



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS
JOHN PAUL II
FOR THE ELEVENTH WORLD DAY OF THE SICK
(WASHINGTON D.C., U.S.A., FEBRUARY 11, 2003)**

1. «We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world . . . We know and believe the love God has for us» (1 Jn 4:14,16).

These words of the apostle John are a good summary of what the Church seeks to do through her pastoral work in the area of health care. Recognizing the presence of the Lord in our suffering brothers and sisters, she strives to bring them the good news of the Gospel and to offer them authentic signs of love.

This is the context of the Eleventh World Day of the Sick, which will take place on February 11, 2003 in Washington, D.C., in the United States, at the National Shrine of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception. The choice of place and day invites the faithful to turn their hearts and minds to the Mother of the Lord. The Church, entrusting herself to our Lady, is inspired to bear renewed witness to charity, in order to be a living icon of Jesus Christ, the Good Samaritan, in the numberless situations of physical and moral suffering in the world today.

Urgent questions about suffering and death, dramatically present in the heart of every person despite the continual attempts by a secular mentality to remove them or ignore them, await satisfactory answers. Especially in the presence of tragic human experiences, the Christian is called to bear witness to the consoling truth of the Risen Lord, who takes upon himself the wounds and ills of humanity, including death itself, and transforms them into occasions of grace and life. This proclamation and this witness are to be delivered to everyone, in every corner of the world.

2. Through the celebration of this World Day of the Sick, may the Gospel of life and love resound

loudly, especially in the Americas, where more than half the world's Catholics live. On the continents of North and South America, as elsewhere in the world, «a model of society appears to be emerging in which the powerful predominate, setting aside and even eliminating the powerless: I am thinking here of unborn children, helpless victims of abortion; the elderly and incurable ill, subjected at times to euthanasia; and the many other people relegated to the margins of society by consumerism and materialism. Nor can I fail to mention the unnecessary recourse to the death penalty . . . This model of society bears the stamp of the culture of death, and is therefore in opposition to the Gospel message» (Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia In America*, 63). Faced with this worrying fact, how can we fail to include the defence of the culture of life among our pastoral priorities? Catholics working in the field of health care have the urgent task of doing all they can to defend life when it is most seriously threatened and to act with a conscience correctly formed according to the teaching of the Church.

The numerous health care facilities through which the Catholic Church offers a genuine testimony of faith, charity and hope are already contributing in an encouraging way to this noble goal. Hitherto these facilities have been able to rely on a significant number of men and women religious who guarantee a high standard of professional and pastoral service. I hope that a fresh flourishing of vocations will enable Religious Institutes to continue their meritorious work and indeed to expand it with the support of many lay volunteers, for the good of suffering humanity in the Americas.

3. This privileged apostolate involves all local Churches. It is therefore necessary that every Episcopal Conference, through appropriate structures, should seek to promote, guide and coordinate the pastoral care of the sick, so that the whole People of God become aware of and sensitive to the many different needs of the suffering.

In order to make this witness of love practical, those involved in the pastoral care of the sick must act in full communion among themselves and with their Bishops. This is of particular importance in Catholic hospitals, which in responding to modern needs are called upon to reflect ever more clearly in their policies the values of the Gospel, as the Magisterium's social and moral guidelines insist. This requires united involvement on the part of Catholic hospitals in every sector, including that of finance and administration.

Catholic hospitals should be centres of life and hope which promote — together with chaplaincies — ethics committees, training programmes for lay health workers, personal and compassionate care of the sick, attention to the needs of their families and a particular sensitivity to the poor and the marginalized. Professional work should be done in a genuine witness to charity, bearing in mind that life is a gift from God, and man merely its steward and guardian.

4. This truth should be continuously repeated in the context of scientific progress and advances in medical techniques which seek to assist and improve the quality of human life. Indeed, it remains

a fundamental precept that life is to be protected and defended, from its conception to its natural end.

As I stated in my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, «The service of humanity leads us to insist, in season and out of season, that those using *the latest advances of science*, especially in the field of biotechnology, must never disregard fundamental ethical requirements by invoking a questionable solidarity which eventually leads to discriminating between one life and another and ignoring the dignity which belongs to every human being» (No. 51).

The Church, which is open to genuine scientific and technological progress, values the effort and sacrifice of those who with dedication and professionalism help to improve the quality of the service rendered to the sick, respecting their inviolable dignity. Every therapeutic procedure, all experimentation and every transplant must take into account this fundamental truth. Thus it is never licit to kill one human being in order to save another. And while palliative treatment in the final stage of life can be encouraged, avoiding a «treatment at all costs» mentality, it will never be permissible to resort to actions or omissions which by their nature or in the intention of the person acting are designed to bring about death.

5. My earnest hope for this Eleventh World Day of the Sick is that it will inspire in Dioceses and parishes a renewed commitment to the pastoral care of the sick. Proper attention must be given to the sick who remain at home, given that less and less time is actually being spent in hospital and the sick are often being entrusted to their own families. In countries without adequate health care facilities, even the terminally ill are left at home. Parish priests and all pastoral workers must be vigilant and ensure that the sick never lack the consoling presence of the Lord through the word of God and the Sacraments.

Proper attention should be given to the pastoral aspect of health care in the formation of priests and religious. For it is in care for the sick more than in any other way that love is made concrete and a witness of hope in the Resurrection is offered.

6. Dear chaplains, religious, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, technicians, administrative personnel, social assistants and volunteers: the World Day of the Sick offers a special opportunity to strive to be ever more generous disciples of Christ the Good Samaritan. Be aware of your identity and learn to recognize in those who suffer the Face of the sorrowful and glorious Lord. Be ready to bring help and hope especially to those afflicted with new diseases, such as AIDS, and with older diseases, such as tuberculosis, malaria and leprosy.

Dear Brothers and Sisters who suffer in body or spirit, to you I express my heartfelt hope that you will learn to recognize and welcome the Lord who calls you to be witnesses to the Gospel of suffering, by looking with trust and love upon the Face of Christ Crucified (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 16) and by uniting your sufferings to his.

I entrust you all to the Immaculate Virgin, our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of the Americas and Health of the Sick. May she hear the prayers that rise from the world of suffering, may she dry the tears of those in pain, may she stand beside those who are alone in their illness, and by her motherly intercession may she help believers who work in the field of health care to be credible witnesses to Christ's love.

To each of you I affectionately impart my Blessing!

From the Vatican, 2 February 2003

JOHN PAUL II

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