



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE SICK FOLLOWING MASS
IN ST. PETER'S BASILICA
FOR NINTH WORLD DAY OF THE SICK**

Sunday, 11 February 2001

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

1. Today, 11 February, we have come together as we do every year for this customary gathering in the Vatican Basilica. My thoughts naturally turn to the grotto of Massabielle, where every year so many people pause in prayer at the foot of the statue of the Immaculate Conception. And, precisely in Mary's name, I greet all of you who have come for the Eucharistic celebration and for the evocative candlelight procession which recreates the characteristic atmosphere of Lourdes. I also greet those who have promoted and organized this always moving Marian event.

I first greet the Cardinal Vicar and the Bishops present; I also greet the directors of Opera Romana Pellegrinaggi and all the priests, religious and lay people who are taking part in the national pastoral-theological convention on the theme: "The Local Church, Pilgrimage and Traditio Fidei".

I greet you in particular, dear sick people, and, with you, the organizers and volunteers of UNITALSI, a commendable association that cares for you, especially on pilgrimages.

2. Dear sick people and volunteers, your presence has special meaning, since we are now celebrating the *World Day of the Sick* for the ninth time. I still remember last year's celebration.

We were in the intense spiritual atmosphere of the Great Jubilee, and the witness of faith given by those who took part made a deep impression. The generous acceptance of the Lord's will by those who are suffering is always a great lesson of life. As I have said on other occasions, the Church relies heavily on the support of those who are tried by illness: their sacrifice is sometimes little

understood, but, when combined with intense prayer, it has a mysterious efficacy for the propagation of the Gospel and the welfare of the whole People of God.

Dear brothers and sisters, today I would like to express again my deep gratitude to you for your silent mission in the Church. May you be firmly convinced that it gives extraordinary power to the progress of the entire Ecclesial Community.

3. This evening, in the evocative setting of this gathering, we want to feel in communion with our brothers and sisters meeting in Sydney, Australia, for the World Day of the Sick. The theme chosen for the event this year is: "*The New Evangelization and the Dignity of the Suffering Person*". This is a theme on which it is important to reflect, because physical and spiritual pain mark everyone's life more or less deeply, and it is necessary that the light of the Gospel also illumine this aspect of human existence.

In the Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, which I signed on the closing day of the Jubilee, I invited all believers to contemplate the face of Jesus. I wrote in that Letter that "in contemplating Christ's face, we confront the most paradoxical aspect of his mystery, as it emerges in his last hour, on the Cross" (n. 25).

You in particular, my sick friends, understand how paradoxical the Cross is, because you are allowed to feel the mystery of pain in your own flesh. When your strength fails because of a serious illness, projects you have long cherished in your heart are abandoned. In addition to physical suffering, there is often spiritual suffering due to a sense of loneliness which grips the individual. In contemporary society, a certain culture considers the sick person a troublesome hindrance, failing to recognize that he makes a valuable spiritual contribution to the community. It is necessary and urgent to rediscover the value of the Cross we share with Christ.

4. At Lourdes Our Lady said to Bernadette on 18 February 1858: "I do not promise you will be happy in this world, but in the next". During another apparition, she invited her to turn her gaze to heaven. Let us listen again to these exhortations of our heavenly Mother as if they were addressed to us: they are an invitation to evaluate earthly realities correctly, knowing that we are destined for eternal life. They help people patiently to bear adversity, sufferings and sickness, in the perspective of paradise. At times some have thought of paradise as an escape from daily reality; on the contrary, the light of faith makes the harsh experience of suffering better understood and thus more knowingly accepted. St Bernadette herself, harshly tested by physical illness, exclaimed one day: "Cross of my Saviour, holy Cross, adorable Cross, in you alone I place my strength, my hope and my joy. You are the tree of life, the mysterious stairway that joins earth to heaven, and the altar on which I want to sacrifice myself by dying for Jesus" (M. B. Soubirous, *Carnet de notes intimes*, p. 20).

5. This is the message of Lourdes, which so many pilgrims, healthy and sick, have accepted and

made their own. May the Virgin's words bring interior comfort to you, suffering brothers and sisters, to whom I once again offer my fraternal solidarity. If you docilely accept God's will, in your illness you can be a word of hope and even of joy for many people, since you tell our contemporaries, who are often restless and unable to find meaning in pain, that God has not abandoned them. In living your situation with faith, you bear witness that God is near. You proclaim that the Lord's tender and loving closeness ensures that there is no season of life that is not worth living. Illness and death are not realities to flee or criticize as useless, but both are stages on a journey.

I also wish to encourage all who dedicate themselves zealously to caring for the sick to continue in their precious mission of love and find in it the inner consolation which the Lord grants to those who become Good Samaritans for their suffering neighbour.

With these sentiments, I embrace you all in the Lord and cordially bless you.