



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
FOR THE WORLD DAY OF THE SICK
FOR THE YEAR 2001**

1. Enriched by the grace of the Great Jubilee and by contemplation of the mystery of the incarnate Word, in which human pain finds "its supreme and surest point of reference" (*Salvifici doloris*, n. 31), the Christian community is preparing to celebrate the Ninth World Day of the Sick on 11 February 2001. The place designated for the celebration of this significant event is the cathedral of Sydney, Australia. The choice of the Australian continent with its cultural and ethnic wealth highlights the close bond of ecclesial communion: this bond transcends distances and fosters the encounter of different cultural identities made fruitful by the one liberating message of salvation.

The cathedral of Sydney is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church. This fact emphasizes the Marian dimension of the World Day of the Sick, which has now been observed for nine years on the memorial of Our Lady of Lourdes. As a loving Mother, Mary will once again enable not only the sick on the Australian continent to feel her protection, but also all who dedicate their professional skills and often their whole lives to serving them.

As in the past, the Day will be an occasion of prayer and support for the countless institutions devoted to the care of the suffering. It will encourage the many priests, religious and lay believers who seek to respond in the Church's name to the expectations of sick people, while paying special attention to the weakest and those struggling the most, in order to assure the victory of the culture of life over the culture of death everywhere (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, n. 100). Since I too have shared the experience of illness several times in recent years, I have come to understand more and more clearly its value for my Petrine ministry and for the Church's life itself. In expressing my affectionate solidarity to those who are suffering, I invite them to contemplate with faith the mystery of Christ crucified and risen, in order to discover God's loving plan in their own experience of pain. Only by looking at Jesus, "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Is 53: 3), is it possible to find serenity and trust.

2. On this World Day of the Sick, whose theme is *The New Evangelization and the Dignity of the Suffering Person*, the Church intends to stress the need to evangelize in a new way this area of human experience, in order to encourage its orientation to the overall well-being of the person and the progress of all people in every part of the world.

The effective treatment of various pathologies, commitment to further research and the investment of adequate resources are praiseworthy objectives which have been successfully pursued in vast areas of the globe. However, while applauding the efforts made, one cannot overlook the fact that not everyone enjoys the same opportunities. I therefore make a pressing appeal that everything be done to encourage the necessary development of health services in the still numerous countries which are unable to offer their inhabitants proper living conditions and appropriate health care. I also hope that the vast potential of modern medicine will be put at the effective service of human beings and applied with full respect for their dignity.

In her 2,000-year history, the Church has always tried to support therapeutic progress for the sake of ever improved assistance to the sick. She has intervened in various situations with every means at her disposal to see that the rights of the person are respected and his authentic well-being always pursued (cf. *Populorum progressio*, n. 34). Today too, faithful to the principles of the Gospel, the Magisterium never ceases to offer moral criteria to guide medical personnel in studying those aspects of research which have not yet been sufficiently clarified, without violating the requirements of an authentic humanism.

3. Every day I go on a spiritual pilgrimage to hospitals and treatment centres, where people of every age and social background live. I would particularly like to pause beside the patients, their relatives and the health-care personnel. These places are like shrines where people participate in Christ's paschal mystery. Even the most heedless person is prompted there to wonder about his own life and its meaning, about the reason for evil, suffering and death (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 10). This is why it is important that the skilled and significant presence of believers should never be wanting in these structures.

Therefore how could I not make a pressing appeal to medical and nursing professionals to learn from Christ, the physician of souls and bodies, to be authentic "Good Samaritans" towards their brothers and sisters? In particular, how could I not hope that everyone dedicated to research will work tirelessly to identify suitable ways to promote the integral health of the human being and fight the consequences of diseases? How could I not, in addition, encourage those who are directly involved in the care of the sick to be always attentive to the needs of the suffering, combining skill and humanity in their professional life?

Hospitals, centres for the sick or the elderly and every institution which cares for the suffering are privileged areas for the new evangelization, which must be committed to making the Gospel message of hope heard precisely in these places. Only Jesus the divine Samaritan is the fully

satisfying answer to the deepest expectations of every human being in search of peace and salvation. Christ is the Saviour of every person and of the whole person. For this reason the Church never tires of proclaiming him, so that the world of illness and the search for health may be enlivened by his light.

It is important, then, that at the beginning of the third Christian millennium a new impetus be given to the evangelization of the world of health as a place particularly suited to becoming a valuable laboratory for the civilization of love.

4. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in scientific research in the medical field and in the modernization of health-care structures. We can only look favourably at this trend, but at the same time it must be stressed that there is a constant need for it to be guided by the concern to offer the sick an effective service, supporting them efficaciously in the fight against disease. In this perspective, there is increasing discussion of "holistic" care, that is, care that pays attention to the biological, psychological, social and spiritual needs of the sick and of those around them. It is particularly necessary, with regard to medicines, treatments and surgical operations, for clinical experimentation to be conducted with absolute respect for the individual and with a clear awareness of the risks and, consequently, of the limits involved. In this area Christian professionals are called to bear witness to their ethical convictions and to be constantly enlightened by faith.

The Church appreciates the efforts of those who, by engaging in research or treatment with dedication and professionalism, help to improve the quality of the service offered to the sick.

5. The equitable distribution of goods, desired by the Creator, is also an urgent imperative in the area of health: the persistent injustice that deprives a large part of the population of the treatment indispensable to health, especially in poor countries, must cease once and for all. This is a grave scandal which can only prompt national leaders to make every effort to ensure that those who lack material means are provided with access to at least basic health care. Promoting "health for all" is a primary duty for every member of the international community; for Christians it is a commitment closely connected with their witness of faith. They know that they must proclaim the Gospel of life in a practical way by promoting respect for it and rejecting every kind of attack on it, from abortion to euthanasia. Reflection on the use of available resources also belongs in this context: their limitedness calls for the establishment of clear moral criteria to guide the decisions of patients or their guardians regarding extraordinary procedures which are expensive or risky. In any case, recourse to forms of aggressive medical treatment should be avoided (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, n. 65).

Here I would like to praise the individuals and structures, and especially religious institutions, which perform a generous service in this sector by courageously responding to the urgent needs of persons and peoples in regions or countries of great poverty. The Church expresses to them a renewed appreciation of the contribution they continually make in this vast and sensitive apostolate. I would like, in particular, to urge the members of religious families involved in health-

care ministry to respond boldly to the challenges of the third millennium, following in the footsteps of their founders. In view of the new tragedies and diseases which have replaced the plagues of the past, there is a pressing need for the work of "Good Samaritans" who can offer the sick the treatment they need, but at the same time provide them with spiritual support to endure their difficult situation with faith.

6. I extend a particularly affectionate thought to the many men and women religious who, with an ever increasing number of lay people, are writing wonderful pages of Gospel charity in hospitals and health-care centres. They often work in frightening war zones and daily risk their lives to save those of their brethren. Unfortunately, many have died for their service to the Gospel of Life.

I would also like to mention the many non-governmental organizations which have recently arisen to help those disadvantaged in the area of health. They can rely on the contribution of "on-site" volunteers, as well as on the generosity of a large number of people who financially support their activity. I encourage them all to continue this praiseworthy work, which in many nations is sensitizing consciences in a significant way.

Lastly I address you, dear sick people and generous health-care professionals. This World Day of the Sick is taking place shortly after the conclusion of the Jubilee Year. It is therefore a renewed invitation to contemplate the face of Christ, who became Man 2,000 years ago to redeem man. Dear brothers and sisters, proclaim and bear witness to the Gospel of life and hope with generous dedication. Proclaim that Christ is the comfort of all who are in distress or difficulty; he is the strength of those experiencing moments of fatigue and vulnerability; he is the support of those who work zealously to assure better living and health conditions for everyone.

I entrust you to Mary, Mother of the Church, to whom, as I recalled at the beginning, the cathedral of Sydney, the spiritual centre of the Ninth World Day of the Sick, is dedicated. May Our Lady of Consolation make her motherly protection felt by all her suffering children; may she help you bear witness before the world to the tenderness of God and make you living icons of her Son. With these wishes I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you and to all your loved ones.

From Castel Gandolfo, 22 August 2000.