

Message of Pope Benedict XVI for the 18th World Day of the Sick

10-11 February 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The World Day of the Sick, which will be celebrated on 11 February of this year, the liturgical memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Lourdes, will see the diocesan communities meet with their bishops in moments of prayer, in order to reflect and to decide upon initiatives of sensitisation connected with the reality of suffering. The Pauline Year that we are celebrating offers a propitious opportunity to stop and reflect with the apostle Paul on the fact that "just as the sufferings of Christ overflow into our lives; so too does the encouragement we receive through Christ" (2 Cor 1:5). The spiritual link with Lourdes, in addition, calls to mind the maternal solicitude of the Mother of Jesus for the brethren of her Son "who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties, until they are led into the happiness of their true home" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 62).

This year we direct our attention particularly to children, the weakest and most defenceless creatures, and, amongst them, to the sick and suffering children. There are little human beings who carry in their bodies the consequences of illnesses which have made them invalids and others who fight against diseases that are now incurable despite the progress of medicine and the care of qualified researchers and health-care professionals. There are children wounded in their bodies and souls as a consequence of conflicts and wars, and other innocent victims of the hatred of senseless adults. There are 'street' children, deprived of the warmth of a family and abandoned to themselves, and minors profaned by abject people who violate their innocence, provoking in them a psychological wound that will mark them for the rest of their lives. And we cannot forget the incalculable number of young people who die because of thirst, hunger, lack of health care, and the little exiles and refugees from their own lands, with their parents, who are in search of better conditions of life. From all these children arises a silent cry of pain that calls on our conscience as men and believers.

The Christian community, which cannot remain indifferent to such dramatic situations, perceives the impelling duty to intervene. The Church, indeed, as I wrote in the encyclical *Deus caritas est*, "is God's family in the world. In this family no one ought to go without the necessities of life" (n. 25, b). I thus hope that the World Day of the Sick will also offer an opportunity to parish and diocesan communities to become increasingly aware that they are "God's family", and will encourage them to make the love of the Lord, who asks that "within the ecclesial family no member should suffer through being in need" (*ibid.*), perceivable in villages, neighbourhoods and cities. Witness to charity is a part of the life itself of every Christian community. And from the outset the Church translated Gospel principles into concrete actions, as we can read in the Acts of the Apostles. Today, given the changed conditions of health care, the need is perceived for closer cooperation between health-care workers who work in various health-care institutions and the ecclesial communities present in local areas. From this perspective, all the value is demonstrated of an institution that is connected with the Holy See, the "Bambino Gesù" Children's Hospital, which this year celebrates its 140 years of existence.

But there is more. Since a sick child belongs to a family that shares his or her suffering often with great hardship and difficulties, Christian communities cannot but also make themselves responsible for helping family units that are afflicted by the illness of a son or daughter. Following the example of the "Good Samaritan", one should bend down in front of people who are so sorely

troubled and offer them the support of practical solidarity. In this way, the acceptance and sharing of suffering is translated into a useful support to the families of sick children, creating within them a climate of serenity and hope, and making them feel surrounded by a wider family of brothers and sisters in Christ. The compassion of Jesus for the weeping of the widow of Nain (cf. Lk 7:12-17) and for the imploring prayer of Jairus (cf. Lk 8:41-56) constitute, amongst others, certain useful points of reference by which to learn to share in the moments of physical and moral tribulation of so many afflicted families. All of this presupposes a disinterested and generous love, a reflection and sign of the merciful love of God who never abandons his children in affliction, but always provides them with admirable resources of the heart and intelligence, so that they can adequately address the difficulties of life.

The daily dedication and tireless commitment to the service of sick children constitute an eloquent testimony of love for human life, in particular for the life of those who are weak and who are in everything and for everything dependent on others. It is, indeed, necessary to affirm with vigour the absolute and supreme dignity of every human life. The teaching that the Church proclaims incessantly does not change with the passing of time: human life is beautiful and should be lived in fullness even when it is weak and shrouded by the mystery of suffering. It is to Jesus that we must direct our gaze: in dying on the cross he wanted to share the pain of all humanity. In his suffering for love we see a supreme co-participation in the sufferings of sick children and their parents. My venerable predecessor John Paul II, who offered a shining example of the patient acceptance of suffering, especially at the sunset of his life, wrote: "on this Cross is the 'Redeemer of man', the Man of Sorrows, who has taken upon himself the physical and moral sufferings of the people of all times, so that in love they may find the salvific meaning of their sorrow and valid answers to all of their questions" (*Salvifici doloris*, n. 31).

I wish here to express my appreciation and encouragement of the international and national organisations that provide care to sick children, especially in poor countries, and with generosity and self-denial offer their contribution to assure that such children have adequate and loving care. At the same time I address a sorrowful appeal to the leaders of nations to strengthen laws and measures in favour of sick children and their families. Always, but even more when the lives of children are at stake, the Church, for her part, makes herself ready to offer her cordial cooperation, with the intention of transforming the whole of human civilisation into a "civilisation of love" (cf. *Salvifici doloris*, n. 30).

To end, I would like to express my spiritual nearness to all of you, dear brothers and sisters, who suffer from an illness. I address an affectionate greeting to those who help you: to bishops, to priests, to consecrated men and women, to health-care workers, to volunteers and to all those who dedicate themselves with love to treating and alleviating the sufferings of those who have to face up to illness. A special greeting for you, dear sick and suffering children: the Pope embraces you with fatherly love, together with your parents and relatives; he assures you that you are especially remembered in his prayers, inviting you to trust in the maternal help of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, who last Christmas we once again contemplated while she held in her arms the Son of God made child. Invoking upon you and every sick person the protection of the Holy Virgin, Health of the Sick, to all of you from my heart I impart a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 2 February 2009

Benedictus P. P. XVI