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Message of the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development for World Health Day 2021

The following is the message sent by His Eminence Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, on the occasion of World Health Day 2021, held today:

Message

Building a fairer, healthier world for all

World Health Day is celebrated annually on April 7. This day was established by the first World Health Assembly in 1948 with the goal to raise awareness on a specific health theme and to highlight issues of great urgency and priority in the world of health. This year's theme puts emphasis on the urgency of working to eliminate inequalities in access to health care, towards "Building a fairer, healthier world for all".

The year 2020 will be remembered as a watershed year that separates the 'before' and the 'after'. The pandemic has profoundly affected our lives and our society; it has intensified longstanding social problems, especially inequalities, such as access to care. The impact of the pandemic has been harshest on the most vulnerable communities, who are most exposed to the disease, with less chances of having access to quality healthcare services.

We are experiencing a crisis, but as Pope Francis recalls, we do not come out from a crisis the same as before, either we come out better or worse. This is the invitation of this World Health Day, "Building a fairer, healthier world for all." This difficult year also reminded us of the importance of human solidarity and the awareness that no one saves his or herself on their own. In this regard, the Pope invites us to enliven and put at the centre of our actions the values of brotherhood, justice, equity, solidarity and inclusion so as not to allow that the various forms of closed nationalisms or market laws prevent us from living as a truly human family.[1]

Health pertains to the value of justice

The pandemic has widened the large gap between countries that are more advantaged and those with less, in obtaining access to health care and medical treatments, and this is a regrettable fact that persists despite the condemnation of this situation on several occasions by various institutions. There are unacceptable disparities and inequalities that deny health to a large part of the population in the "peripheries of the world". Humanity hesitates in accepting that "the fundamental right to the preservation of health pertains to the *value of justice*, whereby there are no distinctions between peoples and ethnic groups, taking into account their objective living situations and stages of development, in pursuing the *common good*, which is at the same time the good of all and of each individual. Among others, the civil community in particular must take on this responsibility for the common good»[2]. It is hoped that "the right to health care and the right to justice ought to be reconciled by ensuring a fair distribution of healthcare facilities and financial resources, in accordance with the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity"[3]. More equitable and more just health systems can be built on these two principles. But in order to do this, it is necessary to first of all rethink the concept of health, as *integral health*.

For an integral health

For a fairer and healthier world, it is necessary to acquire a different overall view on human health and care that takes into account the physical, psychological, intellectual, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of the person. Acquiring this integral view allows us to understand that ensuring that everyone receives the necessary health care is an act of justice, that is, giving the person what is in his/her right. Those who care for the ill and suffering must have this overview, continually inspired by a holistic vision of care: a unanimous effort of health and pastoral workers for the integral health of their patients.

We extend our esteem and gratitude to the caregivers who, despite the many limitations and shortcomings of the health systems, have not given up, fighting for the health of their patients; they have been faithful to their own vocation which finds its source in compassion. "Compassion is also a privileged way to promote justice, since empathizing with the others allows us not only to understand their struggles, difficulties and fears, but also to discover, in the frailness of every human being, his or her unique worth and dignity. Indeed, human dignity is the basis of justice, while the recognition of every person's inestimable worth is the force that impels us to work, with enthusiasm and self-sacrifice, to overcome all disparities"[4].

For a healthier world

In the current pandemic experience we discover that we are brothers and sisters, we are all in the same boat, responsible for one another, and that our well-being also depends on the responsible behaviour of all[5]. Humanity rediscovers the sense of mutual interdependence: a common home, for a common care for creation and for the people who inhabit it. In true fraternity, individualism and selfishness can be defeated by the reaffirmation that only the search for the good of all can lead to good for me. The pandemic, in particular, has taught us that health is a common good so that by protecting one's own health, the health of the other and of the entire community are protected as well.

An issue that deserves special attention is mental health, severely put to the test, in this pandemic period. In this regard, the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development has drawn up a document, which can be consulted on its website[6], entitled: "*Accompanying people in psychological distress in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Members of one body, loved by one love*". The document offers some elements for reflection to those close to people affected by the pandemic and to all those who are called to accompany them both within families and within health facilities.

We must necessarily take urgent care of those who have taken care of us. Those who govern as well as economic and health policy makers have a responsibility to ensure better working conditions for healthcare workers. This requires measured, prudent and ethical economic investments, which are aimed at accompanying the development of human potential; likewise, it entails the training of healthcare workers in integral health as an asset for both individuals and the community; this calls for the promotion of prevention, treatment and pedagogy for integral health education.

Greater attention should also be given to healthcare institutions, in particular to those without financial support from the state, such as those of the Church and other faith communities, which in various corners of the earth, often remote, are the only means for guaranteeing access to healthcare.

Health inequalities are unfair, but they are also preventable through strategies that aim to ensure equal access to health care, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized groups. Greater equity in the protection of health in the world can only be achieved through a renewed moral commitment by the countries with the greatest resources to the countries most in need. It is desirable that universal health coverage be guaranteed to all individuals and all communities. This is an urgent goal to be achieved in order to build a fairer, healthier world, a better world, a world of peace that we dream and believe is still possible[7].

Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson

Prefect

[1] Pope Francis, *Urbi et Orbi* Message – Christmas 2020, December 25, 2020.

[2] *New Charter for Health Care Workers*, n. 141

[3] Pope Francis, Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Participants of the 32nd International Conference on the theme: *Addressing Global Health Inequalities*, November 18, 2017

[4] Pope Francis, Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Participants in the 32nd International Conference on the theme: *Addressing Global Health Inequalities*, November 18, 2017

[5] Cf. Pope FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter, *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 32

[6] Cf. <https://www.humandevlopment.va/it/news/2021/accompagnare-le-persone-in-sofferenza-psicologica-nel-contesto-d.html>

[7] Cf. *Let us dream. A path to a better future* (Simon + Schuster UK (1 December 2020) and *Dio e il mondo che verrà [God and the world that will come –free translation]* (Piemme-LEV, March 2021), books of interviews to Pope Francis.
