

Our Lady of Sorrows

CHABC

15 September 2011

Dear Bishop Gagnon, brother priests, sisters, and dear members of CHABC and friends in Christ who bring his healing compassion to their brothers and sisters:

Introduction

As always, we begin the Annual General Meeting and Conference of the Catholic Health Association of British Columbia with the celebration of the Eucharist, when we give the Lord thanks and praise for the many gifts he has given us, above all the gift of salvation in Christ, and implore his blessing that our activities today and in the world of health care might truly be for his honour and glory and the service of his people.

CHABC is itself one of the great gifts to the Church and community for which today we express our gratitude. Its mission is to deal with public policy issues affecting the delivery of health and pastoral care in hospitals and other facilities, to lobby for the freedom of independent health care in our Province, to foster high ethical standards among health care practitioners, to encourage and help form chaplains in our facilities, to distribute religious and educational materials, to organize the celebration of the World Day of the Sick, and to provide occasions, such as this conference, for professional and spiritual development. We are all very much in the debt of CHABC and its wise

leaders, especially Rick Folka, Chair of the Board, Susan House, its Executive Director, and Monsignor Bernard Rossi.

Especially noteworthy this past year has been the establishment of Parish Nursing at St. Michael's Parish, whose pastor is Monsignor Rossi, a development which I hope will be the first of many such initiatives in British Columbia; the publication of Advance Care Directives fully in accord with Catholic teaching; and working hard to ensure that those who are admitted to care facilities and wish to have a pastoral visit are accommodated.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Providence Health Care for its great contribution to the Church, to physicians and all the health care workers present here, as well to the pastoral workers in facilities both Catholic and not. You are responding to the words of Jesus: "I was sick and you took care of me" (Mt 25:36). As health-care professionals and volunteers, you are all "ministers of life," bringing Jesus' healing touch to the world of the sick, suffering and dying.

In his encyclical on Christian Hope, Pope Benedict observed that "the true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer. . . . A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering and to bear it

inwardly through ‘com-*passion*’ is a cruel and inhuman society.”¹

Thank you for helping to make the world a little more human, conformed a little more to God’s design, through your compassion. As sons and daughters of the Church, you offer the Lord your the service of your hands, cooperating with him and somehow becoming “part of the treasury of compassion so greatly needed by the human race.”²

No suffering can efface this divine image imprinted in the depths of our humanity. But, as believers, we have an additional grace. Because the Son of God freely embraced suffering and death, the eyes of faith enable us to see God’s image in the face of those who suffer. This love of his for the suffering helps us, in turn, to see others more clearly and to give them, above and beyond their material needs, the love for which they yearn.

¹ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 38.

² Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 40.

But we can do this only if we ourselves live in the friendship of Christ born of a personal encounter with him. You yourselves – as health care professionals and volunteers who daily live and work with the suffering know this well. As Pope Benedict recently said at a health care facility in Madrid, speaking to those who work and volunteer there: “Your lives and your committed service proclaim the greatness to which every human being is called: to show compassion and loving concern to the suffering, just as God himself did. In your noble work we hear an echo of the words found in the Gospel: ‘just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me’ (Mt 25:40).”³

Today the Church throughout the world is celebrating the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, especially fitting for those who labour in the apostolate of health care. We are confronted by a mother in pain who witnesses the suffering and death of her only son.

At the Foot of the Cross

In today’s Gospel we find Mary with a few other women and only one man, the beloved disciple, John, at the foot of the Cross. She is on Calvary, where she accompanied Jesus after his painful walk through Jerusalem and up the hill.

There is a beautiful and ancient Christian hymn, called the *Stabat*

³ Benedict XVI, Address to the San José Foundation, Madrid (20 August 2011).

Mater in Latin, which captures the moment:

At the cross her station keeping
stood the mournful mother weeping
close to Jesus to the last.

“Woman, this is your son. . . . this is your mother” (Jn 19:26, 27).

And Jesus speaks to her: “Woman, this is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “This is your mother” (cf. Jn 19:26-27). Notice that Jesus said to John, not “behold *my* mother” but “*your* mother.”

While around the Cross cries of derision and mockery can be heard, at the foot of the Cross there is the presence of love, an exchange between Mother and Son. Mary receives the disciple John as if he were her own son; she will take care of him as she took care of Jesus. Her motherhood is enlarged to include all the children who will form the new community of her Son’s disciples, the Church. And, at the same time, there is reciprocity. John, the beloved disciple, receives Mary as his mother, taking her into his home.

Mary was prepared for this moment of suffering and offering. As a young mother she had heard striking words in the Temple of Jerusalem when the old man Simeon said to her: “A sword will pierce through your own soul” (Lk 2:35). Now it is taking place. All the disciples, except the beloved John, have fled; yet she did not flee. She stayed there, with a mother’s courage, a mother’s fidelity, a mother’s goodness, and a faith

which did not waver even in the hour of darkness: “Blessed is she who believed” (Lk 1:45). In this Hour, this is Jesus’ great consolation.⁴ He died with his Mother looking on, a comfort to him and unimaginable suffering for her.

Faith, Suffering and Discipleship

Today’s feast allows, following upon yesterday’s – the Exaltation or triumph of the Holy Cross – reminds us that our salvation was purchased not only the suffering and death of Jesus, the Son who “learned to obey through suffering” (Heb 5:8), but that of all of us, each of whom must also share in his suffering. This is a hard lesson, and one we learn only very slowly in the course of our lives.

But the truth is there. Mary, the purest of human beings and the one closest to her Son, had to suffer. So must we. This is not a grim thought. Nor is it depressing. It is the path to salvation and life, a path taken by Jesus and then walked on above all by his Mother.

Mary’s suffering was not the physical suffering of Jesus. Most of us will not be called to an agonizing death like his – even though martyrs continue to give witness today. Rather, our suffering will be like Mary’s: the result of being faithful, of being true to our word, “I believe

⁴ Cf. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Meditations on the Via Crucis* (25 March 2005).

in Jesus Christ.”

Remember that as a young woman, at the time of the Annunciation when she conceived Jesus, she said, “Let it be done unto me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). She made a promise that what God wanted to do with her, whatever *he* wanted, she would obey. Of course she did not foresee the pain of exile in Egypt, the separation during his public ministry, and especially she could never have imagined that 33 years she would be witnessing the execution of her Son on a cross.

Her consent to God was not conditioned, with an inbuilt time-limit – a “yes, for now,” a “yes, for the time being,” or a “yes, until the going gets rough.” In accepting to be the Mother of the Messiah, she was committing herself to something irrevocable.

And the moment came – as it does for all of us – when God asks us once again whether or not we want to keep our promise to him – or not. While her Son, the Suffering Servant, was offering himself in sacrifice for our sins, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, Mary was the “woman of sorrows,” Our Lady of Sorrows, never hiding her face from him, never abandoning him.

The Pietà

While not recounted in the Gospel, tradition tells us that Mary received her dead Son into her arms when he was taken down from the cross. Think for a moment of the marvellous *Pietà* of Michelangelo in

St. Peter`s Basilica. It is one of the world`s most expressive works of art. It is an icon of discipleship and expresses far better than my words the cost and the meaning of total and unconditional love. Allow me to read and close with this wonderful paragraph from a book by Walter Ong which I first discovered many years ago. Writing of the Sorrowful Virgin he said:

In the *Pietà* the Virgin Mother has freed herself of all possessiveness, transmuted all *eros* (love involved in its own need) into *agape* (love as self-emptying, involved with the other). She has done so by lovingly acquiescing to her now adult Son`s doing what he was called to do, his Father`s will. She leaves her Son completely free, though doing so returns him dead to her arms. And when she takes him dead into her arms, she does not clutch at him, but leaves her arms open. The statue tugs at the hearts of women and men alike, but its subject matter is supremely feminine. And it is supreme human freedom; Mary has deliberately chosen to let her Son be about his Father`s business. If she had the choice once more, knowing what it would cost, she would do it again. No regrets. Total courage. Her youthful choice is still part of her. Hence her youthful face, often commented on, despite

her mature age. Her arms are open and relaxed. She is completely free, for she is fully aware of what she has chosen.⁵

On our path we are accompanied by a Mother, a Mother given to us, to each of us, by Jesus himself. She is our inheritance. She knows deeply what we are experiencing in our own suffering and our suffering with others, and she wants to be our guide and our protector on our journey, and our comfort in our sorrows. She loves us because we are her children now, according to the will of Christ on the Cross. Amen.

_ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver

⁵ Walter Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality and Consciousness* (Ithaca/London, 1981), 101.