

## **The World Day of the Sick**

Our Lady of Sorrows

13 February 2018

Dear Monsignor Rossi, brother priests who are concelebrating this Mass, dear Sisters, caregivers, and friends who are about to receive the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick: dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

### ***Introduction: Gratitude***

Gratitude is the first word which occurs to me at this, our annual celebration of the World Day of the Sick. I am grateful today for all those who tend to the sick and the suffering in their homes and health-care facilities by their spiritual, medical and compassionate care. Yours, dear friends, is an extraordinary ministry which brings blessings not only to yourselves but even more so to those whom you so patiently and sacrificially serve. Faithful to Jesus' teaching, you make tangible that the Church's caring for the sick is essential to her mission.

This service of yours, your shining witness that continues the ministry of care for the sick which Jesus himself exemplified, highlights that God's grace is active in our midst. Your example is the greatest line of defence the Church and society have for fostering an understanding of sickness and suffering that preserves human dignity to the fullest possible extent.

I am enormously grateful to all of you: to Monsignor Rossi, our Vicar for Health Care and the BC Bishops' representative to the Catholic Health Association of British Columbia; to Bob Breen, the Executive

Director of CHABC; to all the priests, chaplains, pastoral workers, Knights of Malta, and generous volunteers. Through you, Jesus himself touches the wounds of those who are afflicted.

### *Compassion*

There is much chatter in the media today about compassion. Some even dare to claim that killing a dying person is an act of compassion. But they forget that true compassion is an act of sharing, an act of reciprocity. It entails identifying with someone who is suffering and entering that person's painful world with tenderness and care, sharing in their lot. "It means to *suffer with*, in other words to empathize with the suffering of another, to the point of taking it upon oneself."<sup>1</sup> In the Body of Christ, suffering is alleviated when the burden is shared (cf. Gal 6:2).

Jesus himself shared in the suffering of his people. So often the Scriptures tell us that he was "moved with compassion." And, at times, his response was to heal a person suffering from an affliction. He showed that the Kingdom of God was close at hand by curing men and women. However, these cures were but signs; they point to Christ's deeper message, to the need for curing not only the body but also the soul. They guided the spectators – and us today – to understand that the most severe illness we can experience is the absence of God in our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, Angelus (3 August 2014).

Ultimately, “only reconciliation with God can give us true healing, true life.”<sup>2</sup>

### *Suffering of the Caregiver*

In the presence of the suffering of another person, and this is intensified when that person is close to us, we often feel powerless and cannot find the right words to say. This is completely understandable. Before a brother or sister plunged into the mystery of the Cross, a respectful silence, a prayerful presence, a gesture of tenderness, a kind look or smile, are often more valuable than many words.

This experience, after all, was that of the small group of men and women, including Mother Mary and the beloved disciple John. They accompanied Jesus in the depths of his suffering at the time of his Passion and Crucifixion. They walked the Way of the Cross with him. While less a physical suffering, theirs was a profound spiritual suffering: seeing one’s Son or one’s Teacher and Master unjustly tortured to death – and being powerless to stop it – would itself have been excruciating.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, the suffering of the caregiver – which is true compassion – always plays a vital role in building up the Body of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, Angelus (5 February 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Address at the Cardinal Paul Emile Léger Centre - CNRH, Yaoundé (19 March 2009).

### ***Response of Faith by the Sick***

Illness is always a trial, and more so when it is prolonged and painful. When physical healing does not happen, we can feel overwhelmed, isolated, and even depressed. How should a person react in such situations? With the appropriate treatment, certainly – medicine in recent decades has taken giant strides and we are grateful for it – but the Word of God teaches us something more: that the basic attitude with which to face illness is to have faith in God and his goodness. Jesus always repeats this to the people he heals: your faith has made you well (cf. Mk 5:34, 36).

But faith in what? In the love of God. This is the real answer which radically defeats the evil of sickness and suffering<sup>4</sup> and turns them into means of being united with Jesus in his work of salvation. It is worth meditating once again on the beautiful Opening Prayer of this Mass. It reminds those with faith of the immense spiritual fruitfulness that their sickness and suffering are for the Church, indeed they are called “blessed”: “grant that all who are oppressed by pain, distress or other afflictions may know that they are chosen among the blessed and are united to Christ in his suffering for the salvation of the world.”

### ***Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick***

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Angelus (5 February 2012).

We shall now proceed with the Rite of the Anointing of the Sick, that Sacrament by which Jesus himself continues his healing mission in the Church. This is how he strengthens us to play our part in that awesome mission of the salvation of the world. The Sacrament comforts us by healing our hearts to accept more joyfully what the Father is asking of those whom he calls “blessed.”

In the Anointing the Lord Jesus himself makes himself present. He takes those anointed by the hand; he caresses them as he did the sick long ago in Palestine, and he reminds them that they belong to him and that nothing – not even evil and death – can ever separate them from him.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Let us pray to Mary, Health of the Sick, who was given to us as our Mother by Jesus as he was dying on the Cross. Let us pray that every person who is sick and suffering might experience, thanks to the care of those who surround them, the power of God’s love and the comfort of her maternal tenderness.<sup>6</sup> To Mary we turn, confident she

will accompany us in our infirmities, our sickness and our suffering, just as she accompanied her Son on the way to Calvary and

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Francis, General Audience (26 February 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Francis, Angelus (8 February 2015).

kept watch at the foot of the Cross.

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB

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