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GENERAL PAPAL DOCUMENTS

MENTALLY ILL ARE ALSO MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE

# Mentally Ill Are Also Made In God's Image

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**MENTALLY ILL ARE ALSO MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE**

**Pope John Paul II**

*"Whoever suffers from mental illness 'always' bears God's image and likeness in himself, as does every human being In addition, he 'always' has the inalienable right not only to be considered as an image of God and therefore as a person, but also to be treated as such", the Holy Father said on Saturday, 30 November, addressing participants in the international conference sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health-Care Workers, on the theme: "In the Image and Likeness of God: Always? Illness of the Human Mind". Here is a translation of the Pope's address, which was given in Italian.*

1. I am pleased with this meeting which allows me to offer you my greetings, distinguished participants in the international conference sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health-Care Workers on the problem of mental illness, with the significant title: *In the Image and Likeness of God: Always? Illness of the Human Mind.*

I affectionately greet Cardinal Fiorenzo Angelini, whom I thank for his cordial address. A particular word of appreciation is owed to him and to his coworkers, for their efforts in preparing this symposium, which has brought together specialists from all over the world.

2. Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, present among you are researchers, scientists, specialists in the field of the biomedical sciences, theologians, moralists, jurists, psychologists, sociologists and health-care workers. Together you represent a heritage of humanity and wisdom, of science and experience which can produce very useful advice for the understanding, treatment and care of the mentally ill.

The Church looks on these persons with special concern, as she looks on any other human being affected by illness. Instructed by the divine Teacher's words, she believes that "man, made in the image of the Creator, redeemed by the blood of Christ and made holy by the presence of the Holy Spirit, has as the ultimate purpose of his life, to live 'for the praise of God's glory' (cf. Eph 1:12), striving to make each of his actions reflect the splendour of that glory" (Encyclical Letter *Veritatis splendor*, n. 10).

### **Man is created in God's image and likeness**

The Church is deeply convinced of this truth, even when man's mental faculties-the noblest, because they testify to his spiritual nature-seem severely limited and even impeded by a pathological process. She therefore reminds the political community of its duty to recognize and celebrate the divine image in man with actions that support and serve all those who find themselves in a condition of serious mental illness. This is a task which science and faith, medicine and pastoral care, professional skill and a sense of common brotherhood must help to carry out through an investment of adequate human, scientific and socio-economic resources.

3. The title of the congress invites us to further examine this line of reflection which has just been outlined. Indeed, while on the one hand it again offers an authoritative affirmation of the Bible, on the other, it raises a disturbing question.

The conviction that man has been created in the image and likeness of God is one of the pillars of Christian anthropology. This is what is written in the first chapter of Genesis (1:26). Philosophical and theological reflection has identified in man's mental faculties, that is, in his reason and in his will, a privileged sign of this affinity with God. These faculties, in fact, enable man to know the Lord and to establish a relationship of dialogue with him. In discussing this, St. Thomas points out, "Person signifies what is most perfect in all nature, that is, a subsistent individual of a rational nature" (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 29, a. 3).

It should be made clear however that the whole man, not just his spiritual soul, including his intelligence and free will, but also his body shares in the dignity of "the image of God." In fact, the human body "is a human body precisely because it is animated by a spiritual soul, and it is the whole human person that is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 364). "Do you not know, the Apostle writes "that your bodies are members of Christ? ... You are not your own.... So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:15 19-20). Hence the need to respect one's own body, and also the body of every other person, especially the suffering (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 10043).

### **By grace man becomes a child of God**

4. Precisely because man is a person his dignity is unique among all creatures. Every individual man is an end in himself and can never be used as a mere means for reaching other goals not even in the name of the well-being and progress of the community as a whole. By creating man in his

own image, God wished to make him share in his lordship and his glory. When he entrusted him with the task of caring for all creation, he took into account his creative intelligence and his responsible freedom.

The Second Vatican Council, delving into the mystery of man under the guidance of Christ's words (cf. Jn 17:21-22) opened up to us horizons inaccessible to human reason. In the Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, "a certain parallel between the union existing among the divine persons and the union of the sons of God in truth and love" (n. 24) is explicitly mentioned. When God turns his gaze on man, the first thing he sees and loves in him is not the deeds he succeeds in doing, but his own image, an image that confers on man the ability to know and love his own Creator, to rule over all earthly creatures and to use them for God's glory (cf. *ibid.*, n. 12). And this is why the Church recognizes the same dignity in all human beings and the same fundamental value, regardless of any other circumstantial consideration. Therefore regardless too—and this is most important—of the fact that this ability cannot be utilized because impeded by mental illness.

5. This conception of man as the image and likeness of God is not only confirmed by the New Testament Revelation, but supremely enriched by it. St. Paul says: "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal 4:45). By grace, therefore, man truly shares in this divine sonship, becoming a child of God in the Son.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). He is the perfect man who has restored in the children of Adam that likeness to God which had been disfigured ever since the first sin. Human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed, not

absorbed, in him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare. For by his Incarnation, the Son of God has in a certain way united himself with each man" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 22).

6. At this point we feel the whole weight of the disturbing question which appears in the theme: "Always?". This is a provocative question which is not only asked at the *ontological* level—here faith and reason converge in recognizing the full human dignity of the mentally ill—as much as at the *deontological* level: one can in fact ask whether the way a mentally ill person is treated by his peers in daily life corresponds fully and adequately to what he is in God's plan.

That question—"Always?"—must spur both the personal and the collective conscience to a sincere reflection on our behaviour towards those persons who are suffering from mental illness. Is it not true that all too often these persons encounter indifference and neglect, when not also exploited and abused?

Through God's grace, there is also another side to the coin: I stressed this in the Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, recalling "all those daily gestures of openness, sacrifice and unselfish care which countless people lovingly make in families, hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly and other centres or communities which defend life" (n. 27). But we cannot close our eyes to certain forms of behaviour which seem to ignore human dignity and to trample on his inalienable rights.

### **Mentally ill always bear God's image and likeness**

7. We Christians especially cannot do so. In this regard the Gospel speaks clearly. Christ not only took pity on the sick and healed many of them, restoring health to both their-bodies and their minds, his compassion also led him to identify with them. He declares: "I was sick and you visited me" (Mt 25:36). The disciples of the Lord, precisely because they were able to

see the image of the "suffering" Christ in all people marked by sickness, opened their hearts to them, spending themselves in various forms of assistance.

Well, Christ took all human suffering on himself, even mental illness. Yes even this affliction, which perhaps seems the most. absurd and incomprehensible, configures the sick person to Christ and gives him a share in his redeeming passion.

8. Thus the response to the theme's question is clear: whoever suffers from mental illness "always" bears God's image and likeness in himself, as does every human being. In addition, he "always" has the inalienable right not only to be considered as an image of God and therefore as a person, but also to be treated as such.

It is everyone's duty to *make an active response*: our actions must show that mental illness does not create insurmountable distances, nor prevent relations of true Christian charity with those who are its victims. Indeed, it should inspire a particularly attentive attitude towards these people who are fully entitled to belong to the category of the poor to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs (cf. Mt 5:3).

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I have recalled these fundamental and comforting truths, well aware that I am speaking to people who fully understand them. I gladly take this opportunity to express to you my full appreciation of your valuable work and to encourage you to continue a service with such lofty humanitarian importance.

May the Lord bless your therapeutic work and crown it with results that comfort your patients, to whom I offer my affectionate thoughts and the assurance of a special prayer.

Taken from:

L'Osservatore Romano

Weekly Edition in English

11 December 1996

L'Osservatore Romano is the newspaper of the Holy See.

The Weekly Edition in English is published for the US by:

The Cathedral Foundation

L'Osservatore Romano English Edition

320 Cathedral St.

Baltimore, MD 21201

Subscriptions: (410) 547-5315

Fax: (410) 332-1069

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