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The Sixth Sunday of the Year (C)  
The Fifteenth World Day of the Sick

What is the meaning of suffering? Why must we suffer at all? Jesus calls those who are poor, hungry, weeping and hated "blessed" and those who are rich, satisfied, laughing and praised he calls wretched (Luke 6:20-22). Why must he do this? Why condemn everything that we hold in honor and praise everything we despise?

Through these beatitudes, Jesus calls us to embrace suffering as the only way to attain riches, satisfaction, joy and eternal reward. It seems so absurd and therefore, when suffering comes, we all too often turn our hearts "away from the LORD" (Jeremiah 17:5). We become "like a barren bush in the desert" (Jeremiah 17:6) or the "chaff which the wind drives away" (Psalm 1:4).

But if, on the other hand, we willingly accept sufferings and offer them in union with Christ crucified, we become "like a tree planted beside the waters that stretches out its roots to the stream" (Jeremiah 17:) "that yields its fruit in due season" (Psalm 1:3). What is this fruit? Spiritual treasure, contentment, joy and eternal life. When we willingly accept our sufferings, we can say with Saint Paul: "Now I rejoice in my

sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24).

Holy Mother Church invites us to reflect deeply on the mystery of human suffering today as we observe the Fifteenth World Day of the Sick. The Servant of God, Pope John Paul II inaugurated this day to focus the attention of the faithful on the needs of the sick, to make us aware of our duty to assist them by our loving care, attention and prayers. Visiting the sick is, of course, one of those corporal works of mercy to which we are to devote ourselves as a way of caring for Christ himself, as a way of growing in holiness and in love.

The Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in his Message for this day, that

Sickness inevitably brings with it a moment of crisis and sober confrontation with one's own personal situation. Advances in the health sciences often provide the means necessary to meet this challenge, at least with regard to its physical aspects. Human life, however, has intrinsic limitations, and sooner or later it ends in death. This is an experience to which each human being is called, and for which he or she must be prepared.

In times of misery and pain, the soul cannot help but ask the essential questions: What is the purpose of my life? Why am I suffering? Where is God in this? Have I lived well? What will happen to me after death?

Very often we tend to shy away from these questions, thinking them somehow too complicated and beyond our reach. They often provide more questions than they do answers, and we are faced with our own inadequacy and inability to answer even the most basic questions of life. We are faced also with our own sin and our lack of love.

We run from these questions and push them aside because we cannot bring ourselves to face the fact that we are not entirely self-sufficient and independent. We do not want to face the fact that we are sinners and do not love as we know we should. At the same time, these questions make us realize the frailty of human life; with these questions comes the realization that I, too, will die, which brings with it a whole host of other questions. Are you ready for death? Are you prepared to stand before the judgment seat of the Lord?

We do all that we can today to deny the reality of death because it makes us uncomfortable. Our sick relatives and friends who stand on the threshold of death we send off to hospitals and nursing homes, and we visit them when it doesn't conflict with athletic events or television shows. We visit them only rarely so as not to consider their coming death or our own death.

We spend countless hours and money on products to make wrinkles disappear, to color our hair, to lose weight, to look,

feel and dress younger than we are. We pretend that we will live forever, that somehow death will not catch us. This is all such a ridiculous game and we will lose! Those who honestly confront their situation know this well, regardless of whether they are sick or not.

Those who are seriously ill know what true suffering is and, if they have suffered well - that is, if they suffer with patience in love - and have placed their trust in the Lord, they are blessed and have found their hope (cf. Jeremiah 17:). Indeed, all who suffer - not just the sick - who place their trust in the Lord will be blessed and find hope, for "Christ has been raised, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (I Corinthians 15:20). This is why Jesus pronounces those who suffer "blessed."

The sick have access to a great treasure that is hidden from those who do not suffer so, because to them is given the opportunity to trust fully in Jesus Christ, sharing in his sufferings. They are able to realize that they will not live forever, that death is near. Seeing the end of their life, they come to realize that nothing else matters except Jesus Christ!

Let us not run from suffering! The many forms of suffering that come our way are invitations to a relationship of intimacy with Christ the Lord. This intimacy is granted to those who embrace their sufferings and offer them with the sufferings of

Jesus Christ for their own salvation and the salvation of all mankind.

Pope Benedict XVI invites us today to join the sick in prayer and trust. He says:

I now turn to you, my dear brothers and sisters suffering from incurable and terminal diseases. I encourage you to contemplate the sufferings of Christ crucified, and, in union with him, to turn to the Father with complete trust that all life, and your lives in particular are in his hands. Trust that your sufferings, united to those of Christ, will prove fruitful for the needs of the Church and the world. I ask the Lord to strengthen your faith in his love, especially during these trials that you are experiencing. It is my hope that, wherever you are, you will always find the spiritual encouragement and strength needed to nourish your faith and bring you closer to the Father of Life.

Let us, then, gaze upon the Cross, asking the Lord to help us unite our suffering to his that we might be truly rich, fulfilled, joyful and praised by the heavenly host. Amen!