

11 February 2025

"Hope does not disappoint" (Rom 5:5), but strengthens us in times of trial

Dear brothers and sisters,

We are celebrating the 33rd World Day of the Sick in the Jubilee Year 2025, in which the Church invites us to become "pilgrims of hope". The word of God accompanies us and offers us, in the words of Saint Paul, an encouraging message: "Hope does not disappoint" (*Rom 5:5*); indeed, it strengthens us in times of trial.

These are comforting words, but they can also prove perplexing, especially for those who are suffering. How can we be strong, for example, when our bodies are prey to severe, debilitating illnesses that require costly treatment that we may not be able to afford? How can we show strength when, in addition to our own sufferings, we see those of our loved ones who support us yet feel powerless to help us? In these situations, we sense our need for a strength greater than our own. We realize that we need God's help, his grace, his Providence, and the strength that is the gift of his Spirit (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1808).

Let us stop for a moment to reflect on how God remains close to those who are suffering in three particular ways: through *encounter*, *gift* and *sharing*.

1. **Encounter.** When Jesus sent the seventy-two disciples out on mission (cf. *Lk 10:1-9*), he told them to proclaim to the sick: "The kingdom of God has come near to you" (v. 9). He asks them, in other words, to help the sick to see their infirmity, however painful and incomprehensible it may be, as an opportunity to encounter the Lord. In times of illness, we sense our human frailty on the physical, psychological and spiritual levels. Yet we also experience the closeness and compassion of God, who, in Jesus, shared in our human suffering. God does not abandon us and often amazes us by granting us a strength that we never expected and would never have found on our own.

Sickness, then, becomes an occasion for a transformative encounter, the discovery of a solid rock to which we can hold fast amid the tempests of life, an experience that, even at great cost, makes us all the stronger because it teaches us that we are not alone. Suffering always brings with it a mysterious promise of salvation, for it makes us experience the closeness and reality of God's consoling presence. In this way, we come to know "the fullness of the Gospel with all its promise and life" (SAINT JOHN PAUL II, *Address to Young People*, New Orleans, 12 September 1987).

2. This brings us to the second way that God is close to the suffering: as *gift*. More than anything else, suffering makes us aware that hope comes from the Lord. It is thus, first and foremost, a gift to be received and cultivated, by remaining "faithful to the faithfulness of God", in the fine expression of Madeleine Delbr el (cf. *La speranza   una luce nella notte*, Vatican City 2024, Preface).

Indeed, only in Christ's resurrection does our own life and destiny find its place within the infinite horizon of eternity. In Jesus' paschal mystery alone do we attain the certainty that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God" (*Rom 8:38-39*). This "great hope" is the source of all those small glimmers of light that help us to see our way through the trials and obstacles of life (cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 27, 31). The risen Lord goes so far as to walk beside us as our companion on the way, even as he did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus (cf. *Lk 24:13-53*). Like them, we can share with him our anxieties, concerns and disappointments, and listen to his word, which enlightens us and warms our hearts. Like them too, we can recognize him present in the breaking of the bread and thus, even in the present, sense that "greater reality" which, by drawing near to us, restores our courage and confidence.

3. We now come to God's third way of being close to us: through *sharing*. Places of suffering are frequently also places of sharing and mutual enrichment. How often, at the bedside of the sick, do we learn to hope! How often, by our closeness to those who suffer, do we learn to have faith! How often, when we care for those in need, do we discover love! We realize that we are "angels" of hope and messengers of God for one another, all of us together: whether patients, physicians, nurses, family members, friends, priests, men and women religious, no matter where we are, whether in the family or in clinics, nursing homes, hospitals or medical centres.

We need to learn how to appreciate the beauty and significance of these grace-filled encounters. We need to learn how to cherish the gentle smile of a nurse, the gratitude and trust of a patient, the caring face of a doctor or volunteer, or the anxious and expectant look of a spouse, a child, a grandchild or a dear friend. All these are rays of light to be treasured;

even amid the dark night of adversity, they give us strength, while at the same time teaching us the deeper meaning of life, in love and closeness (cf. *Lk* 10:25-37).

Dear brothers and sisters who are ill or who care for the suffering, in this Jubilee you play an especially important part. Your journey together is a sign for everyone: “a hymn to human dignity, a song of hope” (*Spes Non Confundit*, 11). Its strains are heard far beyond the rooms and beds of health facilities, and serve to elicit in charity “the choral participation of society as a whole” (*ibid.*) in a harmony that is at times difficult to achieve, but for that very reason is so comforting and powerful, capable of bringing light and warmth wherever they are most needed.

The whole Church thanks you for this! I do as well, and I remember you always in my prayers. I entrust you to Our Lady, Health of the Sick, in the words that so many of our brothers and sisters have addressed to her in their hour of need:

*We fly to your protection, O Holy Mother of God.
Do not despise our petitions in our necessities,
but deliver us always from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin.*

I bless you, along with your families and loved ones, and I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 14 January 2025 ~~~ FRANCIS

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