

World Day of the Sick

Holy Rosary Cathedral

12 February 2021

Dear Father Santa Maria, Deacon Richard; dear caregivers, volunteers, chaplains and especially dear friends who are sick and brothers and sisters in Christ who are praying for the health of their loved ones at this Holy Mass:

Introduction

This year our celebration of the World Day of the Sick is especially significant. For nearly a year now, a great many people around the world, in our country and here in our province have been suffering because of the unexpected pandemic caused by that “devious and unpredictable enemy,”¹ COVID-19.

Today we have the occasion to express our gratitude for the efforts of all those who, in many different ways, have been dedicating themselves to being with and caring for the sick, often at the risk to their own health. To this silent multitude of healthcare workers and volunteers in our acute care hospitals, long-term care facilities and homes, we owe our profound thanks. Combining professional skill with sacrificial love,

¹ Francis, Address to the Diplomatic Corps (8 February 2021).

we happily recognize them as “angels” at the side of the sick whom they comfort, support, and at times accompany to the threshold of eternal life.

² These generous women and men bring the closeness of God himself to those who are suffering. That’s why they are our heroes.

The coronavirus has forced all of us to acknowledge our fragility and vulnerability before forces beyond our control.³ The pandemic raises once again the age-old questions of why we get sick, suffer and die. And sometimes we even ask ourselves whether Jesus is indifferent to our sickness, whether he really cares about our suffering. We cry out: where are you, O Lord, when I am ill and in pain, when everything seems to be going wrong?

The only possible answer for believers and disciples to make sense of all this is for us to “keep our gaze firmly fixed on Jesus (cf. Heb 12:2). In him, we will see what God himself does in the face of our ills. He shares it. Listen to what today’s Gospel says, citing a prophecy of Isaiah and applying it to Jesus: “He took our infirmities [upon himself] and bore our diseases” (Mt 8:17). The whole account of Jesus’ Passion and Death tells us that Jesus was no stranger to suffering. He took it to

²² Cf. Francis, Address to the Doctors, Nurses and Healthcare Workers from the Lombardy Region (20 June 2020).

³³ Cf. Francis, *Urbi et Orbi* Message (27 March 2020).

himself, put it on his shoulders, and carried that suffering to the Cross before transforming it at the Resurrection.

Jesus, then, didn't eliminate suffering and death from the world. Rather, he took upon himself the burden of our human condition to heal us in an even more radical way: to free us from our sins. This is how Christ fights the world's maladies and suffering: by compassion, by suffering with us thereby conquering them.⁴

Jesus' Healing Ministry

Even before the saving events of the Paschal Mystery, the ultimate healing, Jesus's public ministry offers us countless examples of healing of body and spirit. He cures those affected by fever (cf. Mk 1:29-34), leprosy (cf. Mk 1:40-45), and paralysis (cf. Mk 2:1-12). He restores sight to the blind (cf. Mk 8:22-26; Jn 9:1-7), speech to the dumb, and hearing to the deaf (cf. Mk 7:31-37). Today's Gospel sums up the healing ministry of Jesus in this way: "That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick" (Mt 8:16).

In today's account Peter's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. Jesus' attitude and gesture tell us how he treated the sick: "he touched

⁴⁴ Cf. Francis, Angelus (15 February 2015).

her hand, and the fever left her” (Mt 8:15). This simple act shows his tenderness. Jesus’ healing power cures the woman who resumes her normal life. Immediately she thinks of others: “she got up and began to serve him” (Mt 8:15).

Jesus’ disciples were eyewitnesses to this cure and countless others. But the Lord didn’t want just spectators of his healing mission. Jesus bestowed his healing power upon his Apostles. He sent them out to the highways and byways to do what he was doing: to heal the sick and cast out demons (cf. Mt 10:1; Mk 6:7). After Pentecost, we read in the Acts of the Apostles accounts of the healings worked by Peter (cf. Acts 3:4-8) and Paul (cf. Acts 14:8-11).

This healing mission of the Church has continued without interruption, right up until the present day. Just this past Sunday, Pope Francis affirmed that “taking care of the sick of every kind is an integral part of the Church’s mission, as it was for Jesus.”⁵⁵ It brings to the sick “the Lord’s own gaze, full of tenderness and compassion.”⁶⁶ This “gaze” becomes visible in the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, a Rite which

⁵⁵ Francis, Angelus (7 February 2021).

⁶⁶ Francis, Message for the 26th World Day of the Sick (26 November 2017), 6.

traditionally accompanies this annual Mass, but is impossible today in any large gathering.

Dear brothers and sisters who are ill and for whom we are praying intensely at this Mass: your sickness attracts the heart of Jesus. In him, you can find light to brighten your darkest moments, and hope to ease your distress. In Jesus, you can find the strength to face all the worries and questions that assail you during the trials of body and soul that sickness often provokes.⁷

The “Healthy” and the World Day of the Sick

The World Day of the Sick not only acknowledges the suffering of the sick but also challenges the whole Christian community to express its solidarity with them. Through your compassion and concrete solidarity, dear friends, Jesus himself caresses those who are ill.⁸

Palliative Care

As St. Paul writes in today’s First Reading, at the end of life, when “our outer self is wasting away” (2 Cor 4:16), we are entrusted more than ever to one another’s care in gestures of profound human solidarity.

⁷⁷ Cf. Francis, Message for the 28th World Day of the Sick (2 January 2020), 3.

⁸⁸ Cf. Francis, Angelus (8 February 2015).

But reverence for this sacred moment of preparing for the “eternal weight of glory beyond all measure” (2 Cor 4:17) is now blighted by the spectre of the ever increasing availability of euthanasia in our country. Right now, Bill C-7 is before the Canadian Parliament. If enacted, its provisions would extend euthanasia even to those whose death is not “reasonably foreseeable.” The only way now to minimize the damage to human dignity caused by such a morally depraved law is to work to ensure that palliative care is affordable and accessible to every Canadian.

Palliative care embraces the sick, supports them and their families in their difficulties, offers them affection, attention, and the means to alleviate their suffering.⁹ Such care “supports and respects the dignity of the person and is anchored in the recognition that human life has an objective value independent of illness or life situation.”¹⁰

St. Joseph: Patron of a Happy Death

Christians have long held St. Joseph to be the Patron of a happy death, which we do well to highlight during this Year of St. Joseph. As he breathed his last, he died comforted and cared for by his loved ones,

⁹ Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Samaritanus Bonus*, IV.

¹⁰ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Statement on the Re-tabling of Bill C-7: “An Act to amend the Criminal Code (medical assistance in dying),” (20 October 2020).

in the arms of Mary and Jesus. This was a scene of sadness, but also one of tenderness and trust in the goodness of God ready to receive him into the glory of the Kingdom.¹¹

Conclusion

Dear brothers and sisters who are sick, fragile or suffering: you are on the front line of prayer for the Church and the world, powerfully interceding for us, together with Mary, Health of the Sick, at your side. As we continue our Eucharist on this World Day of the Sick, we pray for you, as you do for us. We pray for one another because we share in the supernatural solidarity of the Communion of Saints invisibly gathered around this altar.

✠ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver

¹¹¹ Cf. Nuala Kenny, *Rediscovering the Art of Dying* (Toronto: Novalis, 2017), 21.