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Message from the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development for the 65th World Leprosy Day

The following is the Message from the prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, His Eminence Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, for the 65th World Leprosy Day, held today, Sunday 28 January.

Message from Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson

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,

“No more injustice, discrimination, leprosy in the world!”

In order to express the Church’s concern for the world, during Vatican Council II, the Council Fathers declared that “*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ*” [1]. For this reason, it is troubling that, despite the enormous progress made by humanity in recent times, it is still not possible to eradicate definitively an “old” disease such as leprosy, which continues to spread to thousands of people all over the world. Indeed, even today, every two minutes a person is infected with Hansen’s disease. Leprosy continues to be a major health problem in places where precarious socio-economic conditions exist, which favour transmission. As Pope Francis has stated, this is a disease that “although in decline, is still among the most feared, and afflicts the poorest and most marginalized” [2].

The data published by the World Health Organization in 2017 on the situation of leprosy worldwide confirm the high concentration of the disease in 14 countries which alone represent 95% of new cases. At the top of the list is India, with 135,485 cases, followed by Brazil with 25,218 cases and Indonesia with 16,826 cases. Even in Europe, 32 new cases of contagion in 2016. In addition, in many countries, the number of cases of leprosy, while not considerable, represents a high percentage with regard to the total population. In the countries in which the disease is endemic it can be seen that, among those afflicted, there are many minors. Indeed, of every 100 people afflicted by Hansen's disease worldwide, 9 have less than 15 years of age.

To combat Hansen's disease effectively and incisively, the World Health Organization has drawn up a *Global Strategy against Leprosy (2016-2020)*, in which an important role is attributed to the defence of fundamental human rights, the reduction of the stigma and consequent promotion of integration and social inclusion, the restoration of the dignity of those afflicted by the disease, and access to care. It is therefore extremely urgent to abrogate, where present, discriminatory laws which obstruct fundamental human rights. It is no longer possible to delay this further [3].

Social stigma is still the main problem today for people affected by Hansen's disease, and it is therefore important, in the words of Pope Francis, "to fight this disease, but also against the discrimination that it engenders". [4]. More than other diseases, sufferers of leprosy need human contact, that "touch" that releases beneficial liberating energy. Very often, says the Holy Father, "we encounter a poor person who comes towards us. We offer him coins, we toss them there, but we avoid touching his hand. And we forget that that person is the Body of Christ! Jesus teaches us not to be afraid to touch the poor and the excluded, because He is in them. Touching the poor can cleanse us from hypocrisy and make us distressed over their condition" [5].

It is edifying to serve with love and tenderness those who are in need of help because it makes us grow in humanity. Saint Francis of Assisi is testimony of this; a young rich man transformed completely by the embrace with a leper, who made him understand what is truly of value in life: not wealth, the power of weapons, earthly glory, but the humility, the mercy, the forgiveness that are the fruit of the encounter with God [6].

From this perspective, the theme of World Leprosy Day reaffirms "No more injustice, discrimination, leprosy in the world!". More charity and love, translated into the concrete facts of acceptance, protection, inclusion and integration. The celebration of this Day recalls not only solidarity but also acting with courage in favour of those brothers and sisters affected by Hansen's disease and their families. For this reason I urge all pastoral workers, social and healthcare workers and all men and women of good faith to sensitize and mobilize consciences in favour of those afflicted by the disease against stigma and against all forms of discrimination towards them.

To have a world free of leprosy and of marginalization, it is necessary to join the forces of all the Churches, religious communities, international organizations, governments, large foundations, non-governmental organizations and associations of people affected by the disease who have so far contributed to fighting against it. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen joint projects of cooperation [7]. If faced with the correct approach, leprosy may finally be eradicated.

I thank all those who, in various ways, have made efforts in favour of those affected by Hansen's disease. May the Good God aid and protect you, by the intercession of the many saints who have made their service to the afflicted the reason for their life.

May Mary Most Holy, our Mother who cares for her children, especially the most vulnerable, obtain every blessing and grace to those sick and those who bear the signs of leprosy on their body.

Cardinal Peter K. A. Turkson
Prefect

[1] Vatican Ecumenical Council II, Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 1.

[2] Pope Francis, *Angelus*, 29 January 2017.

[3] Cf. M. Aramini, Conclusions and Recommendations of the International Conference: *Towards holistic care for people with Hansen's disease, respecting their dignity*, organized by the Pontifical Council for Healthcare Workers in collaboration with the : Good Samaritan Foundation, Nippon Foundation, Raoul Follereau Foundation, Sovereign Order of Malta and Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation, in the Vatican, 9-10 June 2016: «*Dolentium Horninum*», 90 p.63.

[4] Pope Francis, *ibid.*

[5] Pope Francis, Catechesis: "Mercy purifies the heart", 22 June 2016.

[6] Cf. Pope Francis, Address on the occasion of the Meeting with the sick and disabled children assisted at the Seraphic Institute of Assisi, 4 October 2013.

[7] Cf. M. Aramini, *Ibid.*, p. 64.
