

“Take care of him”: compassion as a synodal exercise of healing

10 January 2023

Message Of His Holiness Pope Francis XXXI World Day of the Sick

11 February 2023

Dear brothers and sisters!

Illness is part of our human condition. Yet, if illness is experienced in isolation and abandonment, unaccompanied by care and compassion, it can become inhumane.

When we go on a journey with others, it is not unusual for someone to feel sick, to have to stop because of fatigue or of some mishap along the way. It is precisely in such moments that we see how we are walking together: whether we are truly companions on the journey, or merely individuals on the same path, looking after our own interests and leaving others to “make do”. For this reason, on the thirty-first World Day of the Sick, as the whole Church journeys along the synodal path, I invite all of us to reflect on the fact that it is especially through the experience of vulnerability and illness that we can learn to walk together according to the style of God, which is closeness, compassion, and tenderness.

In the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, the Lord speaks these words that represent one of the high points of God’s Revelation: “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak [...] I will feed them with justice” (34:15-16). Experiences of bewilderment, sickness, and weakness are part of the human journey. Far from excluding us from God’s people, they bring us to the centre of the Lord’s attention, for he is our Father and does not want to lose even one of his children along the way. Let us learn from him, then, how to be a community that truly walks together, capable of resisting the throwaway culture.

The Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* encourages us to read anew the parable of the Good Samaritan, which I chose in order to illustrate how we can move from the “dark clouds” of a closed world to “envisaging and engendering an open world” (cf. No. 56). There is a profound link between this parable of Jesus and the many ways in which fraternity is denied in today’s world. In particular, the fact that the man, beaten and robbed, is abandoned on the side of the road represents the condition in which all too many of our brothers and sisters are left at a time when they most need help. It is no longer easy to distinguish the assaults on human life and dignity that arise from natural causes from those caused by injustice and violence. In fact, increasing levels of inequality and the prevailing interests of the few now affect every human environment to the extent that it is difficult to consider any experience as having solely “natural” causes. All suffering takes place in the context of a “culture” and its various contradictions.

Here it is especially important to recognize the condition of loneliness and abandonment. This kind of cruelty can be overcome more easily than any other injustice, because – as the parable tells us – it only takes a moment of our attention, of being moved to compassion within us, in order to eliminate it. Two travellers, considered pious and religious, see the wounded man, yet fail to stop. The third passer-by, however, a Samaritan, a scorned foreigner, is moved with compassion and takes care of that stranger on the road, treating him as a brother. In doing so, without even thinking about it, he makes a difference, he makes the world more fraternal.

Brothers and sisters, we are rarely prepared for illness. Oftentimes, we fail even to admit that we are getting older. Our vulnerability frightens us and the pervasive culture of efficiency pushes us to sweep it under the carpet, leaving no room for our human frailty. In this way, when evil bursts onto the scene and wounds us, we are left stunned. Moreover, others might abandon us at such times. Or, in our own moments of weakness, we may feel that we should abandon others in order to avoid becoming a burden. This is how loneliness sets in, and we can become poisoned by a bitter sense of injustice, as if God himself had abandoned us. Indeed, we may find it hard to remain at peace with the Lord when our relationship with others and with ourselves is damaged. It is crucial, then, even in the midst of illness, that the whole Church measure herself against the Gospel example of the Good Samaritan, in order that she may become a true “field hospital”, for her mission is manifested in acts of care, particularly in the historical circumstances of our time. We are all fragile and vulnerable, and need that compassion which knows how to pause, approach, heal, and raise up. Thus, the plight of the sick is a call that cuts through indifference and slows the pace of those who go on their way as if they had no sisters and brothers.

The World Day of the Sick calls for prayer and closeness towards those who suffer. Yet it also aims to raise the awareness of God's people, healthcare institutions and civil society with regard to a new way of moving forward together. The above-quoted prophecy of Ezekiel judges harshly the priorities of those who wield economic, cultural, and political power over others: "You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them" (34:3-4). God's word is always illuminating and timely; not only in what it denounces, but also in what it proposes. Indeed, the conclusion of the parable of the Good Samaritan suggests how the exercise of fraternity, which began as a face-to-face encounter, can be expanded into organized care. The elements of the inn, the innkeeper, the money and the promise to remain informed of the situation (cf. Lk 10:34-35) all point to the commitment of healthcare and social workers, family members and volunteers, through whom good stands up in the face of evil every day, in every part of the world.

These past years of the pandemic have increased our sense of gratitude for those who work each day in the fields of healthcare and research. Yet it is not enough to emerge from such an immense collective tragedy simply by honouring heroes. Covid-19 has strained the great networks of expertise and solidarity, and has exposed the structural limits of existing public welfare systems. Gratitude, then, needs to be matched by actively seeking, in every country, strategies and resources in order to guarantee each person's fundamental right to basic and decent healthcare.

The Samaritan calls the innkeeper to "take care of him" (Lk 10:35). Jesus addresses the same call to each of us. He exhorts us to "go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37). As I noted in *Fratelli Tutti*, "The parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbours, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good" (No. 67). Indeed, "we were created for a fulfilment that can only be found in love. We cannot be indifferent to suffering" (No. 68).

On 11 February 2023, let us turn our thoughts to the Shrine of Lourdes, a prophetic lesson entrusted to the Church for our modern times. It is not only what functions well or those who are productive that matter. Sick people, in fact, are at the centre of God's people, and the Church advances together with them as a sign of a humanity in which everyone is precious and no one should be discarded or left behind.

To the intercession of Mary, Health of the Sick, I entrust all of you who are ill; you who care for them in your families, or through your work, research and volunteer service; and those of you who are committed to weaving personal, ecclesial, and civic bonds of fraternity. To all, I impart my heartfelt blessing.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 10 January 2023

Francis