

Annual World Day of the Sick Mass---Diocesan Observance

Memorial Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes

February 11, 2016 11:30 a.m. Borgess Hospital/Lawrence Center

(Readings for Thursday after Ash Wednesday: Dt.30:15-20; Lk.9:22-25)

Greetings and welcome to: sisters, priests, members of the administration, medical staff, caregivers, patients-----all of us, sisters and brothers in Christ! Today we celebrate the 24th Annual World day of the Sick, established by Pope St. John Paul II in 1992, at a time when he himself was beginning to know firsthand what it means to experience physical illness and limitations. How beautiful that he chose this important day, the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, as the day to observe the World Day of Prayer for the Sick. As we know so well, it was in 1858 when our Blessed Mother appeared multiple times to 14-year old Bernadette Soubirous and several other young girls, revealing herself as the Immaculate Conception. She urged them to tell the world to turn from sin and turn back to her Son, Jesus, and she asked them to convince the local priests to build a church on that spot, where a small stream sprung up. Over the years, this stream has been the source of miraculous healings of thousands and thousands of sick and suffering people.

This year, the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes gets a little less attention because of what happened yesterday-----Ash Wednesday---the beginning of our 40 day Lenten Journey toward Easter (and the reason for our Purple Vestments today). We've entered into Lent, the annual time of grace---a time to reflect and to be renewed----a time for us to be very aware that we are mortal, and imperfect----therefore sinful----human beings. And the reality of our mortality also reminds us that we are prone to sickness/illness/suffering.

In addition, of course, we are in the midst of the special Jubilee Year of Mercy that Pope Francis has called the whole world to reflect on: God's unconditional Love and God's limitless Mercy; the gift of God's own Son Jesus to be our Savior, which fulfills God's Plan to be with us in all the joys and sufferings of our human lives.

And so this year's celebration of the World Day of the Sick is the perfect confluence of God's Love, Mercy, and our willingness to take advantage of the graces of Lent to turn away from anything that takes us from God and return to the Lord with all our hearts!

Today's Readings are those for this 2nd day of Lent, and they both speak to us about the power of Choice.

Today's first Reading, we heard Moses set before his people two paths to choose from: 1) life and prosperity; or 2) death and doom. That was the ultimate "life and death" choice for humanity.

But what we realize as we live our lives is that every choice we make follows one of those two basic paths. Are the choices we make life-giving----life-supporting----life-enhancing----life-protecting? Or, not?

Even the small, day to day choices, can fall into one of those two categories. Let's say somebody cuts us off in traffic; do we honk our horn, get all upset, perhaps turn to road rage (which can certainly lead to death), or do we try to be understanding, give the benefit of the doubt, or be merciful to the person who perhaps was

having a bad day? Or in our everyday conversations, do we choose to be honest and truthful, or do we cut people down, talk behind their backs, spread nasty rumors, become involved in gossip and lying? Each day our choices can help to build people up, or tear people down. The choice Moses sets before us really is basic to our human reality.

Jesus built on that same concept when we heard Him in today's Gospel give us two choices: to follow Him----realizing that there is a consequence for making that choice which involves personal sacrifice (denying ourselves and taking up our crosses....) or to follow someone/something else?

Pope Francis wrote a beautiful Message to all of us on this occasion of the 24th World Day of the Sick entitled: "Entrusting oneself to the Merciful Jesus like Mary: '*Do whatever He tells you*' (Jn 2:5)" In that message, he identifies those whom he is addressing---all of us---in these words: "The 24th Annual World Day of the Sick offers me an opportunity to draw particularly close to you, dear friends, who are ill and to those who care for you." Our Holy Father is speaking directly to all of us as we gather here for today's special observance. He then goes on to make this very important insight: "Illness, above all grave illness, always places human existence in crisis and brings with it questions that dig deep." He recognizes, as we all do, that sometimes our first---instinctive---very human response is to be afraid---angry---full of anxiety. But he also reminds us that at this critical moment in a person's life how very important our Faith is to us. And he says: "Not because faith makes illness, pain, or the questions which they raise disappear. But because it offers a key by which we can discover the deepest meaning of what we are experiencing; a key that helps us to see how illness can be the way to draw nearer to Jesus Who walks at our side, weighed down by the Cross. And this key is given to us by Mary, our Mother, who has known this way first hand." Isn't that insightful? And then Pope Francis goes on to tell us how Mary----our Mother---Our Lady of Lourdes---can help us to use that "key" as we struggle with illness and for those of you who minister to and care for those who are ill.

Pope Francis reflects on the Wedding Feast of Cana. We are very familiar with that story: Mary and Jesus were at a wedding celebration before Jesus had begun His public ministry; Mary recognized the embarrassing situation facing the young couple; she went to Jesus to lay out the problem; and then she went to the servants to give them instruction: "Do whatever He tells you."

Pope Francis reminds us that it is the same tender care of our dear Blessed Mother that she provides for us as well. As Pope Francis writes: "This same tenderness is present in the lives of all those persons who attend the sick and understand their needs, even the most imperceptible ones, because they look to them with eyes full of love."

For those who are ill, of course it is more than understandable that they would pray for a miraculous healing---for relief---for a return to good health; we pray for that outcome for them as well. But at the root of our prayers should be Mary's encouragement for us: "Do whatever He tells you." We pray that whatever the circumstance, that our faith will help us to know, and feel, God's mercy and love with us through our struggles.

And Pope Francis concludes: "Whether we are healthy or sick, we can offer up our toil and sufferings....By quietly helping those who suffer, as in illness itself, we take our daily cross upon our shoulders and follow the Master."

So today, on this World Day of the Sick, we give thanks for Borgess, our fine Catholic Hospital, and for the works of love, mercy and healing that takes place here, rooted in our faith. We pray for all who are sick---- those here, and all those throughout the Diocese. We pray for all those who care for the sick: doctors, nurses, medical staff and administration volunteers and all caregivers.

May we continue to make life-giving choices in our lives, and the ultimate choice to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, whatever they may be, and follow Jesus, through this Lent, and throughout the rest of our lives.

God bless you, now and always.