

Immunology, Epidemiology and Social Aspects of Leprosy

1 June 1984

Address of to the members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences

Pope John Paul II

1st June 1984

Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. Today's meeting is a source of deep interest for me, as the theme which you are studying during these days recalls to my heart, no less than to yours, the terrible sufferings of a large number of our brothers and sisters, those who are afflicted by the dreaded disease of leprosy, and especially those in whom it has caused irreversible loss of limbs. My interest is matched by my sincere admiration for the careful and untiring researches which you conduct for the purpose of fighting this illness and saving many human lives.

At this moment my thoughts go to the various meetings which Jesus had with lepers. I wish to quote from just one, as told by Saint Mark in the first chapter of his Gospel. The sacred text reads: "And a leper came to him beseeching him, and kneeling said to him: 'If you will, you can make me clean' ". At this request Jesus "stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him: 'I will; be clean'. And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean" (Marc. 1, 40-42).

By touching the leper's sores with his hand, Jesus knocked down the barrier separating the untouchables from the human community, and by this miraculous cure he opened a path of hope that religion and science have to follow. Neither for the one nor for the other can any person henceforth be called unclean, but every individual will have to be respected and helped to regain the good health worthy of the human person.

2. The sense of universal brotherhood proclaimed by the Gospel evoked from followers of every faith a generous eagerness to assist sufferers from leprosy, and leper colonies and hospitals were set up in every part of the world. In every place there was a widespread movement to provide voluntary aid, an "unexpected gift of private mercy" on the part of those who, "strong in courage... moved by pity, took upon themselves and virtuously maintained the care to which they were not called by their duties", as happened during the plague in Milan described by Alessandro Manzoni in his famous novel *I Promessi Sposi* (Alessandro Manzoni, *I Promessi Sposi*, cap. 32).

Among the apostles of the lepers who appeared among the Christian missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, I cannot fail to mention Father Damien De Veuster of the Picpus Fathers, who has been honoured throughout the world as the most generous example of Christian charity towards lepers. Together with him I wish also to mention among the lay apostles Marcello Candia, who made a total gift of himself and his resources to the sufferers from this disease.

However, the care given by generous volunteers, and the institutions subsequently set up by governments, could not have been effective on the health-care level had not science offered and provided means and methods of diagnosis and therapy.

3. As in every other field, so in the sphere of the treatment of the widely differing forms of disease, feelings of brotherhood and scientific research link hand in order to rescue humanity from its needs and afflictions. The help of charitable volunteers and the scientist's work both call for powerful spiritual energies. Scientific research is not only a magnificent use of the mind; in the words of my predecessor Paul VI, in a speech to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, it also demands "the exercise of lofty moral virtues, which confer upon the scientist the aspect and merit of an ascetic, sometimes of a hero, to whom humanity must pay a great tribute of praise and gratitude" (Pauli VI, *Allocutio ad Pontificiam Academiam Scientiarum*, die 23 apr. 1966: *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, IV (1966) 197).

Eminent moral virtues and the assistance of the Spirit are needed by the scientist who not only devotes himself to research but who also wishes to exercise the charity of knowledge. When reason, tired and perhaps disillusioned in the efforts of study, seems to give in to the temptation of abandoning its undertaking, the Spirit comes to the aid of those who wish heroically to persist in the efforts they are making for love of neighbour, and at the highest point of the mind he lights a spark that brings a sudden intuition of the truth, whence research resumes its path and reaches the longed-for discovery.

4. Ladies and Gentlemen, you are following the path traced out by Gerhard Hansen, who through the perseverance of reason and the spark of the Spirit discovered the cause of leprosy: *Mycobacterium leprae*. Through your enlightened scientific work, in harmonious collaboration with wise doctors and generous volunteers, and through the farsightedness of governmental and private institutions, leprosy has diminished in many parts of the world. But there are still millions of our brothers and sisters who suffer its terrible consequences. For the sake of these people efforts must be everywhere increased to ensure that those who are still condemned to a sort of civil death can rediscover life, improve its quality, and find in society a place corresponding to their human dignity, for like all other people they are made in the image and likeness of God. There is no reason at all why those who have been cured should not be fully reintegrated into society.

Mr President, in your address you have rightly stated that science when directed towards peaceful purposes can lessen the world's ills, improve the human condition, and help to raise the quality of life, especially of those who are the humblest and the most neglected among human beings.

5. I therefore call upon governments, international institutions and philanthropical associations to make increasing contributions to the work being done by research scientists, doctors and volunteers in order to free leprosy patients from their sickness and from their humiliating and tragic rejection by society.

Mr President, you mentioned my apostolic pilgrimage to Brazil and in particular my visit, accompanied by yourself, to the leprosarium at Marituba. There and also, more recently, in Korea I have had the opportunity to express my solidarity personally with those who suffer and to assure them of the love and concern of the universal Church.

Ladies and Gentlemen, continue your research and your therapy, and be assured that the Church fully supports your work, for like you she has received Christ's command, written in the Gospel, to "heal the lepers", and she knows that lepers who have been cured are a sign of the Kingdom of God (Cf. Matth. 10, 8; 11, 5). Help to build up the Kingdom of God, which is also the kingdom of humanity. Be dispensers of justice and love to all those who, in the most desolate corners of the world, are waiting to receive a message of hope from today's society.

May God bless you and your in the service of his people.