

Feast Day of Our Lady of Lourdes
World Day of Prayer for the Sick
February 11, 2009

Tonight we gather for a special celebration of prayer on behalf of our sick brothers and sisters. We do so on the World Day of Prayer for the Sick, a day when the Church throughout the world lifts up to God the members of our families and communities who are suffering and need the healing touch of Christ.

The World Day of the Sick was instituted by Pope John Paul II in 1992 for the purpose of keeping before our eyes the duty of Christians to care for the sick and suffering. This responsibility springs from our union with Christ in the Church. As the Body of Christ, the Church carries on the mission of Christ, who held a special place in his heart and ministry for the ill. Time and again we hear in the Gospels how people brought the sick to the

Lord and how he cured them all. He healed their bodies. Most importantly, he healed their souls, and continues to heal our souls today, through the power of the Cross. Some of the more serious maladies of the soul are listed by Jesus in the Gospel tonight. By his dying and rising he has brought to the human heart the healing power of God's merciful love.

The healing ministry of Jesus, and above all his willingness to die for us on the Cross, gives supreme witness to the dignity of the human person. This dignity is in no way lessened or effaced by illness, disability or age. From embryo to advanced age, irrespective of one's physical abilities or limitations, the human person remains always a person and is never outside the embrace of the Church's loving concern.

It is important to emphasize as well that the Church is concerned to care for the whole person, body and soul. We do not limit our pastoral ministry to a patient's physical symptoms. The description of creation given in the first reading from *Genesis* says that the human being was fashioned from the earth and received the very breath of life from God. Both body and soul are the result of God's creative action. Both body and soul are the object, therefore, of God's loving concern. Both body and soul were healed by the saving power of God active in Jesus Christ. Both body and soul must therefore be the objects of the healing ministry of Christ's Church.

This is why the pastoral care of the Church towards the sick and suffering is broad in its scope. It involves, of course, the attentive and effective care of doctors and nurses. At the same time it comprises the presence of chaplains and pastoral agents, visitors who bring Holy

Communion, and the heartfelt prayers of the Christian community. The whole person is the object of God's healing love. So, too, then, must the needs of the whole person, body and soul, be embraced and cared for by the Church.

This is particularly manifest in the sacrament of the sick. In the act of anointing with holy oil, both body and soul are touched. We pray that, if it be the will of God, the anointing will give rise to the healing of physical infirmity. We are also full of confidence that the soul, too, will be healed. As in every sacramental celebration, the power of Christ's paschal mystery is present in the sacrament of the sick. This means that if the patient truly desires to be reconciled to God, the love of Christ will touch and heal their heart and bring peace.

When Pope John Paul established this day, he linked it, as we know, with the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. This liturgical memorial recalls the story of St. Bernadette Soubirous, a young peasant girl to whom Our Lady appeared near Lourdes in Southern France more than one hundred and fifty years ago. Mary instructed Bernadette to drink from a fountain in the grotto, and many who have since drawn from those same waters have claimed its healing powers. Today, pilgrims from around the world travel to Lourdes searching for not only healing or miraculous cures, but also the means to strengthen their faith when tested by the ravages of illness and suffering.

This feast day reminds us of the special love and concern of our heavenly mother for those who are ill, and of the great power of her intercession. We ask her to pray for all the sick. In particular, we ask her intercession for our five brothers and sisters who have been especially

invited to celebrate the sacrament of the sick with us here
this evening and who will now receive this holy
anointing.