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Message from the interim Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development on the occasion of the 69th World Leprosy Day

The following is the message from the interim Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, His Eminence Cardinal Michael Czerny, S.J., on the occasion of the 69th World Leprosy Day (Hansen's Disease), held today, Sunday 30 January 2022:

Message from His Eminence Cardinal Michael Czerny, S.J.

To the Presidents of 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

"United in Dignity"

Leprosy (Hansen's Disease) is a devastating, although curable, neglected tropical disease that has been in decline for several decades. Since multidrug therapy was introduced in the 1980s, the physical symptoms of this illness have become manageable and have given hope for the eventual elimination of leprosy all together. Nonetheless, "the global incidence remains high, and patients often have long-term complications associated with the disease."^[1] This past year some 127,000 new cases were reported, a significantly lower number than the previous year, although the decrease is likely due to lesser detection and reporting during the pandemic.^[2] Beyond the daunting physical challenges associated with leprosy, the discouraging reality of stigma remains a formidable obstacle to total health and healing. The World Health Organization states "it is estimated that 3-4 million people are living with the visible impairments or deformities due to leprosy. Because both the 'label' of leprosy and the disability it causes result in social exclusion in many communities, the number of people experiencing leprosy-related stigma is likely to be even greater."^[3]

The theme for World Leprosy Day this year is, “United in Dignity,” and it confidently proposes that everyone who experiences leprosy has a right to a decent life free from disease-related stigma and discrimination. In many places of the world where leprosy is prevalent, “affected individuals continue to live as outcasts, leading to myriad mental health issues and perpetuating a cycle of ill health.”[4] People with leprosy often bear a double burden; not only do they have to cope with the physical reality of the disease, but “many people with leprosy experience anxiety, depression, psychological distress, isolation and suicidal ideation.”[5] An integral vision of health envisions the corporeal dimension as well as the spiritual, encompassing one’s psychological health and the physical body. Stigma and discrimination affect the whole person, and they require the full response of individuals and of an integrated, compassionate community.

In his encyclical letter, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis refers to the parable of Jesus about the Good Samaritan, where the victim of a robbery lies wounded and vulnerable on the side of the road. He is passed by several times without receiving any help or assistance. Pope Francis writes, “We cannot be indifferent to suffering; we cannot allow anyone to go through life as an outcast. Instead, we should feel indignant, challenged to emerge from our comfortable isolation and to be changed by our contact with human suffering. This is the meaning of dignity.”[6] To be united in dignity means to be transformed, to see things differently and to act accordingly.

In our care for those with leprosy we must never let stigma and discrimination divide us. It is our common human dignity that knits us together as one. Jesus Christ teaches us this significant reality by his words, and even more so by his example. “Throughout his ministry,” indicates Pope Francis, “he met many sick people; he took on their suffering; he tore down the walls of stigma and of marginalization that prevented so many of them from feeling respected and loved. For Jesus, disease is never an obstacle to encountering people, but rather, the contrary. He taught us that the human person is always precious, always endowed with a dignity that nothing and no one can erase, not even disease.”[7]

Experts agree that “probably one of the most effective methods to reduce stigmatization is early diagnosis and appropriate treatment.”[8] The COVID-19 pandemic has made this very difficult for many places in the world as it has complicated health care in general. But no pandemic can change the dignity of the human person nor his or her inviolable worth and value in society, for when “the dignity of the human person is respected, and his or her rights recognized and guaranteed, creativity and interdependence thrive, and the creativity of the human personality is released through actions that further the common good.”[9] This will be the end result of our being united in dignity, the fruitfulness of creativity that enables communities and individuals to recognize the value of every person, especially those who suffer from illness and disability.

Responding successfully to the challenge of leprosy is well within our grasp as medicine and technology have provided helps and cures that were never before available. Early detection and multidrug therapy continue to bring hope and healing to thousands. What remains for us now is to move forward united in dignity, in the hope that we will also see stigma and discrimination soon in decline. May Our Lady, Help of the Sick, continue to intercede for us, that we may recognize in all persons that unique dignity and value that God has entrusted to the human family.

[1] White C., Franco-Parades C. “Leprosy in the 21st Century,” *Clin. Microbiol Rev.* 28:80-94.

[2] World Health Organization (WHO), “Weekly Epidemiological Record,” No. 36, 10 September 2021.

[3] WHO, *Towards Zero Leprosy: Global Leprosy (Hansen’s Disease) Strategy 2021-2030*, 10.

[4] “Abandoning the Stigma of Leprosy,” Ed., *Lancet*, Vol. 393, 2 February 2019.

[5] WHO, *Mental Health of People with Neglected Tropical Diseases: Toward a Person-Centred Approach*, 5.

[6] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 68.

[7] Pope Francis, "Address to Huntington's Disease Patients and their Families," 18 May 2017.

[8] Kabir S. and Khurana A., "Leprosy Stigma and the Relevance of Emergent Therapeutic Options," *Indian J Med Res* 151: 1-5, January 2020.

[9] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 22.
