Beat Leprosy

31 January 2021

Message of the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development for the 68th World Leprosy Day (31 January 2021)

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,

"Beat Leprosy"

World Leprosy Day 2021 is observed this January 31 with the overall goal: "Beat Leprosy." This noble aim begins with the medical reality that leprosy is a curable disease; but beating leprosy involves more than a mere medical struggle. It also seeks to eliminate the social stigma that accompanies this difficult illness and ultimately envisions the restoration of the human person in an integral way.

There is a compelling account of the healing of leprosy in the Gospel of St. Luke: Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem when he is suddenly met by ten persons suffering from that neglected tropical disease of the skin. They call out to him from a distance, seeking help and consolation in their affliction. He responds by curing them of their physical ailment. One of them, recognizing that he was healed and that his social condition had been restored, returns to Jesus and, drawing near, gives thanks. At the conclusion of that encounter Jesus responds, "Stand up and go, your faith has saved you" (LK 17:19).

The Latin word for salvation is salus, and it is the same word used for healing. When Christ brings healing to the man with leprosy in the Gospel, he applies the salve of human dignity in addition to the physical remedy. It becomes an event that touches the entire person and the effects are far reaching. When the Church speaks of God's generous offer of salvation, that gift is described as both universal and integral.[1: Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 38.] God desires to heal all people and the whole person. Integral health likewise encompasses the personal and social dimension; it includes the spiritual nature of the person as well as the physical.

Health care services have advanced remarkably in addressing leprosy or Hansen's disease in recent decades. Multi-drug therapy has proven successful and effective in curing leprosy and has afforded much hope. Health care, in addition to treating the physical ailments of the person, must also consider the social and psychological dimensions. Integral health involves, "prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation for the better physical, psychological, social and spiritual balance and well-being of the person."[2: Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance for Health Care Workers, "New Charter for Health Care Workers," 3.]

The World Health Organization notes that stigma remains a challenge for early detection and successful completion of treatment for leprosy. "Many patients continue to experience social exclusion, depression and loss of income," they explain.[3: World Health Organization, "Global Leprosy Strategy 2016-2020," 5.] Promoting the inclusion of all persons in society and assuring integration in the community remain priorities. Additionally, financial support and opportunities to actively engage in the workplace and economic life are essential for people with leprosy and their families. "Every human being," insists Pope Francis, "has the right to live with dignity and to develop integrally; this fundamental right cannot be denied by any country. People have this right even if they are unproductive, or were born with or developed limitations."[4: Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti, 107.]

Integral health is also an imperative for persons with leprosy with regard to their mental well-being, "since leprosy can be demonstrated to have a significant impact on social participation and mental health in addition to causing physical impairments."[5: PMW Somas, MW Waltz, WH van Brakel (2020), "The impact of leprosy on the mental wellbeing of leprosy-affected persons and their family members-a systematic review," Global Mental Health 7, e15, 1.] In a sense the person with leprosy suffers from the illness itself, and from the way he or she is received in the community. Lack of social adhesion can have a profoundly negative impact on self-esteem and a person's outlook on life, ultimately leaving the person vulnerable to mental illness. Pope Francis indicates that the human person is, by nature, open to relationships. "Implanted deep within us," he insists, "is the call to transcend ourselves through an encounter with others."[6: Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti, 111.] The health care community in particular, and society as a whole, offer a tremendous service to the common good when they help facilitate this process of personal integration for those who suffer from leprosy and their families. Not everyone will have the skills or expertise to cure Hansen's disease physically, but everyone is capable of promoting that culture of encounter which brings about healing and the mental well-being of those affected by this distressing illness.

In conclusion, I offer my sincere respect and gratitude to all who dedicate themselves to “beat leprosy” and offer healing and hope to those who suffer from Hansen’s disease. They show us, in very practical ways, that leprosy is curable, that human encounter can eliminate stigma, and that mental well-being is an essential part of integral health.

May the powerful intercession of Mary, health of the sick, lead us all more completely towards the healing touch of Jesus Christ.