



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS
JOHN PAUL II
FOR THE 13TH WORLD DAY OF THE SICK
(SHRINE OF MARY, QUEEN OF THE APOSTLES,
YAOUNDÉ, CAMEROON - 11 FEBRUARY 2005)**

Christ, hope for Africa

1. After ten years, in 2005, Africa will once again be hosting the principal celebrations for World Day of the Sick that will take place at the Shrine of Mary, Queen of the Apostles, in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

The choice of this venue will offer an opportunity to express real solidarity to the peoples of that Continent, tried by serious inadequacies in the health-care sector. A further step will thus be taken in implementing the commitment which the Christians of Africa made at the third World Day of the Sick 10 years ago, that is, to be "Good Samaritans" to their brothers and sisters in difficulties.

Actually, in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, complying with the observations of many Synod Fathers, I wrote that "contemporary Africa can be compared to the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho; he fell among robbers who stripped him, beat him and departed, leaving him half dead (cf. Lk 10: 30-37)". And I added that "Africa is a Continent where countless human beings - men and women, children and young people - are lying, as it were, on the edge of the road, sick, injured, disabled, marginalized and abandoned. They are in dire need of Good Samaritans who will come to their aid" (n. 41).

2. World Day of the Sick aims to stimulate reflection on the subject of health, whose fullest meaning also alludes to the harmony of human beings with themselves and with the surrounding world. It is exactly this vision that Africa richly expresses in its cultural tradition, testified to by many art forms, both civil and religious, that are bursting with joy, rhythm and musicality.

Unfortunately, however, today this harmony is deeply disturbed. Numerous diseases wreak havoc on the Continent, including in particular the scourge of AIDS, "which is sowing suffering and death in many parts of Africa" (*ibid.*, n. 116: *loc. cit.* n. 69). The conflicts and wars that afflict many regions of Africa stand in the way of interventions to prevent and treat these diseases. In the refugee camps people are languishing who are deprived even of the indispensable foodstuffs for survival.

I urge those who can to continue to do their utmost to put an end to these tragedies (*cf. ibid.*, n. 117). I then remind people responsible for the sale of arms of what I said in that Document: "Those who foment wars in Africa by the arms trade are accomplices in abominable crimes against humanity" (*ibid.*, n. 118).

3. As for the drama of AIDS, I have had the opportunity in other circumstances to stress that it is also symptomatic of a "pathology of the spirit". To fight it responsibly, it is necessary to increase its prevention by teaching respect for the sacred value of life and the correct approach to sexuality.

Indeed, if there are many contagious infections passed on through the blood especially during pregnancy - infections that must be combated with every possible means - those contracted through sexual intercourse are by far the most numerous and can only be avoided by responsible conduct and the observance of the virtue of chastity.

The Bishops participating in the above-mentioned Synod for Africa in 1994, referring to the effect of irresponsible sexual behaviour on the spread of the disease, made a recommendation that I would like to propose anew here: "The companionship, joy, happiness and peace which Christian marriage and fidelity provide, and the safeguard which chastity gives, must be continuously presented to the faithful, particularly the young" (*ibid.*, n. 116).

4. Everyone must feel involved in the battle against AIDS. In this area too, it is the task of government leaders and civil authorities to make available to citizens clear and correct information, and to earmark sufficient resources to provide education in health care for young people. I encourage international organizations to promote initiatives in this field that are inspired by wisdom and solidarity, and always to strive to defend human dignity and to protect the inviolable right to life.

Earnest applause goes to the pharmaceutical industries engaged in keeping low the costs of medicines helpful in the treatment of AIDS. Of course, financial resources are necessary for scientific research in the health-care sector and further resources are required to put the newly discovered drugs on the market, but in the face of emergencies such as AIDS, the preservation of human life must come before any other criterion.

I ask pastoral workers "to bring to their brothers and sisters affected by AIDS all possible material,

moral and spiritual comfort. I urgently ask the world's scientists and political leaders, motivated by the love and respect due to every human person, to use every means available in order to put an end to this scourge (*ibid.*, n. 116).

I would like in particular to recall here with admiration the many health-care workers, chaplains and volunteers who, like Good Samaritans, assist persons with AIDS and care for their relatives. In this regard, the service of the thousands of Catholic health-care institutions that go to the help of people in Africa afflicted by every kind of illness, and especially by AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis, is invaluable.

In recent years, I have noted that my appeals for persons with AIDS have not been in vain. I have seen with pleasure that various countries and institutions, with a coordinated effort, have supported practical campaigns for its prevention and for the care of the sick.

5. I am now addressing you in a special way, dear Brother Bishops of the Bishops' Conferences of other Continents, to ask you generously to join forces with the Pastors of Africa, to deal effectively with this and other emergencies. The Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care will continue, as in the past, to make its own contribution to coordinating and promoting this cooperation, asking every Bishops' Conference for its effective contribution.

The Church's attention to Africa's problems is not only motivated by philanthropic compassion for men and women in need but is also fostered by attachment to Christ the Redeemer, whose face she recognizes in the features of every suffering person. It is faith, therefore, that impels her to do her utmost in caring for the sick, as she has always done in the course of history. Hope enables her, despite the obstacles of every kind that she encounters, to persevere in this mission. Finally, charity suggests to her the right approach to the different situations, enabling her to perceive the particular features of each person and to respond to them.

With this attitude of deep sharing, the Church reaches out to life's injured in order to offer them Christ's love through the many forms of help that "creativity in charity" (Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 50) suggests to her. She repeats to each one: courage, God has not forgotten you. Christ suffers with you. And by offering up your sufferings, you can collaborate with him in the redemption of the world.

6. The annual celebration of the World Day of the Sick offers everyone a possibility of understanding better the importance of pastoral health care. In our time, marked by a culture imbued with secularism, some have at times been tempted not to recognize the full value of this pastoral context.

They think that human destiny is played out in other fields. Instead, it is precisely in times of sickness that the need to find adequate responses to the ultimate questions about human life is

the most pressing: questions on the meaning of pain, suffering and death itself, considered not only as an enigma that is hard to face, but a mystery in which Christ incorporates our lives in himself, opening them to a new and definitive birth for the life that will never end.

In Christ lies the hope of true, full health; the salvation that he brings is the true response to the ultimate questions about man. There is no contradiction between earthly health and eternal salvation, since the Lord died for the integral salvation of the human person and of all humanity (cf. I Pt 1: 2-5; Liturgy of Holy Friday, *Adoration of the Cross*). Salvation consists of the final content of the New Covenant.

At the next World Day of the Sick, let us therefore proclaim the hope of total health for Africa and for all humanity, as we strive to work with greater determination at the service of this important cause.

7. In the Gospel passage of the Beatitudes, the Lord proclaims: "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*" (Mt 5: 4). The contradiction that seems to exist between suffering and joy is overcome through the consoling action of the Holy Spirit. In conforming us to the mystery of the crucified and Risen Christ, the Holy Spirit opens us from this moment to the joy that will culminate in our beatific encounter with the Redeemer. In fact, the human being does not only aspire to physical or spiritual well-being, but to a "health" that is expressed in total harmony with God, with self and with humanity. This goal can only be reached through the mystery of the passion, death and Resurrection of Christ.

Mary Most Holy offers us an eloquent anticipation of this eschatological reality, especially through the mysteries of her Immaculate Conception and her Assumption into Heaven. In her, conceived without any shadow of sin, is found full acceptance of the divine will and service to human beings, and consequently, she is full of that deep harmony from which joy flows.

We therefore rightly turn to her, invoking her as "*Cause of our joy*". What the Virgin gives to us is a joy that endures even in trials. However, as I think of Africa, endowed with immense human, cultural and religious resources but afflicted also by unspeakable suffering, a heartfelt prayer rises to my lips:

*O Mary, Immaculate Virgin,
Woman of suffering and hope,
be kind to every suffering person,
obtain fullness of life for each one.*

Turn your maternal gaze
especially upon those in Africa
whose need is extreme,

struck down by AIDS
or other mortal illness.

Look upon the mothers who are mourning their children;
Look upon the grandparents who lack the resources
to support their orphaned grandchildren.

Embrace them all, keep them close to your Mother's heart.

Queen of Africa and of the whole world,
Virgin Most Holy, pray for us!

From the Vatican, 8 September 2004

JOHN PAUL II