

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI
TO CAMEROON AND ANGOLA
(MARCH 17-23, 2009)

MEETING WITH THE SICK

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI

*Card. Paul Emile Léger Centre - CNRH of Yaoundé
Thursday, 19 March 2009*

*Dear Cardinals,
Minister of Social Affairs,
Health Minister,
Brother Bishops,
Bishop Joseph Djida,
Director of the Léger Centre,
Dear Carers and Patients,*

I have been looking forward to spending this time with you, and I am happy to be able to greet you, dear brothers and sisters who bear the burden of sickness and suffering. You are not alone in your pain, for Christ himself is close to all who suffer. He reveals to the sick and infirm their place in the heart of God and in society. The Evangelist Mark gives us the example of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law: "Immediately they told him of her", it is written, Jesus "came and took her by the hand and lifted her up" (*Mk* 1:30-31). In this Gospel passage, we see Jesus spending a day with the sick in order to bring them relief. He thereby shows us, through specific actions, his fraternal tenderness and benevolence towards all the broken-hearted, all whose bodies are wounded.

This Centre is named after Cardinal Paul-Émile Léger, a son of Canada who came among you to bring relief to bodies and souls. As I stand here today, I am mindful of all the people in hospitals, in specialized health centres or clinics, who suffer from a disability, mental or physical. I also think of those whose flesh bears the scars of wars and violence. I remember too all the sick and, especially here in Africa, the victims of such diseases as Aids, malaria and tuberculosis. I know how actively engaged the Catholic Church in your country is in the fight against these terrible afflictions, and I encourage you to pursue this urgent task with great determination. To those of you who endure the trials of sickness and suffering, and to all your families, I wish to bring a word of comfort from the Lord, to renew my support, and to invite you to turn towards Christ and towards Mary, whom he has given to us as our mother. She knew suffering, and she followed her Son along the path to Calvary, preserving in her heart that love which Jesus came to bring to all people.

Faced with suffering, sickness and death, it is tempting to cry out in pain, as Job did, whose name means “suffering” (cf. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, I,1,15). Even Jesus cried out, shortly before his death (cf. *Mk* 15:37; *Heb* 5:7). As our condition deteriorates, our anguish increases; some are tempted to doubt whether God is present in their lives. Job, however, was conscious of God’s presence; his was not a cry of rebellion, but, from the depths of his sorrow, he allowed his trust to grow (cf. *Job* 19; 42:2-6). His friends, like each of us when faced with the suffering of a loved one, tried to console him, but they used hollow and empty words.

In the presence of such torment, we feel powerless and we cannot find the right words. Before a brother or sister plunged into the mystery of the Cross, a respectful and compassionate silence, a prayerful presence, a gesture of tenderness and comfort, a kind look, a smile, often achieve more than many words. This was the experience of a small group of men and women, including the Virgin Mary and the Apostle John, who followed Jesus in the depths of his suffering at the time of his Passion and his death on the Cross. Among them, the Gospel tells us, was an African, Simon of Cyrene. He was given the task of helping Jesus to carry his Cross on the way to Golgotha. This man, albeit through no choice of his own, came to the aid of the Man of Sorrows when he had been abandoned by all his followers and handed over to blind violence. History tells us, then, that an African, a son of your continent, took part, at the price of his own suffering, in the infinite suffering of the one who ransomed all men, including his executioners. Simon of Cyrene could not have known that it was his Saviour who stood there before him. He was “drafted in” to assist him (cf. *Mk* 15:21); he was constrained, forced to do so. It is hard to accept to carry someone else’s cross. Only after the resurrection could he have understood what he had done. Brothers and sisters, it is the same for each of us: in the depths of our anguish, of our own rebellion, Christ offers us his loving presence even if we find it hard to understand that he is at our side. Only the Lord’s final victory will reveal for us the definitive meaning of our trials.

Can it not be said that every African is in some sense a member of the family of Simon of Cyrene? Every African who suffers, indeed every person who suffers, helps Christ to carry his Cross and climbs with him the path to Golgotha in order one day to rise again with him. When we see the infamy to which Jesus was subjected, when we contemplate his face on the Cross, when we recognize his appalling suffering, we can glimpse, through faith, the radiant face of the Risen Lord who tells us that suffering and sickness will not have the last word in our human lives. I pray, dear brothers and sisters, that you will be able to recognize yourselves in “Simon of Cyrene”. I pray, dear brothers and sisters who are sick, that many of you will encounter a Simon at your bedside.

Since the resurrection, and right up to our own time, there have been countless witnesses who have turned, with faith and hope, towards the Saviour of mankind, recognizing his presence at the heart of their suffering. May the Father of mercies graciously grant the prayers of all who turn to him. He answers our call and our prayer, as and when he wishes, for our good and not according to our desires. It is for us to discern his response and to accept the gifts that he offers us as a grace. Let us fix our gaze upon the Crucified one, with faith and courage, for from him come life, comfort, and healing. Let us learn to

gaze on him who desires our good and knows how to wipe the tears from our eyes. Let us learn to abandon ourselves into his embrace, like a small child in his mother's arms.

The saints have given us a fine example by living lives entirely dedicated to God, our Father. Saint Teresa of Avila, who placed her monastery under the protection of Saint Joseph, was healed from a particular ailment on the very day of his feast. She said she had never prayed to him in vain, and she recommended him to all who claimed not to know how to pray: "I do not understand", she wrote, "how anyone can think of the Queen of angels and of all the trials she suffered during the early years of the divine child Jesus, without thanking Saint Joseph for the perfect devotion with which he came to assist them both. May anyone who lacks a teacher of prayer choose this admirable Saint as a master, for under his guidance no one need be afraid of going astray" (*Life*, 6). Saint Teresa saw in Saint Joseph not only an intercessor for bodily health, but also an intercessor for the health of the soul, a teacher of prayer.

Dear friends who are sick, we too can choose him as a teacher of prayer, whatever our state of health, and all families can do the same. I am thinking especially of hospital staff, and all those who work in the field of health care. By accompanying those who suffer, through the care and attention you offer them, you accomplish an act of charity and love that God recognizes: "I was sick, and you visited me" (*Mt 25:36*). All of you, doctors and researchers, have the task of putting into practice every legitimate form of pain relief; you are called, in the first place, to protect human life, you are the defenders of life from conception to natural death. For every person, respect for life is a right and at the same time a duty, since all life is a gift from God. With you, I would like to give thanks to the Lord for all who, in one way or another, work in the service of the suffering. I encourage priests and those who visit the sick to commit themselves to an active and friendly presence in their hospital chaplaincy, or to assure an ecclesial presence in the home, for the comfort and spiritual support of the sick. In accordance with his promise, God will give you a just reward, and he will recompense you in heaven.

Before greeting you more personally, and then taking my leave, I would like to assure each of you of my affection and my prayer. I also want to express my wish that none of you should ever feel alone. In fact it is the task of every human person, created in the image of Christ, to be a good neighbour to those around him. I entrust all of you to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, our Mother, and to the intercession of Saint Joseph. May God grant that we become bearers for one another of the mercy, tenderness and love of our God, and may he bless you!