

WORLD DAY OF THE SICK, FEBRUARY 11, 2020  
FEAST OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES

Pope Francis's message for the 2020 World Day of the Sick is  
"Come to me all you who labour and are heavily burdened,  
and I will give you rest (Matt 11:28)."

The promise of "rest" can mean many things in the health care setting: actual rest, peace, respite or relief and, both for patients and families. We need to remember to turn to God for help and rest, as well as to our human helpers. As an example, Artificial Intelligence (AI) promises to be extremely valuable in many areas of health care, for speed and accuracy of diagnosis, efficiency, cost cutting, research and so on. When it comes to the patient/caregiver relationship, however, artificial intelligence sounds rather cold and, well, artificial. Most of us prefer being face to face with a sympathetic and supportive human being in that situation. It is true that some hospitals have robots in place which act as substitute caregivers or friends in helping deal with some situations. These have their place and could be useful in short-staffed area and in handling preliminary questions or in helping patients navigate hospital systems. But of course they have limits, as even humans do in some circumstances. It is hard to imagine that a robot could hug people in the same way as humans, or with the same emotional feeling, even if programmed to say appropriate things. So much is conveyed through our senses, which is why we have them—to be used!

In his message, Pope Francis calls for "human warmth" and the personalized approach of Christ, and we can see that this involves mercy, empathy, emotions, feelings and often heartfelt hugs that convey warmth and appreciation for the person and for what the person is enduring. Watch a mother with her baby, how she hugs and holds the child, pressing the baby as closely to herself as possible, her joy in the child showing on her face! That is so human and reflects what all of us need in some situations, child or adult.

Further, the Pope explains that Jesus does so because He Himself became frail, endured human suffering and received comfort from His Father. According to the Pope, only those who personally experience suffering are able to comfort others. This is so important! Suffering of any sort is inevitable for all of us and while at the time it can seem destructive, it can strengthen us as individuals and help us become more aware of the help and support that others need when they undergo difficulties.

When we are sick, the help we receive from others makes us truly grateful for them, and exemplifies a sort of communion in solidarity with our fellow human beings, even if this is only a temporal relationship between patient and caregiver (which sounds more personal than healthcare worker!) Communion and solidarity are very much part of the Catholic way of life,

although found not only in personnel in Catholic facilities, since these qualities, or virtues, are deeply human, developed through experience, as the Pope reminds us.

I think it's true: being supported in pain and suffering sensed as coming from a deep place in the other's heart is truly like having a burden shared. We are never so weak and vulnerable as when we are suffering from a serious illness, or when we are faced with the possibility that the end could be near. Everything else is then placed in a different perspective and we need people more than ever.

For those with chronic disease, how heavy the burden must be and how difficult to find rest! When we are ill, as soon as we begin to see light at the end of the tunnel we start to make plans and often venture forth again a bit too early because we can't WAIT to feel ourselves again. Think of what it must be like not to have that attitude and relief return to our life—to know that, short of a miracle cure, life will remain on the same plane: the illness continues, I won't be able to do anything much more than I'm doing now for the rest of my life, I'm somewhat static and the pain endures. I can't imagine the resignation and acceptance called for, although I have known people who exemplified that acceptance and who served as incredible witnesses to the resilience of the human spirit and to their faith in God.

A major watchword for Pope Francis is mercy, and the many photographs of Francis hugging, kissing and caressing sick people of all ages and stages illustrate his deep compassion and willingness to be of comfort to them. He embodies his own message found in Matthew's Gospel: "...come to me, and I will give you rest." There is no doubt that sick people heed this message: they long for it, they need it, it comforts and supports them on their journey. This of course extends to their families, and there are several respite agencies and organizations that take this further, taking people into their care so that parents or caregivers may have a "break" from their constant routine. They are examples of what the Pope calls "Inns of the Good Samaritan" and he asks all of us, not just health care facilities, to reflect that image in whichever way we can. Then we will be helping the heavily burdened, and we will be helping them find rest, in Christ's name.

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