



Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time and World Day of Prayer for the Sick 4th and 11th
February 2024

Reflection Mgr Daniel McHugh

“In the morning, long before dawn, He got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there” (Mark 1:35)

On Sunday 11th February we celebrate World Day of the Sick, an Annual Day instituted by Pope St John Paul II on the occasion of the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes: a Feast marking the day on which Bernadette was told by Mary *“I am the Immaculate Conception”*. Lourdes is famed for the way it draws the sick to Mary in prayer for healing. *“I almost died three times”*, says Sylvie Huchet, a 44 year old French woman from Vendée and a regular guest at Accueil Notre-Dame, *“Once, I came to Lourdes ground up like a grain of wheat. I was on life support, lying on a stretcher with a medicine pump. I asked only one thing when I arrived at the grotto: Mother Mary, take me to Heaven in my heart. I still wanted to live, but I no longer had the strength to endure suffering. I wanted to find peace....forever”*. In 1992, further to a traffic accident, Sylvie contracted a nosocomial disease, the *“hospital disease”*. *I have a staph infection, she explains, I have had 44 operations. Today, I have managed to forget the disease....but not the pain! She continues: I need to come to Lourdes, I have faith. Everytime I go to the baths and I cry. One day, I received a real healing here: I had an abscess in my heart and it was pierced. I had forgiveness to give and I was finally able to give it: I received a grace of peace”*. This personal testimony is to be found among others on the Internet under the heading *“Why Lourdes attracts the sick”*.

This woman’s experience seems to me to relate to the theme Pope Francis has chosen for this year’s World Day of the Sick message: *“Heal relationships to heal the ill”*. In his message released a short while ago the Pope explores the fundamental and healing power of our relationships with others and with God. *“Each of us”*, says the Pope, *“came into the world because our parents welcomed us, and we were each ‘made for love’ and are called to communion and fraternity. The best therapy for those who are ill, he adds, is to offer our love and communion, despite the pace of our frenetic lives”*. I thought of the mailing from the Diocesan Director of the Lourdes Pilgrimage, Fr Jeremy Howard (also Chaplain to the Francophone Community) who says *“We are also advertising for carers, nurses and doctors to volunteer for the week in Lourdes to help assist those who need help throughout their pilgrimage.”* These generous people, include many young people who go to support the sick, pay for themselves, and are assured of *“free time for making their Pilgrimage also.”*

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“The sick, the vulnerable, and the poor are at the heart of the Church”, concludes Pope Francis. “They must also be at the heart of our human concern and pastoral attention.” In my experience this is an area of pastoral care that the elderly and sick are assured of in their local parishes: priests, deacons and special ministers take Holy Communion to people in their homes; SVP and other caring organisations arrange social times with generous refreshment and entertainment. Those in Prayer Groups are always reaching out to the sick. The Pope says: *“To those who experience illness, whether temporary or chronic, I would say this: Do not be ashamed of your longing for closeness and tenderness. Do not conceal it and never think that you are a burden to others.”*

In conclusion, the Holy Father invites Christians to draw inspiration *“from Jesus’ compassion-filled gaze through prayer and the Eucharist, so as to heal the wounds of solitude and isolation.”*

We find accounts of that “compassion-filled gaze” of Jesus towards the sick and the poor all over the Gospels including the Gospel for the 5th Sunday where we hear that Simon’s mother-in-law had gone to bed with fever. *“He went to her, took her by the hand and helped her up.”* The Gospel continues: *“he cured many who were suffering from diseases of one kind or another.”*

The anchor of Jesus’ life and action is also a key aspect of the Gospel for the Fifth Sunday where we are told: *“In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there.”* With everyone wanting a piece of Him, he needed to be in touch with His source of strength for His mission. Ultimately His Kingdom is to be found in new life through death.

We all need to summon spiritual reinforcements as Jesus did: we cannot continually give and never receive.

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