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The Eucharist, The Role of the Virgin and Suffering

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The Holy Father's Message for the World Day of the Sick 2008, was made public today. Its theme is: "The Eucharist, Lourdes and Pastoral Care of the Sick". The World Day of the Sick is due to be celebrated on February 11, Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes.



In the Message, which has been published in Italian and English, the Pope explains how this year's World Day is associated with "two important events in the life of the Church: ... The 150th anniversary of the apparitions of Mary Immaculate at Lourdes, and the celebration of the International Eucharistic Congress at Quebec, Canada, in June". This, he writes, "is a remarkable opportunity to consider the close connection that exists between the Mystery of the Eucharist, the role of Mary in the project of salvation, and the reality of human pain and suffering".

"There is an indissoluble bond", the Pope states, "between the mother and the Son generated in her womb by work of the Holy Spirit, and this bond we perceive, in a mysterious way, in the Sacrament of the Eucharist".

Benedict XVI highlights how "Mary 'Mater Dolorosa' is associated with the sacrifice of Christ, suffering with her divine Son at the foot of the cross. The Christian community feels her to be especially close as it gathers around its suffering members who bear the signs of the Lord's passion. Mary suffers with those who are afflicted, with them she hopes, and she is their comfort, supporting them with her maternal help".

The Pope mentions the theme of the Eucharistic Congress of Quebec, "The Eucharist, Gift of God for the Life of the World", then proceeds: "It is He who gathers us around the Eucharistic table, arousing in His disciples loving care for the suffering and the sick, in whom the Christian community recognises the face of its Lord".

"It thus appears clear that it is specifically from the Eucharist that health pastoral care must draw the necessary spiritual strength to come effectively to man's aid and to help him understand the salvific value of his own suffering. ... Mysteriously united to Christ, the man who suffers with love and meek self-abandonment to the will of God becomes a living offering for the salvation of the world".

The Pope invites diocesan and parish communities to celebrate the World Day of the Sick "with full appreciation for the happy concurrence of the 150th anniversary of the apparitions of Our Lady at Lourdes with the International Eucharistic Congress. May it be an occasion to emphasise the importance of Mass, and of the adoration and celebration of the Eucharist, so that chapels in our healthcare centres become beating hearts in which Jesus offers Himself unceasingly to the Father for the life of humanity! The distribution of the Eucharist to the sick, if performed decorously and in a spirit of prayer, is a true comfort to those who suffer".

Benedict XVI concludes his Message by inviting people to consider the World Day of the Sick as "a propitious circumstance to invoke in a special way the maternal protection of Mary over those who are weighed down by illness, over healthcare providers, and workers in health pastoral care. I think in particular of priests involved in this field, religious, volunteers, and all those who with active dedication are concerned to serve, in body and soul, the sick and those in need".