

World Day of the Sick Sunday, 11 February 2018

In his Message for this year's World Day of the Sick, Pope Francis looks to the Cross of Christ for redemption from suffering and to Mary as Mother of the Church, a mother who looks out for all her children. The Pope's example of practical accompaniment of the sick, the dying and the elderly is shown in his frequent visits to hospitals, seniors' homes and in his loving attention to the sick and people with disabilities who come to his weekly audiences. Accompanying and encountering the sick are watchwords of his ministry of mercy, and an example of how Mary looks after her children. We, too, can support the sick through many different organizations and in many varied ways:

- We can work politically to ensure that our health care and social service systems will focus on not only direct medical services, but will also strive to improve the social determinants of health.
- In order to optimize infant and child healthcare and to be intentional about disease prevention as life begins, we can make political demands in their interests.
- We can also support the claims of those employed in health care and social services who are overworked or underpaid.
- From the Catholic viewpoint of improving the common good, we must ask whether our national budgetary provisions for health care are sufficient? If not, are those who are more financially secure willing to pay more so that others may benefit, beyond accepting an already somewhat heavy tax burden?

We are becoming more aware of regional injustices, even at the level of not having clean water available – in Canada! In 2018! We know this need not be, so we are challenged to respond.

- Some will be called to take political and social action to improve our health systems on behalf of the sick, as above.
- Some are called to be of great practical assistance to the sick, the frail and the elderly. volunteering in hospices, in hospitals and long-term care homes.
- Some participate in athletic and other events to raise awareness for specific charities and causes, at the same time persuading other people to support those causes financially.
- Many people are involved professionally in responding to the needs of the poor, the homeless, the elderly, those with addictions and so on, and many give their time and talents in other ways – financially, personally and spiritually through donating, volunteering, praying and raising awareness through their personal witness and commitment.

At an international level, Canada contributes large amounts in government aid to many countries and organizations, and many of us do so in a smaller way, through financial support of organizations that help medically and socially.

- Instead of birthday gifts, we can ask for a well (or part of one!) to be built in a developing country; we can 'send' friends some goats, pigs or chickens – redirected, of course, to a family who will benefit directly from them.
- We can send medical supplies and educational materials through organizations such as *Chalice*, based in Nova Scotia, while many hospitals such as St. Joseph's in Hamilton send medical teams with suitable supplies to help in countries in need, in this case, Haiti.

We can be inspired by many local examples of accompanying and encountering the sick in the spirit of Pope Francis. Here are a few examples that have struck me recently:

- In the Archdiocese of Québec, teams of two are going out to visit the sick, the lonely and the vulnerable – all people who need our special care and attention, even more so in today's world.
- I have a priest friend who started to visit the psychiatric ward of a local hospital, making himself available for conversation to anyone who would like to chat. Being 'listened to' is a great gift, and another form of accompanying the sick.
- I just heard recently from two sisters I know who have left their full-time careers to look after their other sister with early signs of dementia, in order to keep her at home in her own surroundings and involved in family life as long as possible.
We all know parish nurses who look after the elderly, the housebound and the sick in their local areas and who include prayer, a spiritual dimension and parish 'talk' in their visits, which many homebound people miss.

I am sure there are countless examples we can all give of how we accompany and encounter the sick, and Pope Francis reminds us that the prime example is Mary. She stood at the foot of the Cross, sorrowing no doubt, but she was **THERE**, accompanying Jesus to the end. Aware of this, it is natural that we should turn to her for encouragement in our accompanying and encountering those who need it support!

Mary, Help of the Sick, pray for us!

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