



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT IN NEW ZEALAND

***ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE SICK, THE ELDERLY
AND THE HANDICAPPED***

Wellington (New Zealand), 23 November 1986

"The Kingdom of God is very near to you!" Dear Brothers and Sisters,¹ On the feast of Christ the King, I am pleased to be with you who in a special way share in the sufferings of our Saviour. I greet you in the name of Jesus, who is our strength and hope. And I offer cordial greetings, too, to those of you who have accompanied our suffering brothers and sisters in Christ. It is a great joy to be with all of you here in Wellington. As I prayed and prepared for my pastoral visit to New Zealand, I looked forward particularly to being with the sick, the elderly, the handicapped and disabled. I looked forward to this occasion when we would join in prayer and celebrate this Liturgy of the Anointing of the Sick. Now that I am with you, I can assure you of the special place you have in my own heart and in the life of the Church. Your prayers and sacrifices have great power; because they contribute so much to the Church's mission of salvation. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: "The Kingdom of God is very near to you"! The only time Jesus was asked: "Are you a king?" was during his Passion, at the time of his greatest suffering. Indeed, it was by his suffering and death that he won for us the gift of the Redemption and definitively established his Kingdom. Perhaps this helps us to understand better why Jesus gave the following instructions to his disciples when he first sent them forth: "Whenever you go into a town where they make you welcome, eat what is set before you. Cure those in it who are sick, and say, 'The Kingdom of God is very near to you' ".³ God wishes to draw near to every human person, but with particular tenderness to those who are sick.² Human suffering, however, tempts us to doubt the words of Jesus that the Kingdom of God is near. When pain dulls the mind and weighs down body and soul, God can seem far away; life can become a heavy burden. We are tempted not to believe the Good News. "For" as the Book of Wisdom says, "a perishable body presses down the soul, and this tent of clay weighs down the teeming mind". The mystery of human suffering overwhelms the sick person and poses disturbing new questions: Why is God allowing me to suffer? What purpose does it serve? How can God who is good permit something which is so evil? There are no easy answers to these questions asked by the burdened mind and heart. Certainly, no satisfying answer can be found without the light of faith. We must cry out to God, our Father and Creator, as did the author of the Book of Wisdom: "With you is wisdom, she who knows your words... Despatch her from the holy heavens... to help me and to toil with me and teach me what is pleasing to you".³ Our Saviour knows well the many special needs of those who suffer. From the beginning of his public ministry, together with his preaching of the Good

News of the Kingdom, "he went about doing good and healing". When he sent forth his own disciples on their mission, he gave them a special power and clear instructions to follow his example. In his preaching, Jesus makes it clear that, although illness is linked to the sinful condition of humanity, in individual cases it is certainly not a punishment from God for personal sins. When asked whose sin had caused a man to be born blind, Jesus replied: "Neither he nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him". What unexpected Good News this was for his followers! This suffering is not divine retribution. On the contrary, it is intended for a good purpose: "so that the works of God might be displayed"! And indeed, it was the suffering and death of Christ that displayed the works of God most eloquently. By his Paschal Mystery, Jesus won for us our salvation. Suffering and death, when accepted with love and offered with trust to God, become the key to eternal victory, the triumph of life over death, the triumph of life through death.⁴ By means of a special Sacrament, the Church continues Jesus' ministry of caring for the sick. Thus, the Liturgy of the Anointing of the Sick which we are celebrating today faithfully continues the example of our loving Saviour. This Sacrament is best understood within the context of the Church's overall concern for the sick. For it is the culminating point of the many and varied pastoral efforts made for the sick in their homes, in hospitals and in other places. It is the climax of an entire programme of loving service in which all the members of the Church are involved. What we are doing today is faithful to the example of Jesus and to the instructions of Saint James, who wrote: "If one of you is ill, he should send for the elders of the Church, and they must anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up again; and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven". Today in New Zealand, the Successor of Peter continues this tradition of the anointing of the sick, which the Church teaches to be one of the Seven Sacraments of the New Testament instituted by Christ. It is good for all of us, even the elderly and sick, to remember that good health is not something to be taken for granted but a blessing from the Lord. Nor is it something we should endanger through the misuse of alcohol or drugs or in any other way. For, as Saint Paul says, "Your body, you know, is the temple of the Holy Spirit... That is why you should use your body for the glory of God". Doing what we can to maintain our own good health makes it possible for us to serve others and fulfil our responsibilities in the world. However, when illness does come, we have this special Sacrament to assist us in our weakness and to bring the strengthening and healing presence of Christ.⁵ Those who are seriously ill feel deeply their need for the assistance of Christ and the Church. Besides the physical pain and weakness, illness brings powerful anxieties and fears. The sick are vulnerable to temptations which they may never have faced before; they may even be led to the verge of despair. The Anointing of the Sick responds to these precise needs, for it is a sacrament of faith, a sacrament for the whole person, body and soul. Through the laying on of hands by the priest, the anointing with oil and the prayers, new grace is given: "The sacrament provides the sick person with the grace of the Holy Spirit by which the whole individual is brought to health, trust in God is encouraged, and strength is given to resist the temptations of the Evil One and anxiety about death. Thus the sick person is able not only to bear his or her suffering bravely, but also to fight against it. A return to physical health may even follow the reception of this sacrament if it will be beneficial to the sick person's salvation". The Anointing of the Sick brings particular consolation and grace to those who are near death. It prepares them to face this final moment of earthly life with lively faith in the Risen Saviour and firm hope in the Resurrection. At the same time, we must remember that the Sacrament is meant not only for those about to die but for anyone who is in danger of death through sickness or old age. Its purpose is not only to prepare us for death, which will inevitably come to all of us, but also to strengthen us in our time of illness. For this reason, the Church encourages the sick and elderly not to wait until the point of death to ask for the Sacrament and to seek its grace.⁶ Today's Liturgy says that the Lord is the Good Shepherd who leads us beside restful waters to refresh our drooping spirits. The Psalmist says to God: "You have prepared a banquet for me in the sight of my foes. My head you have anointed with oil; my cup is

overflowing". Anointing with oil has been used to signify healing, but at the same to signify a particular mission among God's people. In the Scriptures we often find that people whom God has chosen for a special mission receive a special anointing. So it is with you who are sick or elderly. You have an important role in the Church. First of all, the very weakness which you feel, and particularly the love and faith with which you accept that weakness, remind the world of the higher values in life, of the things that really matter. Moreover, your sufferings take on a special value, a creative character, when you offer them in union with Christ. They become redemptive, since they share in the mystery of the Redemption. That is why Saint Paul could say: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's affections for the sake of his body, that is, the Church". Through the pain and the disabilities that restrict your life, you can proclaim the Gospel in a very powerful way. Your joy and patience are themselves silent witnesses to God's liberating power at work in your lives.⁷ I would like to address a word of gratitude to those of you who devote yourselves to helping others. The Feast of Christ the King which we are celebrating today is a feast of service, for it is the feast of the one who "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many". In his earthly life, Jesus taught us the meaning of service, the kind of love in action that brings closer the Kingdom of God. I encourage you in your generous dedication to those who suffer. Through your daily efforts, you bear witness to the value of all human life, particularly that life which is most fragile and most dependent on others. Your service to the sick, the elderly, the handicapped and the disabled is part of the Church's proclamation of the beauty of all life, even when it is weak. Your service is in complete contrast to every effort to suppress life by evils such as euthanasia and abortion. You have aligned yourselves with all those in society who are determined to take a prophetic stand on behalf of the innocent and most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters. I am particularly grateful to you because you have so faithfully listened to the command of Jesus to his disciples: "Cure those who are sick, and say 'The Kingdom of God is very near to you' ". Yes, the Kingdom of God is near:

the Kingdom of the One who came to serve,

the Kingdom of the Good Shepherd,

the Kingdom where the last shall be first and the first shall be last,

the Kingdom of Christ our Lord. Praise be to him! *Praised be Jesus Christ our King! Amen.* © Copyright 1986 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana