



The Holy See

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

February 11, 1997

1. The next World Day of the Sick will be celebrated on February 11, 1997 at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fatima, in the noble nation of Portugal. The place chosen is particularly significant for me. I in fact wished to go there on the anniversary of the assassination attempt I suffered in St. Peter's Square, in order to thank Divine Providence, according to whose inscrutable design the dramatic event had mysteriously coincided with the anniversary of the first appearance of the Mother of Jesus on May 13, 1917, at the Cave of Iria.

I am therefore happy that the official celebration of a Day like that of the Sick, which is especially close to my heart, should be held at Fatima. It will afford each of us the opportunity to listen once again to the message of the Virgin, whose basic core is "the call to conversion and penance, as in the Gospel. This call was pronounced at the beginning of the twentieth century and has thus been addressed to this century in particular. The Lady of the message seems to read the signs of the times—the signs of our time—with special insight" (*Allocution at Fatima*, May 13, 1982, in *Insegnamenti VI/2* [1982], p. 1580).

In listening to the Most Blessed Virgin it will be possible to rediscover her mission in the mystery of Christ and of the Church in a vital and moving way—a mission which is already found to be indicated in the Gospel, when Mary asks Christ to begin to perform his miracles, saying to the servants at the wedding banquet at Cana in Galilee, "Do whatever he tells you" (*Jn* 2:5). At Fatima She echoed a specific word pronounced by her Son at the outset of his public mission: "The time is fulfilled...; repent and believe in the Gospel" (*Mk* 1:15). The insistent invitation of Mary Most Holy to penance is nothing but the manifestation of her maternal concern for the fate of the human family, in need of conversion and forgiveness.

2. Mary became the spokeswoman for other words of Christ at Fatima. Christ's invitation

especially resounded in the Cave of Iria: "Come to me, all you that labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest" (*Mt 11:28*). Are the throngs of pilgrims who hasten to that blessed land from all over the world not perhaps eloquent testimony of the need for relief and comfort which numberless persons experience in their lives?

Above all, it is the suffering who feel attracted by the perspective of "relief" which the Divine Physician is able to offer those who turn to Him with trust. And in Fatima this relief is found: sometimes it is physical relief, when, in his providence, God grants healing from illness; more often it is spiritual relief, when the soul, pervaded by the inner light of grace, finds the strength to accept the painful weight of infirmity, transforming it, through communion with Christ, the suffering servant, into an instrument of redemption and salvation for oneself and one's brothers and sisters.

The direction to move in, on this hard road, is pointed out to us by the motherly voice of Mary, who, in the history and life of the Church, has always continued to repeat—and in a special way in our time—the words "Do whatever He tells you."

3. The World Day of the Sick, then, is a precious occasion to hear again and accept the exhortation of the Mother of Jesus, who, at the foot of the Cross, was entrusted with mankind (cf. *Jn 19:25-27*). The World Day is situated in the first year of the Triduum preparatory to the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000: a year entirely dedicated to reflection on Christ. Precisely this reflection on the centrality of Christ "cannot be detached from recognition of the role played by his Most Holy Mother.... Indeed, Mary perennially points to her Divine Son and proposes Herself to all believers as a model of lived faith" (Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, no. 43).

The exemplariness of Mary is conveyed in the most lofty fashion by the invitation to look at the Crucified One so as to learn from Him, who, in completely taking on the human condition, freely wished to burden Himself with our sufferings and offer Himself to the Father as an innocent victim for us men and for our salvation, "with loud cries and tears" (*Heb 5:7*). He thus redeemed suffering, transforming it into a gift of salvific love.

4. Dear Brothers and Sisters who are suffering in spirit and in body! Do not yield to the temptation to regard pain as an experience which is only negative, to the point of doubting God's goodness. In the suffering Christ every sick person finds the meaning of his or her afflictions. Suffering and illness belong to the condition of man, a fragile, limited creature, marked by original sin from birth on. In Christ, who died and rose again, however, humanity discovers a new dimension to its suffering: instead of a failure, it reveals itself to be the occasion for offering witness to faith and love.

Dear people who are sick, be able to find in love "the salvific meaning of your pain and valid answers to all your questions" (Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 31). Yours is a mission of most lofty value for both the Church and society. "You that bear the weight of suffering occupy the

first places among those whom God loves. As with all those He met along the roads of Palestine, Jesus directs a gaze full of tenderness at you; his love will never be lacking" (*Address to the Sick and Suffering*, Tours, September 21, 1996, 2, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, September 23-24, 1996, p.4). Manage to be generous witnesses to this privileged love through the gift of your suffering, which can do so much for the salvation of the human race.

In a society like the present one, which is seeking to build its future on well-being and consumerism and measures everything in terms of efficiency and profit, illness and suffering, which cannot be denied, are either removed or emptied of their meaning in the illusion of their being overcome exclusively through the means offered by the progress of science and technology.

Illness and suffering no doubt remain a limit and a trial for the human mind. In the light of Christ's Cross, however, they become a privileged moment for growth in faith and a precious instrument to contribute, in union with Jesus the Redeemer, to implementing the divine project of salvation.

5. In the page of the Gospel referring to the Last Judgment, when "the Son of man comes in his glory with all his angels" (*Mt 25:31*), the criteria on the basis of which the sentence will be pronounced are indicated. As we know, they are summarized in the solemn concluding affirmation: "In truth, I tell you: every time you did these things to a single one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (*Mt 25:40*). Among these "least of my brothers" are the sick (cf. *Mt 25:36*), who are often alone and marginalized by society. To make public opinion sensitive to them is one of the main goals of celebrating the World Day of the Sick: to be close to those suffering so that they will be able to make their suffering fruitful, also by way of the help of those who are at their side to provide care and assistance—this is the commitment the World Day is calling for.

Following the example of Jesus, as "Good Samaritans" we must approach suffering man. We must learn to "serve the Son of man in men," as Blessed Luigi Orione said (cf. *Scritti*, 57, 104). We must be able to see the sufferings of our brothers and sisters with the eyes of solidarity, not "pass by," but "become a neighbor," pausing at their side, with gestures of service and love aimed at the integral health of the human person. A society is characterized by the attention it devotes to those suffering and by the attitude it adopts towards them.

Too many human beings in the world in which we live remain excluded from the love of the family and social community. In appearing in Fatima to three poor little shepherds to make them announcers of the Gospel message, the Most Blessed Virgin renewed her liberating *Magnificat*, speaking on behalf of "those who do not passively accept the adverse circumstances in personal and social life and are not victims of 'alienation'—as it is termed today—but, rather, proclaim with Her that God *raises high the lowly* and, when appropriate, *pulls down princes from their thrones*" (*Homily at the Sanctuary of Zapopan*, January 30, 1979, 4, in *Insegnamenti* II/1 [1979], p. 295).

6. On this occasion, too, I thus renew a *forceful appeal to public leaders, international and national*

organizations in the health field, health care workers, volunteer associations, and all men of good will, that they join in the commitment of the Church, which, in adhering to Christ's teaching, seeks to announce the Gospel through the witness of service to those who suffer.

May the Most Blessed Virgin, who has dried so many tears in Fatima, help everyone to transform this World Day of the Sick into a distinctive moment for "new evangelization."

With these wishes, as I invoke the maternal protection of Mary, Mother of the Lord and our Mother, for the initiatives undertaken in connection with this Day, I willingly impart my affectionate Blessing to you, dear people who are ill, your relatives, health care workers, volunteers, and all who, in a spirit of solidarity, are close to you in your sufferings.

From the Vatican, October 18, 1996.