Spirituality
Vatican
Francis, the comic strip
Rohan Aggarwal, 26, a resident doctor treating patients suffering from COVID-19, rushes to a

Rohan Aggarwal, 26, a resident doctor treating patients suffering from COVID-19, rushes to an emergency call at a ward for COVID-19 patients, during his 27-hour shift at Holy Family Hospital in New Delhi in this May 1, 2021, file photo. (CNS photo/Danish Siddiqui, Reuters)

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Although scientists have made great strides in the field of medicine, genuine care and listening to those who suffer must always be at the forefront of any therapy, Pope Francis said.

"Patients are always more important than their diseases, and for this reason, no therapeutic approach can disregard listening to the patient, his or her history, anxieties and fears," the pope wrote in his message for the 2022 World Day of the Sick, which the Catholic Church marks Feb. 11, the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes.

Care that respects each patient's "dignity and frailties" is especially needed when "healing is not possible," he added.

"It is always possible to console; it is always possible to make people sense a closeness that is more interested in the person than in his or her pathology. For this reason, I would hope that the training provided to health workers might enable them to develop a capacity for listening and relating to others," Pope Francis wrote in his message, which was released by the Vatican Jan. 4.

Reflecting on Christ's call in Luke 6:36 to "be merciful," Pope Francis focused on the need to accompany those who suffer "on a path of charity."

Mercy, he said, "expresses God's very nature" in that he "cares for us with the strength of a father and the tenderness of a mother."

Jesus is the "supreme witness" of God's merciful love for the sick, not only in healing them but also in making care for the sick "paramount in the mission of the apostles," the pope said.

Many people who are ill, especially during the current pandemic, "spent the last part of their earthly life in solitude, in an intensive care unit, assisted by generous health care workers, yet far from their loved ones and the most important people in their lives," he noted.

"This helps us to see how important is the presence at our side of witnesses to God's charity, who, following the example of Jesus, the very mercy of the Father, pour the balm of consolation and the wine of hope on the wounds of the sick," the pope wrote.

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Pope Francis thanked health care workers who went out of their way to care for the sick as a mission "carried out with love and competence, (that) transcends the bounds of your profession."

"Your hands, which touch the suffering flesh of Christ, can be a sign of the merciful hands of the father," he said. "Be mindful of the great dignity of your profession, as well as the responsibility that it entails."

The pope also highlighted the importance of Catholic health care institutions, which help to meet the needs of those unable to obtain medical treatment due to poverty or social exclusion.

"At a time when the culture of waste is widespread and life is not always acknowledged as worthy of being welcomed and lived, these structures, like 'houses of mercy,' can be exemplary in protecting and caring for all life, even the most fragile, from its beginning until its natural end," he said.

Pope Francis said pastoral ministry in health care provides an "indispensable service" and that all Christians are called to offer "God's closeness" to the sick and the suffering.

"I would like to remind everyone that closeness to the sick and their pastoral care is not only the task of certain specifically designated ministers; visiting the sick is an invitation that Christ addresses to all his disciples," the pope said.

"How many sick and elderly people are living at home and waiting for a visit! The ministry of consolation is a task for every baptized person, mindful of the word of Jesus; 'I was sick, and you visited me,'" he said.