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## Pastoral Letter for Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time

### 'Called to Serve the Sick'

One of the great gifts of Pope Francis to the Church has been the Jubilee Year of Mercy, which concluded last November. During that Year, we entered so much more deeply into an understanding and acceptance of the mercy of God towards each of us, no matter the circumstances of our life. We also refreshed the flow between the mercy we receive from the Lord and the mercy we extend to those around us through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

Now, for the next six months, I ask you all to focus on one particular corporal work of mercy: caring for the sick. From now until the close of our Diocesan Pilgrimage to Lourdes at the end of July, I hope that we can look again at how we respond to those in our midst who are sick, in body or in mind, and how we support them and their families. The care we extend will embrace not only sick members of our own family and our relatives, but also those in our neighbourhood, those in hospital, and those who are burdened with chronic illness or painful conditions. This special season, with the title 'Called to Serve the Sick', is being led by Bishop Paul McAleenan. I thank him for all his work in this.

Caring for the sick is a daily, practical expression of the mercy we have first received from God. This means that our caring for the sick arises from our faith in God and is most fully completed when it takes its shape from that faith. The care we offer, then, is shot through with a loving trust that this sickness, these special needs, which a person is carrying, are capable of bringing that person closer to God, and of helping others through their own pain. This is what we mean by 'redemptive power of suffering'. I am sure you know the words of that wonderful hymn which says: 'Nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee. E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me, nearer my God to thee.'

The first reading of our Mass today expressed the feelings experienced by many in their illness: 'The Lord has abandoned me. The Lord has forgotten me'. Indeed this is often how we feel. But the promise contained in that reading from Isaiah assured us that God's love is stronger even than a mother's love. God promises: 'I will never forget you.' And God looks to us to give practical expression to that promise. God wants us to say to those for whom we care: 'I, too, in God's name, will never forget you!' This is what St Paul means when he says that we have been 'entrusted with the mysteries of God' and prays that we may be found worthy of that trust.

My mother had a special way of approaching the presence of illness and suffering in her life. She often remarked that the traditional saying 'God never gives a cross without the back to bear it' was wrong. She insisted that it ought to say 'God never gives a cross without the backs to bear it' for it is only by standing shoulder to shoulder that can we carry the crosses which come our way from the Lord. Indeed, quite often it is the shoulders of the sick persons themselves who help us to carry the cross together. Often it is the sick who bless us with their courage, tenacious faith and enduring hope.

On Wednesday this week, we begin the time of Lent in which we try to follow more closely Our Blessed Lord, especially in the sufferings he bore for us. This longer season of 'Called to Serve the Sick', can start by our looking again, during Lent, at how we care for those who are going through a time of illness, or indeed whose lives are coming to an end. It asks us to see beyond all the necessary practical help and medical care to the very soul of the person, seeing them as a precious daughter or son of our Heavenly Father, making their way to him, coming closer, step-by-step, with Christ himself. As Cardinal Hume said: 'The journey to heaven always goes over the hill of Calvary.' We can make that journey together.

Please do look out for the steps and events of this season. Please do make a renewed effort to remember the sick and the dying in your prayers. Please do not turn your back on them, simply handing them over to professional care, important though that care is. The mystery of the gift of life in each one of us becomes more precious at such times. Let us treasure and serve that mystery, for it is the mystery of God himself.

Yours devotedly,

+ Vincent Nichols

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols  
Archbishop of Westminster