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FEAST OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES

When we talk about the sick we most often think about care, compassion and good works. The Church has always emphasized the importance of the corporal works of mercy, and these are primary in looking after the needs of sick people. Being ill makes us vulnerable: we are at our weakest physically and sometimes mentally, which in turn can affect our spiritual lives, and can lead to feelings of depression and sadness.

We know that when we are very sick “we are not ourselves.” I think this is an important consideration – that feeling of somehow not being the whole person we are normally capable of being. We do not care about matters that are usually important to us – how we look, how we feel, how our work is being affected. We may not want to have visitors, partly because we do not have the stamina, partly because for many of us our pride is damaged in being seen in a weak and helpless state. We can even feel guilty – we are causing people so much bother, our needs are taking up other people’s time and so on. We ask the Lord: why must I be sick? Why me? Why now?

In many cases these questions are unanswerable, at least in the way in which we would like to hear the answers! Sometimes we have partly brought on our health problems through life style, carelessness, perhaps recklessness, but answers are even more difficult if we have a false sense that illness and sickness do not happen to me: I am different; I am strong; I do not need any help. When I talk like this, I am showing I do not need the Lord in my life; I’m showing the order of my life is “me first,” independent “me,” and the Lord is second (at least!).

For Christians, this attitude cannot be right. We know we are to imitate Christ. We are not asked to endure all that he endured, but we will always experience some suffering, sometimes at a deep level. We know, too, that the legalization of euthanasia can affect our thinking. We ask the same questions: why should we suffer? Why should we persevere in enduring pain that is not only physical, but mental and emotional? Perhaps a more developed spirituality could help us face our mortality and human limitations, if we allow others to counsel us in attempting to answer these questions from a Christian perspective.

Pope Francis tells us to realize that our body and our life are gifts. This immediately places us in another approach to the experience of illness. This year's official celebration of the World Day of the Sick is being held in Calcutta, and the Pope reminds us that Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta "... made herself available for everyone through her welcome and defence of human life, of those unborn and those abandoned and discarded". The main point here is that she "made herself available." This is a true gift to others: the idea of a "present" being human presence and not a material gift. This personal response, although for most of us at a much lower level of giving, is possible for everyone to make to help the sick and suffering.

In response to our experiences of human weakness when we are ill, the Pope writes in his Message: "We will always be conscious of our limitations as 'creatures' before other individuals and situations. A frank acknowledgment of this truth keeps us humble and spurs us to practise solidarity as an essential virtue in life." This is so important in countering our self-centredness and pride, the pride that makes us think our good health is a personal achievement, not a gift from God. Such acknowledgment broadens our scope for humility and the need for help.

Pope Francis' use of the word "solidarity" shows how important this virtue is for the individual and the common good: we stand together in being gifts to each other, the sick and the helper, in a relationship that benefits both of us as well as the broader community of help in which we find ourselves. It is so important that the dignity of the sick person is respected in this relationship. It is not a one-way practice of care on the part of the helper, but a human relationship which, as the Pope states in praising the role of volunteers, makes it possible "... for the sick to pass from being passive recipients of care to being active participants in a relationship that can restore hope and inspire openness to further treatment." The Pope calls not only on individuals, professionals and volunteers, but also on Catholic health care institutions to be examples of self-giving, generosity and solidarity in their care of the sick.

The idea of "gift" is reinforced by the Pope in his comment that "The joy of generous giving is a barometer of the health of a Christian!" This wise comment shows us that giving of one's self is not only a Christian duty in caring for the sick, but the sick are also called to give of themselves in a mutual relationship with their helpers. Both sides will then grow in spiritual health, over and above the seeking of personal health. The development of relationship becomes not just a duty, but a "joy!"

Pope Francis frequently highlights our need for showing joy as one of the major marks of being Christian, and it is not surprising that he points towards the joyful possibilities that can be experienced even in times of sickness and ill health. He tells us that the development of the relationship of solidarity between sick people and their helpers can be a means to this joy. It is a gift we can give to each other to counter the seeming despair of the world in the face of suffering and our capacity to handle it.

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