

66e Wereld Lepradag: Einde aan discriminatie, stigmata en vooroordelen

Message from the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development for the 66th World Leprosy Day (27 January 2019)

To the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences,
To the Bishops responsible for Health Pastoral Care,
To Men and Women Religious,
To social, healthcare and pastoral workers,
To volunteers and all persons of good will,

“Ending discrimination, stigma, and prejudice”

The medical community and society have seen great advances in the care of persons with Leprosy or Hansen’s disease in recent years. Diagnosis has improved and various treatments are more accessible than before, yet “this illness still continues to strike, especially the neediest and poorest of persons.”^[1] Over 200,000 new cases of Hansen’s disease are reported each year, with 94% representing 13 different countries.^[2] “It is important,” Pope Francis has stated, “to keep solidarity alive with these brothers and sisters, disabled as a result of this disease.”^[3] Jesus has given us a model for this care; what moved Christ deeply in the encounter with Leprosy must now motivate us in the Church and in society.

Multidrug therapy and skilled clinical service centres have proven effective in addressing this illness, but “no institution can by itself replace the human heart or human compassion when it is a matter of encountering the suffering of another.”^[4] The theme for this year’s World Leprosy Day, “Ending discrimination, stigma, and prejudice,” teaches us clearly that one of the most critical needs in the lives of those experiencing this devastating disease is love.

Pope Francis, reflecting on Jesus’ healing of the person with leprosy in St. Mark’s Gospel (Mk 1:40-45), indicates God’s power and effectiveness in meeting our deepest desire to be loved and cared for. “God’s mercy,” he reminds us, “overcomes every barrier and Jesus’ hand touches” the person with leprosy. The Divine Physician wastes no time diagnosing the diseases that afflict us, and He desires nothing more than to treat them by drawing near to us. “He does not stand at a safe distance,” Francis continues, “and does not act by delegating, but places himself in direct contact with our contagion.”^[5]

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the canonization of St. Damien de Veuster. Born in Tremelo, Belgium in 1840, he was ordained a priest for the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. His missionary zeal led him to serve the isolated community of persons suffering from leprosy on the Hawaiian Island of Molokai. Attentive to the inspirations of his own heart and the requests of the sick persons he served, Damien chose to remain on the island and later contracted the disease himself. To a community that was used to being addressed from a distance, he preached the Gospel of mercy, indicating the nearness of God to “We lepers.” He died on the Island of Molokai in 1889, after 16 years of compassionate care that revealed the face of Christ to those he served.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis addresses the human tendency to embrace “an unruly activism” when it comes to serving the poor and those in need. What God calls each of us to, he explains, is “an attentiveness which considers the other ‘in a certain sense as one with ourselves.’”^[6] What we need today is “the grace to build a culture of encounter, of this fruitful encounter, this encounter that returns to each person their dignity as

children of God, the dignity of living.”^[7] St. Francis of Assisi’s profound conversion included a grace-filled encounter with a person suffering from leprosy. In the end, he cared for that person—the leper who was a figure of Christ crucified—helped him, and kissed him. Every true encounter has the power to restore life and hope.

On a practical level, there are several ways that this encounter with those suffering from leprosy can be facilitated. Our health institutions and local health care systems, cooperating with government agencies and NGOs, can help form partnerships that will have a lasting effect on those afflicted with this illness. It will not be an individual effort that will bring about the necessary transformation of those struggling with leprosy, but a shared work of communion and solidarity.

Building awareness, particularly in those countries where leprosy is endemic, is also a necessary step on the road to progress. Here the power of education and the contribution of the academy of sciences can do much to assist those diagnosed with leprosy to find a way forward and to help our communities to extend a welcoming, healing hand. God always blesses such cooperation and the benefits for the sick are tangible.

Finally, communities themselves must continually strive to eliminate “discrimination, stigma, and prejudice,” by working towards the complete integration of the person in all of his or her bodily and spiritual dimensions. When addressing the great need for development on a global scale, St. Paul VI spoke of the development “of the whole man and of everyman.”^[8] When persons with leprosy find the clinical care they deserve being matched by the receptivity of a fraternal glance of love, and therefore social acceptance in accord with their spiritual dignity, then will integral human development find its purest expression in authentic healing.

I express my deepest gratitude to all who work so tirelessly to assist persons afflicted by leprosy and who provide such effective relief in their care for the sick. The financial support of many, along with the various contributions of science and research have also brought hope and assistance for countless persons afflicted with this illness. May the powerful intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Health of the Sick, continue to be with us as we seek to eliminate Hansen’s disease, as well as stigma, discrimination and prejudice in all its forms.

Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson
Prefect

^[1] Pope Francis, *Angelus*, 28 January 2018.

^[2] World Health Organization, “*Global Leprosy Strategy 2016-2020*,” 3.

^[3] Pope Francis, *Angelus*, 31 January 2016.

^[4] Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance for Health Care Workers, “*New Charter for Health Care Workers*,” 3.

^[5] Pope Francis, *Angelus*, 15 February 2015.

^[6] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 199.

^[7] Pope Francis, “Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the Casa Santa Marta,” 13 September 2016.

^[8] Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 42.