



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
FOR THE II WORLD DAY OF THE SICK**

1. I turn my thoughts affectionately to you, brothers and sisters who bear in your body and in your spirit the signs of human sufferings, on the significant occasion of the *World Day of the Sick*.

I particularly greet you among the sick who have the grace of faith in Christ, Son of the living God, who became man in the womb of the Virgin Mary. In him, united to all the suffering, crucified and risen again for the salvation of men, you find the strength to undergo your suffering as "*salvific pain*".

I would like to meet each of you, in every place on earth, to bless you in the name of Jesus Christ, who went about "*doing good and healing*" the sick (Acts 10:38). I would like to be at your side to console you in your afflictions, sustain your courage, nourish your hope, that all of you may be able to make yourselves a gift of love to Christ for the good of the Church and the world.

Like Mary at the foot of the cross (cf. Jn 19:25), I wish to pause at the calvary of so many brothers and sisters who at this moment are lacerated by fratricidal wars, languish in hospitals, or are in mourning for their loved ones who are the victims of violence. The *World Day* will have the Marian sanctuary of Czestochowa as the site of its most solemn celebration this year, to ask for the divine gift of peace through the motherly intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin, along with the spiritual and bodily comfort of the sick or suffering people who silently offer their sacrifices to the Queen of Peace.

Only in Christ does man find true light

2. On the occasion of the *World Day of the Sick* I wish to call the attention of you that are ill, of health-care workers, of Christians, and of all people of goodwill to the subject of "*salvific pain*" — that is, the Christian meaning of suffering, a topic upon which I dwelt in the Apostolic Letter

Salvifici doloris, published on 11 February, 10 years ago.

How can we speak of salvific pain? Is suffering not an obstacle to happiness and a motive for separation from God? There are undoubtedly tribulations which, from a human point of view, seem devoid of any meaning.

In reality, if the Lord Jesus, Incarnate Word, has declared "Blessed the afflicted" (Mt 5:4), it is because a higher point of view exists, that of God, who calls everyone to life and, though by way of pain and death, to his eternal kingdom of love and peace.

Happy is the person who succeeds in making God's light shine in the poverty of a suffering or diminished life!

3. To obtain this light on pain, we must first of all listen to the word of God, found in the books of Sacred Scripture, which can also be termed "*a great book on suffering*" (*Salvifici doloris*, n. 6). Therein we in fact encounter not only "*an extensive listing of situations which in varied ways are painful for man*" (ibid., n. 7), but also the experience of multiform evil which inevitably prompts the question "Why?" (ibid., n. 9).

In the Book of Job this question is most dramatically expressed and at the same time given an initial, partial answer. The story of that just man, tried in every way in spite of his innocence, shows that "*it is not true that all suffering is a consequence of sin and has the character of punishment*" (ibid., n. 11).

The full and definitive answer to Job is Christ. "*Only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man find true light*" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 22). In Christ even pain is taken up into the mystery of *infinite charity*, which radiates out from God the *Trinity* and becomes an expression of love and instrument of redemption — that is, it becomes salvific pain.

It is in fact the *Father* who chooses the total gift of the Son as the way to restore the alliance with men rendered ineffective by sin: "*God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son so that anyone who believes in him will not die, but have eternal life*" (Jn 3:16).

It is the *Son* who "heads towards his suffering; aware of its saving power, he goes obediently to the Father, but first of all *he is united to the Father in this love*, with which he has loved the world and man in the world" (*Salvifici doloris*, n. 16).

It is the *Holy Spirit*, speaking through the prophets, who announced the sufferings which the Messiah voluntarily embraced for men and to some extent in place of men: "*He has burdened himself with our sufferings; he has taken upon himself our pains.... The Lord made the iniquity of all of us fall upon him*" (Is 53:4-6).

4. Brothers and sisters, let us admire the loving plan of divine Wisdom! Christ *"has drawn near... to the world of suffering by the very fact that he has taken this suffering upon himself"* (*Salvifici doloris*, n. 16): he became like us in everything, except sin (cf. Heb 4:15, 1 Pt 2:22); he took on the human condition with all its limits, including death (cf. Ph 2:7-8); he offered his life for us (cf. Jn 10:7, 1 Jn 3:16), so that we might live by the new life in the Spirit (cf. Rom 6:4, 8:9-11).

It sometimes happens that under the weight of acute, unbearable pain someone directs a reproach at God, accusing him of injustice; but the lament dies on the lips of whoever contemplates the Crucified One suffering "voluntarily" and "innocently" (*Salvifici doloris*, n. 18). We cannot reproach a God uniting himself to human sufferings!

Tribulations of life become signs of future glory

5. A perfect revelation of the salvific value of pain is the passion of the Lord: *"In the cross of Christ not only has redemption been fulfilled through suffering, but suffering itself has also been redeemed"* (ibid., n. 19). Christ *"opened his suffering to man"*, and in him man rediscovers his sufferings *"enriched with a new content and a new meaning"* (ibid., n. 20).

Reason, which already grasps the distinction existing between pain and evil, when illuminated by faith comprehends that all suffering can, through grace, become a prolongation of the mystery of the Redemption, which, though complete in Christ, *"constantly remains open to all love which is expressed in human suffering"* (ibid., n. 24).

All of the tribulations of life can become signs and foundations of future glory. *"In the measure in which you share in the sufferings of Christ"*, the First Letter of Peter exhorts, *"rejoice so that you may also rejoice and exult in the revelation of his glory"* (1 Pt 4:13).

6. Dear people who are ill, you know from experience that in your situation you need examples more than words. Yes, we all need models spurring us to walk the road of the sanctification of pain.

On this commemoration of Our Lady of Lourdes, let us gaze at Mary as a *living icon of the Gospel of suffering*.

Call to mind the episodes in her life. You will find Mary in the poverty of the house in Nazareth, in the humiliation of the stable in Bethlehem, in the privations of the flight into the land of Egypt, in the exertion of humble, blessed work with Jesus and Joseph.

Especially after the prophecy of Simeon, who predicted the Mother's sharing in the suffering of the Son (Lk 2:34), Mary on a deep level experienced a mysterious presage of pain. Together with her Son, she, too, began to head towards the cross. *"It was on Calvary that the suffering of the*

Blessed Virgin Mary, alongside that of Christ, reached a peak which is indeed difficult to imagine in its loftiness from a human standpoint, but which is certainly mysterious and supernaturally fruitful for the purpose of universal salvation" (Salvifici doloris, n. 25).

The Mother of Jesus was preserved from sin, but not from suffering. The Christian people thus identifies with the figure of Our Lady of Sorrows, discerning its own pain in hers. In contemplating her, each of the faithful is introduced more intimately into the mystery of Christ and his salvific pain.

Let us seek to enter into communion with the Immaculate Heart of the Mother of Jesus, where the pain of the Son for the world's salvation was reflected in a unique and incomparable way. Let us receive Mary, designated the spiritual mother of his disciples by the dying Christ, and entrust ourselves to her so as to be faithful to God on the journey from Baptism to glory.

Do not be discouraged or yield to pessimism

7. I now address you, health-care workers, doctors, men and women nurses, chaplains and women religious, technical and administrative personnel, social workers and volunteers.

Like the Good Samaritan, you are close to and serve the sick and suffering, respecting — first of all, and always — their dignity as persons, and, with the eyes of faith, recognizing the presence of the suffering Jesus in them. Guard against the indifference which can result from habit; every day renew your commitment to being brothers and sisters to all, with no discrimination; to the irreplaceable contribution of your professionalism, joined to the adequacy of facilities, add the "heart", which alone can give them humanity (*Salvifici doloris*, n. 29).

8. Finally, I appeal to you who are leaders of nations, that you may consider health to be a priority problem on a world level.

One of the aims of the *World Day of the Sick* is to carry out a vast effort to stimulate awareness of the serious and inescapable problems concerning health policy and care. About two-thirds of mankind still lack essential medical care, while the resources employed in this sector are too often insufficient. May the World Health Organization's programme - "Health for All by the Year 2000" - which might appear to be a mirage, instead prompt constructive rivalry in effective solidarity. The extraordinary progress of science and technology and the development of the mass media contribute to making this hope ever firmer.

9. Dear people who are ill: sustained by faith, face evil in all its forms without becoming discouraged and yielding to pessimism. Take the opportunity opened up by Christ to transform your situation into an expression of grace and love. Then your pain, too, will become salvific and contribute to completing the suffering of Christ for the benefit of his Body which is the Church (cf.

Col 1:24).

I wish all of you and health-care workers and everyone devoted to serving the suffering grace and peace, salvation and health, vital strength, assiduous commitment, and unfailing hope. Along with the motherly assistance of Our Lady, *Salus infirmorum*, may you always be accompanied and comforted by my affectionate Blessing.

From the Vatican, 8 December 1993.

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