

Some reflections on the coming world day for the sick

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Pope Benedict XVI in his message with regards to the 14th World Day for the Sick which is to be held on 11 February so as to coincide with the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, draws our attention to those problems related: *"to the psychological unrest that affects today a fifth of all humanity and that has become a real crisis for man's social wellbeing"*. In an admirably concise and at the same time wide-ranging and discerning manner the pontifical document considers different points.

First of all with regards to the causes of this unrest, the Pope writes: *"The ongoing wars in different parts of the world, the continuous appalling natural disasters and the spreading of terrorism as well as causing a terrifying number of deaths, have produced in many of the survivors psychological traumas from which any recovery seems now impossible... In the more economically advanced countries the specialists recognise also as a cause to this unrest the negative influence of the loss of moral values"*.

The first of these points is to do with factors that are external to one, of circumstances that one is subjected to, of decisions made over and above our heads and often opposed to the general orientation of public opinion. The second point instead engages us in our obligations as believers, called to be by divine vocation *"the light of the world and the salt of the earth"*.

Padre Pio in fact would live in *"agony"* his obligations as a religious and priest over the worry *"of not winning all his*

brothers and sisters for God".

The document also considers this problem of psychological well-being from a political and social point of view: *"In many countries there still do not exist laws that take into account this problem and in others there are lacking the necessary policies... In many parts of the world the assistance for these sick does not exist or is insufficient, or is in a state of collapse. Moreover, society does not always accept the mentally handicapped and their disabilities, and which also explains the difficulties that must be faced in order to find the necessary human and financial resources"*.

There exist in the world conditions that are far removed from our experience of everyday, but that are nevertheless tragically real and difficult to forget after seeing them with one's own eyes.

I was a direct witness last December, during the festivities in Chad in Africa for the 40th anniversary of our missionary work there of this reality. I was brought to see, in an uninhabited area on the outskirts of the city, a ditch in which there had been placed a number of epileptic children who had been abandoned by their families and made to live like animals.

It is because of realities like these that Pope Benedict XVI exhorts us *"to assist in concrete ways and undertakings, those who have in their families members who are in some way mentally disabled, and that there grow and spread a culture of sharing and solidarity, and assisted by appropriate laws and health plans that provide the sufficient resources for their concrete re-*

alisation".

Finally, but not last in importance, in the points that he considers, there is an exhortation that originates from the Pope as theologian: *"I wish now to turn to you, dear brothers and sisters who are tried by sickness in order to invite you to offer together with Christ your state of suffering to the Father, in the certainty that every trial accepted with resignation gains merit and draws God's love upon all mankind"*.

These are words that reflect in a clear way the spiritual experience of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina who, knowing that suffering *"is a sign of Jesus' inexpressible love"*, told one of his spiritual children, who was very sick: *"Jesus wants to take full possession of your heart and He wants it to be transfixed by suffering and love like His own"*. And he added: *"You do well to desire to suffer - even physical suffering"*. Padre Pio himself offered himself as a victim for *"poor sinners"* and he would renew this offering to God *"frequently during the day"*.

In the light of this invitation begun from reflections on the coming World Day for the Sick, we should offer our own sufferings to Jesus like a sublime prayer and in this way we will prepare ourselves for the coming celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the *"Home for the Relief of Suffering"*, the hospital conceived by Padre Pio as a living monument of charity to those who suffer. ■