Theological Reflection

Homily for the Memorial of Our Lady of Lourdes

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How fitting it is to celebrate the Annual White Mass, praying especially for the sick and those who care for them, on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, for it is through the eyes of Mary that we look upon the face of the Suffering Christ and come to understand our own suffering and the suffering of those for whom we care. It is the Mother of Jesus, who, before the suffering of the newlyweds at Cana, directed the wine stewards to her Divine Son and instructed them: “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5 NAB). Through Mary, we come to know the immeasurable mercy of God in our suffering, the mercy of God the Son Incarnate. Such has been the grace given to countless pilgrims to Our Lady at her shrine in Lourdes.

Through Mary, we come to understand the profound meaning of the words with which God has described his desire to care for us and love us in the Church, the Body of Christ. Referring to Jerusalem, image of the Church to be established by His Incarnate Son, God spoke these tender words through the Prophet Isaiah:

Lo, I will spread prosperity over Jerusalem like a river, and the wealth of the

nations like an overflowing torrent. As nurslings, you shall be carried in her arms, and fondled in her lap; as a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; in Jerusalem you shall find your comfort. (Is 66:12–13)

In fact, this passage of the Holy Scriptures was the first inspiration of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower, in articulating her Little Way of humility, confidence, and total abandonment to Divine Providence (Thérèse of Lisieux 1996, 208).

The apparitions of our Blessed Mother to Saint Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes, which we commemorate today, lead all who go on pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes to the never-failing mercy of God, incarnate in her Divine Son. All who go on pilgrimage to Lourdes experience the profound personal healing that Christ alone gives, the healing that comes from being carried in God’s arms and lovingly caressed upon his lap. Many also experience physical healing, a sign of the far greater and deeper spiritual healing offered to all who approach our all-merciful God with faith.

Our Lady of Lourdes leads pilgrims to her Shrine to pray the Rosary, the prayer by which we contemplate the Face of Christ and come to know God’s mercy and peace

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that is the fruit of God's mercy. Today, we reflect in a particular way on the power of the Rosary for healing the suffering and for strengthening those who care for them. The Sorrowful Mysteries especially assist us to unite our sufferings to the Passion and Death of Christ, and, with Christ, "to transform them into occasions of grace and life" (John Paul II 2003b, 623, no. 1) Regarding the Sorrowful Mysteries, Pope John Paul II wrote in his apostolic letter *On the Most Holy Rosary*:

The sorrowful mysteries help the believer to relive the death of Jesus, to stand at the foot of the Cross beside Mary, to enter with her into the depths of God's love for man and to experience all of its life-giving power. (John Paul II 2003a, 21, no. 22)¹

Those who are sick and those who care for them are called to give witness to the truth that our suffering is a share in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and that, in serving the sick, we serve Christ.

In a world that views illness and death as the denial of the meaning of life and as annihilation, our faith teaches us that our suffering and death, united to the suffering and death of Christ, expresses our deepest love and ultimately issue in life, the eternal life of heaven. Obedient to the counsel of our Blessed Mother, we must do what Christ tells us. Doing so, we will witness the miracle of the transformation of suffering and death, even as the wine stewards at Cana witnessed the transformation of the water into the finest wine.

Doing what Christ tells us is, first of all, caring for the sick and suffering. In his *Message* for the Eleventh World Day of the Sick, held in 2003 at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., Pope Saint John Paul II expressed the "earnest hope" that the celebration "will inspire in dioceses and parishes a renewed

commitment to the pastoral care of the sick (John Paul II 2003b, 625, no. 5). He noted especially the need to care for the sick in their homes, "given that less and less time is actually being spent in hospital and the sick are often being entrusted to their own families" (John Paul II 2003b, 625, no. 5).

Doing what Christ tells us, in a world forgetful of God and His plan for us, also means giving healthcare, according to the mind and heart of Christ, faithful to the Church's moral teaching. We are blessed in our nation to have the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, now in the fifth edition. This compendium of the Church's teaching regarding the promotion of health and the care of the sick has been developed over many years with the assistance of the Holy See. I urge all who serve in Catholic healthcare facilities to give careful study to the *Ethical and Religious Directives* and to refer to them, also for inspiration in caring out your service which is a participation in the mission of Christ, bringing the healing of God's mercy to the sick.

As we are about to unite ourselves to Christ as He makes sacramentally present His Sacrifice on Calvary, I offer words directed by Pope Saint John Paul II both to those who care for sick and to the sick themselves:

Dear chaplains, religious, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, technicians, administrative personnel, social assistants and volunteers: the World Day of the Sick offers a special opportunity to strive to be ever more generous disciples of Christ the Good Samaritan. Be aware of your identity and learn to recognize in those who suffer the Face of the sorrowful and glorious Lord....

Dear Brothers and Sisters who suffer in body or spirit, to you I express my heartfelt hope that you will learn to recognize

and welcome the Lord who calls you to be witnesses to the Gospel of suffering, by looking with trust and love upon the Face of Christ Crucified and by uniting your sufferings to his.

I entrust you to the Immaculate Virgin, our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of the Americas and Health of the Sick. May she hear the prayers that rise from the world of suffering, may she dry the tears of those in pain, may she stand beside those who are alone in their illness, and by her motherly intercession may she help believers who work in the field of health care to be credible witnesses to Christ's love. (John Paul II 2003b, 625–626, no. 6)

Let us now lift up our hearts, one with the Immaculate Heart of Mary, to the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus. May our hearts, resting in the glorious pierced Heart of Jesus be purified and strengthened for an ever more loving care of our brothers and sisters who are infirm. May Our Blessed Mother lead us to Christ, in order that we may do what He tells us. May our communion with Christ in the Eucharistic Sacrifice uncover for us once again the enduring meaning of suffering and dying in our lives, and strengthen us to care for the suffering and dying, in accord with His mind and heart.

*Heart of Jesus, burning furnace of charity,
have mercy on us.*

*Our Lady of Lourdes, Health of the Sick,
pray for us.*

Saint Bernadette Soubirous, pray for us.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

NOTE

1. “Adducunt credentem doloris mysteria ut Iesu mortem iterum vivendo experiatur seque iuxta Mariam infra crucem collocet, ut in profundum Dei amorem erga homines cum Ea pervadat omnemque illius percipiat regenerantem virtutem” (John Paul II 2003a, 21, no. 22).

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- Thérèse of Lisieux. 1996. *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, 3rd ed., trans. John Clarke. Washington, DC: ICS Publications.