

PASTORAL LETTER

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CHRIST OUR MEDICINE FOR OUR ILLNESSES

Who amongst us is not familiar with illness? We are all subject to falling ill, but not everyone faces illness in the same way: there are those who accept their illness, however then there are those who struggle and succumb to the heavy weight of their malady; furthermore, on several occasions, family members and those close to the ailing person also suffer.

When referring to illness, we are not only referring to physical ailments, but also to other illnesses which affect our interpersonal relationships, mostly those within the family; sicknesses which corrode relationships in the ecclesial community and several other areas of society.

Then there are illnesses of a moral nature: even though we all know the difference between what is good and what is bad, yet many times we find ourselves doing precisely what we do not wish to do.

There are illnesses of a spiritual nature, when a person, in spite of his efforts to live authentically, feels distant from God.

There are emotional wounds, when a person feels that he or she is being brushed aside, betrayed, humiliated, lied about, cheated and treated unjustly.

All these illnesses fill us with sadness; we retreat into our shell and distance ourselves from others. Even worse, there are occasions when others shy away from us because of our sickness. Instead of finding shelter, we realize that there are those who are embarrassed to acknowledge that they are related to us. The Christian community is not free from the temptation of shunning all those who are 'sick'.

There could be some people who think that during the three months in which Saint Paul dwelt among us, he spent his time baptizing, saying Mass or even organising a *festa* or two. Yet, according to St Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, Paul concentrated on one main thing: healing. As an apostle of Jesus Christ, he healed the father of Publius. After this, the people all came out to bring to him their sick, so that they too would be healed from their illnesses¹.

This should be a source of encouragement for all of us, because if we are losing hope due to of our sickness, today we can call upon Him in whose name Paul healed: Jesus Christ. He, who walked through the streets of Palestine, teaching and healing², is today also passing through our streets and He is prepared to heal us from every ailment. There is no sickness that cannot be cured by Jesus. Only one thing is necessary: that we reveal our true spiritual condition to Him convinced that He has the "word" to heal our wounds. This is why we hope that during this Jubilee Year, we allow the words of the apostle James to resound in our ears: "Any one of you who is ill should send for the elders of the church, and they must anoint the sick person with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of the faith will save the sick person"³. This is the priest's mission: not to condemn or excommunicate, but to place his hands upon the sick and pray for the mercy of God which heals. This is why, as your Bishops, we

¹ see Acts 28:8-9

² see Acts 10:38

³ Jm 5:14

appeal to anyone amongst us who is sick, in our families or in our communities, to move closer to Jesus Christ, who St Augustine refers to as the “Healer of the Soul”⁴. In St George Preca’s words, in “the Hospital of Christ” there are several wards such as those for persons sick with anger, jealousy, hatred, greed, theft, revenge; “the heavenly doctor” distributes the medicine appropriate for each and every spiritual illness, so that the person is able to heal and find peace⁵.

The coming of St Paul, our Father in Faith, also reminds us of our commitment towards the Church, which he founded locally. With the span of time, our vision of this Church might have become clouded. Through his actions, Paul shows us that the Church is made up of sick people – that which Pope Francis refers to as “a field hospital” which welcomes the wounded⁶, some of them so seriously wounded that it is impossible for them ever to be “whole” again. This is the open Church which we would like to see in our country! If the Church remains a space reserved for spiritually healthy people, we would be discouraging those who are wounded, from sitting around the altar. Saint Augustine warns us that those people who are under the impression that they are spiritually healthy are actually ailing to the extent that they cannot be healed since they do not feel the need to draw close to Christ; on the other hand, those who admit they are sick, seek the embrace of Jesus who heals them⁷. The scribes of the Pharisees, who saw Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus heard them and said to them: “It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. I came to call not the upright, but sinners”⁸.

In this “field hospital” where many are in danger of dying, we should not be concerned with, for example, how high are the patient’s sugar levels, because what the patient needs at this particular moment is something far more important: to help him or her avoid death ... only then we can help these persons to look after other aspects of their health. By this we mean that in this Church-hospital, the most essential factor is for contemporary man to become aware that God exists, and that God so loved the world that He gave us His only Son so that all who believe in Him may be saved⁹.

We should not exclude sick persons, because God may actually visit us in a person who is weak. God shows his mercy wherever there is human weakness. This is because “God chose those who by human standards are fools to shame the wise; he chose those who by human standards are weak to shame the strong; those who by human standards are common and contemptible – indeed those who count for nothing – to reduce to nothing all those that do count for something”¹⁰. Therefore, let us encourage those who are feeling weak, particularly those who are going through a difficult time in their marriage or family life, so that they may find their place in the Church. Through these people, God may indeed teach important lessons to those who think themselves wise in matters of God.

God’s medicine which has the power to heal all our ailments is called “mercy” or “reconciliation”. This is because the initiative was taken by God, who drew us close to Him through Christ, without taking account of our sins¹¹. As we read in the prophet Isaiah, “Ours

⁴ *De civitate Dei*, 5,14

⁵ *Dun Ġorġ Preca, L-Isptar ta' Kristu*, 1997, 4.

⁶ See Pope Francis, Interview by Antonio Spadaro SJ in *La Civiltà Cattolica* (19 September 2013).

⁷ See *Sermo* 80,4

⁸ Mk 2:16-17

⁹ See Jn 3:16

¹⁰ 1Cor 1:27-28

¹¹ see 2Cor 5:18-19

were the sufferings he was bearing, ours the sorrows he was carrying... The punishment reconciling us fell on him, and we have been healed by his bruises”¹².

The normal channel through which this healing power is transmitted is the sacrament of confession. When, by means of this sacrament, man tastes the goodness of God’s mercy, he becomes aware of the ugliness of sin and starts to feel repentant and then converts! In the light of our experience as your shepherds, we feel that we need to place firmly at the centre of Church life, the sacrament of reconciliation, so that we can experience first-hand the greatness of mercy¹³. The sacrament of confession is not magic. In certain situations, this sacrament is part of a healing process that takes time. There are wounds which continue to fester even after one has received forgiveness. Absolution is a dose of divine medicine which assists in the healing process. Besides this, there are other wounds which although healed, have left a scar, like, for example, in the case of a person who has repented, yet cannot make good for the damage he has caused. The fact that a sinner is not able, under certain circumstances, to turn back the clock, does not mean that he cannot receive forgiveness.

God’s mercy is so limitless that it could scandalize us! There are people who simply cannot understand how God is always ready to bestow this medicine of mercy. But it could be that we are slow when it comes to forgiving others, because as Jesus teaches, we find it easier to observe the splinter in our brother’s eye, than the great log in our own eye¹⁴. It is only when we consider ourselves as sinners that we can find the courage and humility to forgive.

Last Wednesday we marked the start of Lent in preparation for the great feast of Easter. The sacrament of Confession is a gift which Jesus gave us on the day of his resurrection. In fact, on Easter Sunday in the evening, Jesus came in the midst of the apostles and said to them: “Receive the Holy Spirit: if you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven”¹⁵. On the occasion of this Jubilee of Mercy, let us pray to God, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, Help of the Sick, so that during this Lent, our religious observances will prove to be oil poured over our wounds which are bandaged¹⁶, so that together with the Risen Christ we can become a “new creation”¹⁷.

We impart upon you our pastoral blessing.

Today, feast of the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple, 2nd February 2016.

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Archbishop of Malta

✠ **Mario Grech**
Bishop of Gozo

¹² Is 53:4-5

¹³ see Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 17.

¹⁴ see Lk 6:41

¹⁵ see Jn 20:19-23

¹⁶ see Lk 10:34

¹⁷ 2Cor 5:17