



The Holy See

PASTORAL JOURNEY
TO BENIN, UGANDA AND KHARTOUM (SUDAN)

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE SICK AND DISABLED OF UGANDA**

*Saint Francis Hospital, Nsambya (Uganda)
Sunday, 7 February 1993*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. With joy and affection I greet you, *the sick and disabled of Uganda*, and invoke upon you the grace and mercy of God our Father. With this Message, which I entrust to Bishop Henry Ssentongo, President of the Medical Bureau of the Uganda Episcopal Conference, it is my desire to embrace all of you who are living the mystery of human suffering in this beloved African nation.

The Church feels particularly close to those who are suffering in mind or body, whatever their social or economic condition or their religious affiliation. In each one she sees the image of Christ her Saviour, who became man in order to save us from our sins and to bring us eternal life. Following the example and command of Jesus, her Master and Lord, she reaches out with mercy and compassion to every human being, but especially to the poor, the sick and the disabled. This loving concern, essential to her mission, finds concrete expression not only in the establishment of her many hospitals, clinics and dispensaries, but also and above all in the physical and spiritual care provided by her priests and Religious and by the many lay men and women—doctors, nurses and other health-care professionals—whom she sets forth as examples to civil society for their selfless devotion to others. Through these means the Church wishes "to meet people in a special way on the path of their suffering" (cf. John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 3), and to offer to them the hope and consolation of the Gospel.

2. My greeting to you is one of *joy and peace*, born of the serene trust which Christians have in

Jesus Christ. We are confident that the Lord will one day make us sharers in his glory if we but suffer with him, as Saint Peter so beautifully wrote: "Rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (1 Pt. 4:13). Despite the pain, frustration and loneliness which we may experience, we know that in Christ we find light and hope even in the midst of suffering.

In the Cross of Jesus Christ, God gave the definitive answer to all evil, both moral and physical. The Father did not abandon his creation when death and suffering entered the world as a result of sin (cf. Gen. 3:15-19). Rather, he "so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). Because of this gift of the Father's love, revealed most fully in the Death and Resurrection of Christ, we can now live in hope—not the false hope that we will never have to suffer—but *in the real hope of eternal life*. In the light of the Paschal Mystery of Christ's Cross and Resurrection we find a completely new and definitive reason for hope in the face of suffering and death, a hope which spurs us on "to go forward through the thick darkness of humiliations, doubts, hopelessness and persecution" (John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 20).

3. Dear brothers and sisters, because of our incorporation into Christ through Baptism Christians are given a share in the mystery of Christ's Cross, the mystery by which he chose to redeem the world. Because it was by suffering that Jesus brought grace and mercy to us all, each of us "is also *called to share in that suffering* through which the Redemption was accomplished" (John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 19). Through the Cross a transcendent dimension and salvific meaning has been brought to human suffering, giving it a purpose and value never before imagined. "Thus, each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ" (*Ibid.*).

Christians are therefore invited to look not merely at themselves, but to see with the eyes of faith the great good that can be accomplished if they offer their sufferings in union with the Cross of Christ, as a pleasing sacrifice to God our Father. How many people there are in Uganda who can be helped by our prayers! I am thinking of the orphans, the young men seeking employment, the families struggling to survive, the people addicted to alcohol or drugs, the men and women who have never heard the Gospel of Christ, the elderly, the lonely and especially those whose illness may be even greater than our own. "I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1).

Those who generously embrace the Cross of Jesus Christ and offer their sufferings in union with the saving power of his eternal sacrifice can help bring new life to the people of Uganda and to men and women throughout the world. Saint Paul saw clearly how much the Church was enriched by the sufferings of Christians when they are borne with patience and love: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his Body, that is, the Church" (Col. 1:24). *The Church needs the spiritual gift which only*

the sick are able to offer. Bear your sufferings in union with the Lord, confident that one day you will be glorified with him. For "the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18).

4. And now I would like to address in particular those among you who are *suffering from AIDS*. I know well that within one decade this dreaded disease has already affected so many of your people, and left thousands of children without parental care. Many of you are already bed-ridden, many others diagnosed as seropositive, others living in constant fear of contracting the disease. There is only One who can give you hope and confidence in the midst of such pain, fear and even death itself. He is Christ, who said: "Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light" (Mt. 11:28-30). Never lose heart! At times the yoke may not seem easy nor the burden light, but the Lord assures you, as he did Saint Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Christ is at your side; do not doubt his presence or the strength of his grace!

The scourge of AIDS challenges everyone. As the Bishops of Uganda have rightly observed: "This situation, which is affecting everyone, needs to be confronted in solidarity, with much love and care for the victims, with much generosity to the orphans and with much commitment to a renewed way of Christian moral living" (Pastoral Letter of the Ugandan Bishops, *Let Your Light Shine*, 28). Indeed all people of goodwill are called to reflect on the deeper social and moral issues associated with this disease. Parallel to the spread of AIDS, there is a dangerous crisis of values in some societies, as many people grow crippled in spirit, indifferent to the virtues and spiritual values which alone can guarantee true happiness and the authentic progress of society. This spiritual crisis especially affects the young, on whom the future of your country depends.

You who suffer from AIDS have an important role to play in this vital struggle for the well-being of your country! Offer your sufferings in union with Christ for your brothers and sisters who are especially at risk! Your suffering can be a gracefilled opportunity to bring about the moral rebirth of Ugandan society.

I invoke the comforting and strengthening gifts of God's unfailing love upon those who suffer from AIDS and upon all those who are generously engaged in *caring for them*. At the same time I appeal to those who are working to find an effective scientific response to this illness not to delay, and above all not to allow commercial considerations to detract from their committed efforts.

5. The Church's deep love and esteem for the sick were beautifully expressed in the words of my predecessor Pope Paul VI to the patients of the National Hospital in Mulogo during his visit in 1969. Dear friends, I now ask you to take these words to heart: "Like our Lord on the Cross, you cannot move about freely; but, like him you can hold your arms open wide to the entire world, and

offer your sufferings for the salvation of men.... Let your hospital bed be an altar upon which you offer yourself completely to God, to do with as he wishes; and your reward will be exceedingly great in heaven" (Paul VI, *Address to the Sick in the National Hospital of Mulogo*, 1 Aug. 1969).

The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ shed light on the true meaning and value of human suffering. The Lord invites everyone to join him on the road to Calvary and to share in the joy of Easter. On that journey we are never alone; the Blessed Virgin Mary, who stood at the foot of her Son's Cross, is ever at our side. Invoking her intercession and that of Saint Charles Lwanga and all the Uganda Martyrs, I impart my Apostolic Blessing to you, your loved ones, and all who care for you, as a pledge of God's grace and comfort.