

Message of the President of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers for the Fifty-Seventh World Leprosy Day

(Sunday, 31 January 2010)

*To the Presidents of Bishops' Conferences
and Bishops Responsible for Pastoral Care in Health*

The 'World Leprosy Day', which was founded during the first half of the 1950s thanks to the role of the French writer Raoul Follereau, is not only a day of reflection on the victims of this devastating disease. It is first and foremost a day of solidarity with our brothers and sisters who are afflicted by it.

Leprosy, which is also known as Hansen's disease, in reality continues to infect hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world every year. According to the most recent statistics published by the World Health Organisation, 210,000 new cases were registered in the year 2009. In addition, the people who are infected by this disease but are not registered as having it, or anyway are still without access to treatment, are certainly very many in number.

From a statistical point of view, the countries that are most afflicted are in Asia, in South America and in Africa. India has the most number of people with the disease, followed by Brazil. There are also numerous cases in Angola, Bangladesh, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Indonesia, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nepal and Tanzania.

Hansen's disease is an 'ancient' disease, but not for this is it less devastating physically and often also morally. In all epochs and all civilisations the fate of people with leprosy has been that of being marginalised, deprived of any kind of social life, condemned to seeing their own bodies disintegrate until death arrives.

Unfortunately, still today those who suffer from it or – although they have been cured of it – bear its unmistakable mutilations, are far too often condemned to loneliness and fear, to live as though they were invisible to the eyes of other people, of society and of public opinion. In the most economically advanced countries it appears that this disease has been forgotten about, as have the people who are afflicted by it.

When it is remembered, when the word 'leprosy' is spoken, various kinds of feelings are provoked: incredulity in those who ask how it is that this pathology can exist; fear and repugnance or a no less grave ostentation of indifference; but also the pity and love that spring from the attentive and merciful attitude of Jesus towards these sick people (Mk 1:40-42).

The role of Follereau, of many institutions and bodies of an ecclesial and/or non-governmental character which fight against leprosy, the exceptional work of St. Damian di Veuster and very many

other saints and men of good will, have helped to ensure that negative attitudes towards people with leprosy have been overcome, promoting their dignity and their rights and at the same time a more universal love for neighbour.

Today effective treatment for leprosy exists but despite this fact Hansen's disease continues to spread. Amongst the factors that favour its perpetuation there is certainly individual and collective acute poverty which far too often involves a lack of hygiene, the presence of debilitating illnesses, insufficient alimentation if not chronic hunger, and a lack of rapid access to medical care and treatment. At a social level there persist at the same time fears which, usually generated by ignorance, add a heavy stigma to the already terrible burden which leprosy involves, even after a person has been cured of it.

I thus appeal to the international community and to the authorities of each individual State and invite them to develop and strengthen the strategies that are needed in the fight against leprosy, making them more effective and capillary above all where the number of new cases is still high. All of this should be done without neglecting campaigns of education and sensitisation that are able to help the people who are afflicted and their families to move out of exclusion and obtain the treatment that is necessary.

At the same time in a heartfelt way I thank the local Churches and the various missionary and non-missionary religious institutions for what has already been done by so many of them, by consecrated men and women, lay men and women; for the good that has already been done by the World Health Organisation through its praiseworthy commitment to eradicating this and other 'forgotten' illnesses;¹ the anti-leprosy associations and non-governmental organisations;² as well as numerous volunteers and all men and women of good will who through their work, which is marked by love for our brothers and sisters afflicted with this disease, dedicate themselves to their care in an overall way, restoring to them the dignity, the joy and the pride of being treated as human beings, so that they can safeguard or, according to their situations, regain their rightful place in society.

May Mary *Salus Infirmorum* support these sick people in their difficult fight against the sufferings and tribulations provoked by this disease and may the veil of silence be torn away through an increasing number of acts of true solidarity towards people afflicted by leprosy!

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for Health Care Workers*

¹ Cf. World Health Organization, SEA-GLP-2009.3 and SEA-GLP-2009.4 (Enhanced Global Strategy for Further Reducing the Disease Burden due to Leprosy – Plan Period: 2011-2015).

² The AFRF in France, the AIFO in Italy, the ALES in Switzerland, the ALM in the United States of America, CIOMOL in Switzerland, the DAHW in Germany, the DFB in Belgium, the FL in Luxemburg, the LEPR in England, the NLR in Holland, the SF in Spain, the Sasakawa Foundation in Japan, the SLC in Canada and the TLMI in England.