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Pope John Paul II

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Address to the Francois-Charon Centre for the Handicapped

Pope John Paul II



The following talk was given by the Pontiff on Sept. 10, 1984 during his visit to Canada. The Centre is located in Quebec.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I have very much wanted to meet personally with you, you who suffer in your bodies from illness or accident. I would like to greet each and every one of you, as well as all those who surround you with affection and assistance and who help you to love life and make it blossom in you like a gift from God. I mean, of course, your parents and your friends and all the people who work in this Centre. I would also like to extend my greetings to the other handicapped men and women in Quebec and throughout Canada. Like Jesus of Nazareth, I want to come near you and to explore with you the spiritual meaning of your suffering and your hope for a full life.

First of all, I express spontaneously my admiration, my congratulations and my encouragement to those who organized this Centre and

who see to its daily operation. The name Francois-Charon is, in itself, quite evocative. When this land was first being settled, he fell prey to illness and decided to abandon his lucrative fur business to devote his efforts and money to the underprivileged, to children, orphans, the crippled, the old and the infirm. To all, according to their needs, he provided care, education and training. Was it not his house of charity that later became the Montreal General Hospital?

Today, five years after the merging of two institutions of somewhat similar nature, the Francois-Charon Centre wants to be in the forefront of science, technology and pedagogy in order to offer physical and psycho-social rehabilitation services to an increasing number of physically handicapped adults in eastern Quebec.

Not only are tools and sophisticated rehabilitation methods made available to the handicapped, but also the means of acquiring as much independence as possible in their own milieu, as well as occupational training for re-integration into society. Teams of specialists from all disciplines work according to the philosophy that everyone has the right to equal opportunity and to equal human dignity. It is marvelous and I hope that scientists continue to invent every possible means of effectively relieving suffering.

But, dear members of the staff, despite all these tools and qualifications, the handicapped could not develop without the devotion, dedication, support and *human warmth* they also require and which I know you offer them here. I am struck by the young age of the employees who, inspired by an ideal of service, offer their abilities and their dynamism. I am not forgetting all the volunteers who by their visits here and in the home help to provide a climate of friendship and service.

A word of encouragement must also be given to the concern this Centre has for integrating the spiritual dimension into its work of human rehabilitation. This chapel in the heart of the Centre is a sign of this concern. It is a place where all those who want to gather before the Lord, partake of the Eucharist, meditate and sing with others, and meet the priest and those who are involved with him in pastoral activities can do so. The human person constitutes a whole — body and soul — and every personal event — trial, effort or healing — has a spiritual dimension.

Yes, my best wishes for the expert service offered in this Centre and in other similar institutions in Quebec.

Dignity of Handicapped

I see in all this a sign of the value that your people attach to the dignity of the handicapped, in spite of the fascination the modern world feels for productivity, profit, efficiency, speed, and records of physical strength.

Our societies, thank God, appear to be becoming progressively more aware of the situation of the handicapped. They have rights which have often been neglected. On Dec. 9, 1975, the United Nations Organization issued a statement on these rights which deserve our praise. In addition, the U.N. decreed 1981 the International Year of the Handicapped. However, all these good intentions must take form in every region. For this to happen, there are psychological and material obstacles to overcome and progress to be made.

The Church has always taken a vivid interest in this question. Over the centuries, it fostered many undertakings involving great generosity in order, like Christ, to come to the aid of the handicapped. It did this because it was convinced of the unique value of every person. On March 4, 1981, the Holy See published a long document re-asserting the basic principles and lines of action (*L'Osservatore Romano*, weekly French edition, March 24, 1981). I would like now to say once again clearly and forcefully: *the handicapped person is a human subject in the full sense, with all the innate, sacred and inviolable rights which that entails.* This is true whether the person be handicapped by physical disability, whether due to birth defect, chronic disease or accident, or by mental or sensory deficiency. It is true, too, no matter how great the person's affliction might be. We must facilitate his or her participation in all facets of social life and at all possible levels: in the family, at school, at work, in the community, in politics and religion. In practice, this presupposes the absolute respect of the human life of the handicapped person from his or her conception through every stage of development.

We must attempt to overcome not only handicaps, but also their causes. Often, they are natural — a deformation of the organism or a disease. Sometimes they are related to war or pollution, alcohol or drug abuse, or careless driving. There may be psychological and moral causes. A spiritual "ecology" is as important as an ecology of nature. We must help families who are in distress and deserve our help. To this end, we must build centers like this one, where there is sensitivity to family bonds. We must provide training, suitable employment with a just wage, promotion opportunities and security to spare the handicapped traumatic experiences. All this requires imagination and boldness in order to develop various kinds of ideal initiatives. It also requires the aid of public authorities. I devoted a whole paragraph to this question in my encyclical on work (No. 22). It is important, finally, that the handicapped person not only be loved and helped but that he or she be as aware as possible of his or her dignity and resources, of his or her ability to will, to communicate, to cooperate, to love and give while continuing daily the battle to maintain and develop his or her potential.

Unquestionably, the quality of a society or civilization is measured by the respect it has for its weakest members. A technically perfect

society where only fully-productive members are accepted must be considered totally unworthy of human beings, perverted as it is by a type of discrimination which is no less reprehensible than racial discrimination. The handicapped person is one of us and shares in our humanity. To recognize and promote his or her dignity and rights is to recognize our own dignity and rights.

These are the convictions of the Church (cf. aforementioned document from the Holy See) and the Church is delighted to see that they are shared and practiced by many governments and societies.

But, dear friends, when it comes to working for the handicapped, Christians can find in their faith deeper motives and a very special source of strength.

The gospel shows us Jesus going around doing good. He welcomed all those who were suffering, whether physically or morally. He even sought them out. He proclaimed to them the good news of the love of God and of their salvation by faith. And in this salvation, He included both the body and the soul. By comforting the infirm — the crippled, the paralyzed, the blind and the deaf — He wanted to deliver them from their misery. Their healing, in answer to their faith, was the sign of the fuller life which He proclaimed: "Arise and walk!"

Jesus Assumed Suffering

He was not content simply to be near suffering and to relieve it, but He took it upon himself. Voluntarily, He became the man of sorrows, acquainted with suffering including, in the end, the suffering of the tortured and those condemned to death. Because He, the beloved Son of the Father, sacrificed His life, God raised Him from the dead, and Christ opened for us the gates of life. He guaranteed us that life would have the last word.

So the message He left us is that you, the handicapped, should seek with Him to fight against evil, to overcome the obstacle from which your body suffers, and to do this with the assistance of science and technology and with the courage of love.

This is how we become good samaritans for one another (cf. *Letter Salvifici Doloris*, Nos. 28-30), not only by stopping beside a person suffering the wounds of life, but by bringing him or her efficacious help, by giving ourselves to this person with whom Christ identified Himself: "What you have done to one of My brothers or sisters, you have done unto Me."

Up to this point, dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, I have spoken of the nobility of this tenacious fight against physical evil and of all the technical competency, courage, solidarity and hope which it involves. This is indeed the will of God.

But the mystery of your suffering is deeper still and I would like to descend into its depths with you as I did in my letter of Feb. 11 this

year, on the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes: "At the heart of all human suffering appears the inevitable question: Why? It is a question about the cause, the reason; it is also a question about purpose and, finally meaning" (No. 9). "Almost every person enters suffering protesting, quite humanly: 'Why?' . . ." (No. 26). The person suffering addresses this question to God as Job did, and also to Christ. Even though one identifies the secondary cause of the handicap even though one hopes to overcome it and manages to do so through will and rehabilitation, the subjective problem remains: "Why this suffering? Why this restriction at this time in my life?" This mystery accompanies us just as it accompanies all human trials, even human work. Christ gives an answer from His cross, from the depth of His own suffering. It is not an abstract answer. It is a call which requires time for us to hear.

Christ gave universal redemptive value to His own suffering which appeared to be imposed on Him from without. He accepted it out of obedience to His Father and out of love for humanity, in order to free it from its sin, the ultimate cause of suffering and death. And if we agree to, we also can participate in this redemption. This agreement is neither fatality nor resignation to suffering which remains an evil against which we must continue to struggle. But God shows us how to draw good from evil by offering up our suffering with the cross of Christ. I'm sure that many of you are having or have had this experience in faith. The pain remains. But the heart is serene and peaceful. It overcomes the feeling of the uselessness of suffering (cf. *ibid.*, No. 27). It opens itself to love and helps those around to go out of themselves, to give themselves. Such a heart bears witness to faith and hope. It believes that in the mystery of the communion of saints it has something to offer for the salvation of its brothers and sisters throughout the world. It enters into the redemptive mission of Christ.

For this moving witness, we thank the handicapped and all those who discretely accompany them on their spiritual journey. It is important that the handicapped and the sick help one another in associations, not only to make their living conditions more human and to have their rights recognized, but also to better share in this mystery. No one can impose his or her faith, but everyone can live it and bear witness to it and bring new inspiration and dynamism into these health institutions. Blessed are those who understand the language of the beatitudes! Human suffering becomes for them a force which can help to transform the world.

Yes, with Christ you must love life: "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full" (Jn. 10, 11) — natural life in your body, in your rehabilitated functions, in your senses; the life of the intellectual faculties and of your ability to love, but also, the more mysterious, supernatural life which God gives believers at baptism, His divine life, a sharing in the life of the Trinity. This life is unaffected by

physical handicaps; in fact, it is in contrast with the weaknesses of the body. This life is invisible to the eye, but it gives people their inner beauty and their hidden strength. It lasts and grows beyond this earthly life. The greatness of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation, lies in introducing us to this life. This chapel is a chosen place for that to happen.

That, dear friends, is the message the Bishop of Rome wanted to leave with you.

You seem to be well looked after here and encouraged to rediscover a taste for life. I cannot help but think — and this is an intention I entrust to your prayer — of all the other handicapped people in this country and in the world — of the mentally handicapped, of the gravely ill, of those who have injuries so serious that there is no human hope for improvement, but who have the right to the same respect for life; of the handicapped who are defenseless, of children waiting to be born and of the elderly on whose behalf I would like to say: "We have the right to birth, we have the right to life!" I think of the countries which are too poor to have rehabilitation centers like this one.

We all share in the suffering of our brothers and sisters.

As I said at the outset of the International Year of the Handicapped (Jan. 1, 1981): "If we were to devote only a small part of the budget for the arms race to this task, we could make considerable progress and ease the fate of many suffering people."

Pontiff's Assurance

Before we say good-bye — and I can assure you that the memory of this meeting will remain vivid with me — I would like to express again my affection and my encouragement to all the handicapped here in this Centre. I express it also to their families and to the deserving staff of this institution. Vatican II recognized that the vital center of the lay apostolate is found in works of charity like this (cf. *Apostolicam actuositatem*, Decree No. 8). I think too of the religious men and women who have devoted their consecrated lives to serving the handicapped and of all the priests who bring them the efficacious signs of Christ's love.

Peter the Apostle said to the lame man at the beautiful gate: "I have neither silver nor gold, but in the name of Jesus Christ, rise up and walk." This miraculous healing power belongs to Jesus Christ. Today, Peter's successor thanks you for your welcome and your witness and he hopes that his presence among you will help to strengthen your faith, that faith which enlightens, expands and uplifts your life. I ask Mary, our Mother, to obtain for you this gift of the Holy Spirit. And I pray to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to fill you with his blessings.