



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI
TO "ST JOHN THE BAPTIST" ROMAN HOSPITAL
OF THE SOVEREIGN MILITARY HOSPITALLER ORDER OF MALTA

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

First Sunday of Advent, 2 December 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

"*Let us go to the house of the Lord!*". These words that we repeated in the response of the Responsorial Psalm clearly express the feelings that fill our hearts today, the First Sunday of Advent. The reason why we can go ahead joyfully, as the Apostle Paul has exhorted us, lies in the fact that our salvation is now at hand. The Lord is coming! With this knowledge we set out on the journey of Advent, preparing ourselves to celebrate with faith the extraordinary event of the Lord's birth. In the coming weeks, day after day the liturgy will offer for our reflection Old Testament texts that recall the lively, constant desire that kept alive in the Jewish people the expectation of the Messiah's coming. Watchful in prayer, let us too seek to prepare our hearts to receive the Lord, who will come to show us his mercy and give us his salvation.

Precisely during this time of waiting, Advent is a season of hope, and it is to Christian hope that I wished to dedicate my second Encyclical, officially presented the day before yesterday; it begins with the words St Paul addressed to the Christians of Rome: "*Spe salvi facti sumus* - in hope we were saved" (Rom 8: 24). In the Encyclical, I write among other things that "we need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain" (n. 31). May the certainty that God alone can be our steadfast hope enliven us all, gathered here this morning in this house where illness is combated with the support of solidarity. And I would like to make the most of my Visit to your hospital, managed by the Association of the Italian Knights of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, to present the Encyclical in spirit to the Christian community of Rome, and especially to those who, like you, are in direct contact with suffering and illness, for

precisely through suffering like the sick do we have need of hope, the certainty that God exists and does not abandon us, that he lovingly takes us by the hand and accompanies us. It is a text I invite you to examine deeply, to find in it the reasons for this "trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous" (n. 1).

Dear brothers and sisters, "May the God of hope who fills us with all joy and peace in faith through the power of the Holy Spirit be with you all!". With this wish which the priest addresses to the assembly at the beginning of Holy Mass, I offer you my cordial greeting. I greet first of all the Cardinal Vicar, Camillo Ruini, and Cardinal Pio Laghi, Patron of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, the Prelates and priests present and the chaplains and Sisters who serve here. I greet with respect His Most Eminent Highness Fra Andrew Bertie, Prince and Grand Master of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, whom I thank for the sentiments he has expressed on behalf of the management, the administrative, health-care and nursing staffs and all those who in their various capacities work in this hospital. I extend my greeting to the distinguished Authorities, with a special thought for the Health-care Director as well as the Patients' Representative, whom I thank for the words they addressed to me at the beginning of the Celebration.

But my most affectionate greeting is for you, dear sick people, and for your relatives who share your anxieties and hopes. The Pope is spiritually close to you and assures you of his daily prayers; he invites you to find support and comfort in Jesus and never to lose trust. The Advent liturgy will repeat to us throughout the coming weeks not to tire of calling on him; it will exhort us to go forth to meet him, knowing that he himself comes constantly to visit us. In trial and in sickness, God mysteriously visits us, and if we abandon ourselves to his will, we can experience the power of his love. Precisely because they are inhabited by people troubled by suffering, hospitals and clinics can become privileged places to witness to Christian love, which nourishes hope and inspires resolutions of fraternal solidarity. In the Collect we prayed: "O God, inspire in us the determination to meet with good works your Christ who comes". Yes! Let us open our hearts to every person, especially if he or she is in difficulty, because by doing good to those in need we prepare to welcome Jesus, who, in them, comes to visit us.

Dear brothers and sisters, this is what you seek to do in this hospital, where everyone's concern focuses on the professional and loving acceptance of the patients, the preservation of their dignity and the commitment to improve the quality of their life. Down the centuries the Church has made herself particularly "close" to the suffering. Your praiseworthy Sovereign Military Order of Malta has chosen to share in this spirit: from the very outset it was dedicated to the assistance of pilgrims in the Holy Land with a Hospice-Infirmary. While it pursued its aim of the defence of Christianity, the Sovereign Military Order of Malta spared no effort in treating the sick, especially the poor and the outcast. This hospital is also a testimony of this fraternal love. Having come into existence in the 1970s, it has today become a stronghold with a high standard of technology and a home of solidarity, where side by side with the health-care staff numerous volunteers work with generous dedication.

Dear Knights of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, dear doctors, nurses and all who work here, you are all called to carry out an important service to the sick and to society, a service that demands self-denial and a spirit of sacrifice. In every sick person, whoever he or she may be, may you be able to recognize and serve Christ himself; make them perceive with your acts and words the signs of his merciful love. To carry out this "mission" well, endeavour, as St Paul instructs us in the Second Reading, to "put on the armour of light" (Rom 13: 12), which consists in the Word of God, the gifts of the Spirit, the grace of the Sacraments, the theological and cardinal virtues; fight evil and abandon sin that darkens our life. At the beginning of a new liturgical year, let us renew our good resolutions of evangelical life. "It is full time now for you to wake from sleep" (Rom 13: 11), the Apostle urges; it is time to convert, to throw off the lethargy of sin, to prepare ourselves confidently to welcome "the Lord who comes". It is for this reason that Advent is a season of prayer and watchful waiting.

The Gospel passage that has just been proclaimed exhorts us to be "watchful", which is among other things the key word of the whole of this liturgical period: "Watch, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Mt 24: 42). Jesus, who came among us at Christmas and will return in glory at the end of time, does not tire of visiting us continuously in everyday events. He asks us to be alert to perceive his presence, his advent, and recommends that we watch and wait for him since his coming is not programmed or foretold but will be sudden and unexpected. Only those who are alert are not taken by surprise. He warns: may it not happen to you as in Noah's day, when men ate and drank heedlessly and were swept away unprepared by the flood (cf. Mt 24: 37-38). What does the Lord want to make us understand with this warning, other than we must not let ourselves be absorbed by material realities and concerns to the point of being ensnared by them? We must live in the eyes of the Lord with the conviction that he can make himself present. If we live in this way, the world will become better.

"Watch, therefore". Let us listen to Jesus' Gospel invitation and prepare ourselves to relive with faith the mystery of the Redeemer's birth, which filled all the world with joy; let us prepare ourselves to welcome the Lord in his constant coming to us in the events of life, in joy and in pain, in health and in sickness; let us prepare ourselves to meet him at his definitive coming. His nearness is always a source of peace, and if suffering, a legacy of human nature, sometimes becomes unbearable, with the Saviour's advent "suffering - without ceasing to be suffering - becomes, despite everything, a hymn of praise" (*Spe Salvi*, n. 37). Comforted by these words, let us continue the Eucharistic Celebration, invoking upon the sick, their relatives and all who work in this hospital and in the entire Order of the Knights of Malta the motherly protection of Mary, the Virgin of waiting and hope, as also of the joy which already exists in this world, because when we feel the closeness of the living Christ, there the remedy to suffering and his joy is already present. Amen.

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