



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE 18th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
PROMOTED BY THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR HEALTH
PASTORAL CARE ON THE THEME OF "DEPRESSION"**

Friday, 14 November 2003

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Dear Friends,*

1. I am pleased to meet you on the occasion of the International Conference organized by the Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care on the theme of "Depression". I thank Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán for his kind words on behalf of those present.

I greet the distinguished Specialists, who came to offer the fruit of their research in order to further knowledge of this pathology, so as to improve treatment and provide the right type of assistance to those concerned and to their families.

Likewise, my appreciation goes to those who are dedicated to the service of persons with depression, helping them to retain their trust in life. My thoughts naturally extend to families who are accompanying their loved one with affection and sensitivity.

2. Your work, dear participants in the Congress, has revealed the different, complex aspects of depression: they range from chronic sickness, more or less permanent, to a fleeting state linked to difficult events - conjugal and family conflicts, serious work problems, states of loneliness... - that involve a crack, or even fracture in social, professional or family relationships. This disease is often accompanied by an existential and spiritual crisis that leads to an inability to perceive the meaning of life.

The spread of depressive states has become disturbing. They reveal human, psychological and

spiritual frailties which, at least in part, are induced by society. It is important to become aware of the effect on people of messages conveyed by the *media* which exalt consumerism, the immediate satisfaction of desires and the race for ever greater material well-being. It is necessary to propose new ways so that each person may build his or her own personality by cultivating spiritual life, the foundation of a mature existence. The enthusiastic participation in the World Youth Days shows that the young generations are seeking Someone who can illuminate their daily journey, giving them good reasons for living and helping them to face their difficulties.

3. You have stressed that *depression is always a spiritual trial*. The role of those who care for depressed persons and who do not have a specifically therapeutic task consists above all in helping them to rediscover their self-esteem, confidence in their own abilities, interest in the future, the desire to live. It is therefore important to stretch out a hand to the sick, to make them perceive the tenderness of God, to integrate them into a community of faith and life in which they can feel accepted, understood, supported, respected; in a word, in which they can love and be loved. For them as for everyone else, contemplating Christ means letting oneself be "looked at" by him, an experience that opens one to hope and convinces one to choose life (cf. Dt 30: 19).

In the spiritual process, *reading and meditation on the Psalms*, in which the sacred author expresses his joys and anxieties in prayer, can be of great help. *The recitation of the Rosary* makes it possible to find in Mary a loving Mother who teaches us how to live in Christ.

Participation in the Eucharist is a source of inner peace, because of the effectiveness of the Word and of the Bread of Life, and because of the integration into the ecclesial community that it achieves. Aware of the effort it costs a depressed person to do something which to others appears simple and spontaneous, one must endeavour to help him with patience and sensitivity, remembering the observation of St Theresa of the Child Jesus: "Little ones take little steps".

In his infinite love, God is always close to those who are suffering. Depressive illness can be a *way to discover other aspects of oneself* and new forms of encounter with God. Christ listens to the cry of those whose boat is rocked by the storm (cf. Mk 4: 35-41). He is present beside them to help them in the crossing and guide them to the harbour of rediscovered peace.

4. The phenomenon of depression reminds the Church and all society how important it is to provide people, and especially youth, with examples and experiences that can help them to grow on the human, psychological, moral and spiritual levels. In fact, the absence of reference points can only contribute to making persons more fragile, inducing them to believe that all forms of behaviour are the same. In this perspective, the role of the family, of school, of youth movements and of parish associations is very important because of the effect that these realities have on the person's formation.

Indeed, the public institutions have a significant role in guaranteeing a dignified standard of living,

especially to abandoned, sick and elderly people. Equally necessary are policies for youth aimed at offering the young generations motives for hope to protect them from emptiness or from dangerous fillers.

5. Dear friends, in encouraging you to a renewed commitment in such an important task beside your brothers and sisters who are suffering from depression, I entrust you to the intercession of Mary Most Holy, *Salus infirmorum* (Health of the Sick). May every individual and every family feel her motherly solicitude in times of difficulty.

To you all, to your collaborators and to your loved ones, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.