

(English translation)

Castelgandolfo, 1 September 1999

Illness, a salutary moment?

Excerpt from a conversation of Chiara to the delegates of the Focolare Movement

...

At the first signs of any illness, we are invited to believe and to say that everything is love, the love of God, recalling Therese of Lisieux, who did not focus on her infirmity when she first spat up blood; rather, she said: "My Spouse has arrived."¹ ...

Who suffers is at the front line

In the Focolare we also have our own view of illness and of those who are sick.

In another diary from April 1968 we find:

"In our work, in the triumphs . . . brought about by this vigorous and flourishing Movement, at times we are tempted to see people who are suffering as marginal cases to be looked after, to be visited, but to be helped if we can so that they may soon resume their activity, as if such activity were our primary duty, the centre of our life.

"But this is not so. Those among us who are suffering, who are lying ill, who are dying, are the chosen ones. They are at the centre of the hierarchy of love in the Movement. They are the ones who do the most, who achieve the most."²

And at another time we wrote: "Those who are ill should be seen as living hosts who unite their suffering to that of Christ, thus giving the best contribution to the development of the Work of Mary and of the Church."³

Pope John XXIII was of the same opinion. He wrote to a bishop who had retired: "Now your task has changed (in relation to the Church): you must pray for her. And this is no less important than action for her."

Illness seen by some saints

It would be beautiful and interesting at this point to examine some rules of life of other religious families in order to see how consistent the Holy Spirit is in suggesting to various founders norms similar to our own.

In the Rule of Benedict, for example, we read in chapter 36: "First and foremost, care must be given to the sick...."⁴

In an early rule of Saint Francis we find: "I beg the sick brother to thank God for everything and to desire to be whatever the Lord wills, whether sick or well, because God teaches all those He has destined for eternal life ... as the Lord says: 'Those whom I love, I correct and chastise' (Rev 3:19)."⁵

Illness, therefore, is love. For Francis as for us, all that makes us suffer is love.

Illnesses: trials for the final trial

Moreover, we see illnesses, with their burden of suffering, as trials from God for the final trial: our passage to the next life.

¹ Cf. Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, transl. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1996), p. 211.

² Chiara Lubich, Unpublished Diary of 11 April 1968.

³ General Statutes of the Work of Mary, art. 52.

⁴ G. Turbessi (ed.), *Regole monastiche antiche* (Rome, 1978), p. 442.

⁵ *The Saint, Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, pp. 71–72.

We wrote in the sixties:

“God, in becoming man, and therefore in being mortal, was born on this earth to die.

“This is the meaning of life: to live like the grain of wheat—whose destiny it is to die and decay—in preparation for the true life of eternity. ...

“We have to see all the illnesses that befall us as steps prepared by the love of God to help us scale the heights, as trials to prepare us for the trial. We are like small hosts, not yet completely consumed, but awaiting that moment which will come for all of us, the full ‘consummatum est’ (Jn 19:30).

“And so: mortals with the Mortal One, in order to rise with him and to begin a Life that will never end.

“Lord, may the doing of your will be incense that we offer in this ‘mass’ we are preparing.”⁶

And the writing entitled: “His mass and ours” is well known. It speaks of suffering. It may be useful here to quote a part of it because it contains the meaning that illness and suffering have for us:

“If you suffer and your suffering is such

that it prevents any activity,

remember the mass.

Jesus in the mass,

today as once before,

does not work, does not preach:

Jesus sacrifices himself out of love.

In life

we can do many things, say many words,

but the voice of suffering,

maybe unheard and unknown to others,

is the most powerful word,

the one that pierces heaven.

If you suffer,

immerse your pain in his:

say your mass; ...

and let your blood flow

for the good of humanity —

like him!

The mass!

It is too great to understand!

His mass, our mass.”⁷

Chiara Lubich

(taken from: Chiara Lubich, *A New Way*, New City Press, New York 2006, pp.112-116.)

⁶ Chiara Lubich, Unpublished Diary of 11 April 1968.

⁷ Chiara Lubich, *Meditations*, pp. 36–37; cf. also *Christian Living Today*, pp. 93–94.