

## The Mentally Ill-- Also Made In God's Image

Excerpted from "Mentally Ill are also Made in God's Image," by Pope John Paul II, Nov. 30, 1996

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). . .

### [Humans] are 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 solidarity must help to carry out through an investment of adequate human, scientific and socio-economic resources. . .

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. . .

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

. . . 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.

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), 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).

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**

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.

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).

### **Reflection Questions**

What does Pope John Paul II say is the duty of the political community toward the mentally ill?

Why does he start addressing the problem of responding to mental illness by looking at the policies and structures of the politicians who lead our local, national and international communities, rather than begin by asking Christians to be kind to those with mental illness?

John Paul II stresses that it is not just our minds that make us human, but our bodies as well; how does this challenge us to behave, towards ourselves and towards others?

What is your initial reaction when you are around someone who seems mentally ill? What prejudices and preconceived notions do you have about people with mental illnesses? Christ identified with the sick. Why does he want us to do the same? Why is this sometimes difficult?

Reflect quietly on the following question: Do you know anyone who has a mental illness? Remember that mental illness includes more common illnesses such as depression and eating disorders.

How can we make as “active response” to those with mental illness? What can we do for individuals with emotional problems and mental distress? What can we do with others to advance the rights of all those who suffer with such illnesses?

### **Prayer for Those with Mental Illnesses**

Christ, in the Garden of Gethsemane, you were distressed in mind and wounded in spirit. You took on this painful human experience and asked if your disciples would provide comfort by being aware and compassionate.

Through your church and our beloved John Paul II, you ask your disciples today to provide comfort and compassion to those who are suffering from emotional and mental illnesses. Help us not to fail you in this challenge.

Guide us to understand the complexities of mental illness. Give us the discernment to seek justice for those who suffer in mind. Grant us compassionate hearts so we may embrace them as your children.

Bring us all to health and wholeness in mind and body. Amen.

