the same Christ who drained the cup of human suffering "which the Father gave him" (cf. Jn 18:11). The same Christ, who assumed all the ills of the earthly human condition except sin, in order to draw from them salvific good: the good of redemption, the good of purification and reconciliation with God, the good of grace. If he says to each of you, dear Brothers and Sisters: "Come and follow me", he invites you and calls you to take part in the same transformation, in the same transmutation of the evil of suffering into salvific good: that of the redemption, of grace, purification, and conversion... for oneself and for others. Just for this reason, St Paul, who so passionately wished to imitate Christ, says in another place: "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col 1:24). Each of you can make these words the essence of your own life and vocation. I wish you this transformation, which is "an interior miracle" even greater than the miracle of healing; this transformation, which corresponds to the normal way of God's economy of salvation as Jesus Christ presented it to us. I wish you this grace and I implore it on each of you, dear Brothers and Sisters.⁴ "I was sick", Jesus says of himself, "and you visited me" (Mt 25:36). According to the logic of the same economy of salvation, he, who identifies himself with each suffering person, waits — in this man — for other men, who "come to visit him". He waits for the expression of human compassion, solidarity, kindness, love, patience, solicitude, in all their various forms. He waits for the expression of all that is noble, elevated, in the human heart: "you visited me." Jesus, who is present in our suffering neighbour, wishes to be present in every act of charity and service of ours, which is expressed also in every glass of water we give "in his name" (cf Mk 9:41). Jesus wants love, the solidarity of love, to grow from suffering and around suffering. He wants, that is, the sum of that good which is possible in our human world. A good that never passes away. The Pope, who wishes to be a servant of this love, kisses the forehead and kisses the hands of all those who contribute to the presence of this love and to its growth in our world. He knows, in fact, and believes that he is kissing the hands and the forehead of Christ himself, who is mystically present in those who suffer and in those who, out of love, serve the suffering. With this "spiritual kiss" of Christ, let us prepare, dear Brothers and Sisters, to celebrate and take part in this sacrifice, in which the sacrifice of each of you has had its place since time immemorial. And perhaps it is particularly opportune to recall that, according to the Letter to the Hebrews, on celebrating this sacrifice and praying "cum clamore valido" (Heb 5:7), Christ is heard by the Father: Christ of our sufferings, Christ of our sacrifices, Christ of our

Gethsemane, Christ of our difficult transformations, Christ of our faithful service to our neighbour, Christ of our pilgrimages to Lourdes, Christ of our community, today, in St Peter's Basilica, Christ our Redeemer, Christ our Brother! Amen.

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