

“The Church in the Service of Love for the Suffering”

*MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
FOR THE EIGHTEENTH WORLD DAY OF THE SICK - 11 February 2010*

*Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Foundation of the
Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers (for Health Pastoral Care)*

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

On 11 February of next year, the liturgical memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Lourdes, the XVIII World Day of the Sick will be celebrated in the Vatican Basilica. This happy coinciding with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the foundation of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers constitutes a further reason to thank God for the journey that has been made hitherto in the sector of pastoral care in health. With all my heart I hope that this anniversary will be an occasion for a more generous apostolic impetus to the service of the sick and those who care for them.

Indeed, by the annual World Day of the Sick the Church intends to sensitise the ecclesial community in a capillary way about the importance of pastoral service in the vast world of health, a service that is an integral part of its mission because it is written into the furrow of the very salvific mission of Christ. He, divine Physician, “went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil” (Acts 10:38). In the mystery of his passion, death and resurrection, human suffering attained meaning and fullness of light. In his apostolic letter *Salvifici doloris*, the Servant of God John Paul II has illuminating words on the subject: “Human suffering”, he wrote, “has reached its culmination in the passion of Christ. And at the same time it has entered into a completely new dimension and a new order: *it has been linked to love*, to that love which creates good, drawing it out by means of suffering, just as the supreme good of the Redemption of the world was drawn from the Cross of Christ, and from that Cross constantly take its beginning. The Cross of Christ has become a source from which flow rivers of living water” (n. 18).

The Lord Jesus at the Last Supper, before returning to the Father, bent down to wash the feet of the Apostles, anticipating the supreme act of love of the Cross. By this gesture he invited his disciples to enter into the same logic of love that should be given in particular to the least and those most in need (cf. Jn 13:12-17). Following his example, every Christian is called to live anew, in different and always new contexts, the parable of the Good Samaritan, who, when passing a man left half dead by thieves at the side of the road, “went up to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He then lifted him onto his own mount and took him to an inn and looked after him. Next day, he took out two denarii and handed them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Look after him, and on my way back I will make good any extra expense you have’” (Lk 10:33-35).

At the end of this parable Jesus says: “Go, and do the same yourself” (Lk 10:37). He addresses us, as well, with these words. He exhorts us to bend down before the wounds of the body and of the spirit of so many of our brothers and sisters that we encounter on the roads of the world; he helps us to understand that with the grace of God received and lived in daily life, the experience of illness and suffering can become a school of hope. In truth, as I stated in my encyclical *Spe salvi*, “It is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed, but rather by the capacity for accepting it, maturing through it and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love” (n. 37).

The Ecumenical Second Vatican Council referred to the important task of the Church of caring for human suffering. In the dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* we read that “Christ was sent by the Father ‘to bring good news to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart’ (Lk 4:18), ‘to seek and to save what was lost’ (Lk 19:10). Similarly, the Church encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder. It does all it can to relieve their need and in them it strives to serve Christ” (n. 8). Down the centuries, this humanitarian and spiritual action of the ecclesial community for the sick and the suffering has been expressed in multiple forms and

health-care structures, of an institutional character as well. I would like to remember here those that are directly managed by dioceses and those that were created by the generosity of various religious institutes. This is a valuable “patrimony” that corresponds to the fact that “love thus needs to be organised if it is to be an ordered service to the community” (encyclical *Deus caritas est*, n. 20). The creation of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, twenty-five years ago or thereabouts, belongs to this ecclesial solicitude for the world of health. And I would like to add that at the present historical-cultural moment one perceives even more the need for an attentive and ecclesial presence at the side of the sick and also for a presence within society that is able to transmit gospel values, in an effective way, in defence of life at all its stages, from its conception until its natural end.

I would like here to take up the *Message to the Poor, the Sick and the Suffering* which the fathers of the Second Vatican Council addressed to the world at the end of that Council: “All of you who feel heavily the weight of the cross”, they said, “you who weep...you the unknown victims of suffering, take courage. You are the preferred children of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of hope, happiness and life. You are the brothers of the suffering Christ, and with Him, if you wish, you are saving the world” (*Ench. Vat.*, I, n. 523*, [p. 313]). From my heart I thank those who every day “serve the sick and suffering” so that the “apostolate of mercy may ever more effectively respond to people’s needs” (John Paul II, Apost. Const. *Pastor Bonus*, art. 152).

In this Year for Priests my thoughts are particularly addressed to you, dear priests, “ministers of the sick”, a sign and instrument of the compassion of Christ which must reach all men who are marked by suffering. I invite you, dear presbyters, not to spare yourselves in giving them care and comfort. Time passed at the side of those in affliction reveals itself to be fertile in grace for all the other dimensions of pastoral care. Lastly, I address you, dear sick people, and I ask you to pray and to offer up your sufferings for priests so that they may remain faithful to their vocations

and so that their ministries will be rich in spiritual fruits, to the benefit of the whole of the Church.

With these feelings I implore upon the sick, and also on those who take care of them, the maternal protection of Mary *Salus infirmorum*, and on them all, from my heart, I bestow my Apostolic Blessing,

From the Vatican, 22 November 2009, the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ,
King of the Universe,

Benedict XVI