

World Leprosy Day: let us renew our commitment to building an inclusive society

17 January 2023

Message to participants in the 2nd International Symposium on Hansen's Disease - "Leave No One Behind"

Pope Francis

23-24 January 2023

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, Sisters and brothers!

I greet you all warmly on the occasion of the second Symposium on Hansen's disease. Thank you for your commitment to people affected by this pathology, often forgotten and rejected by society. You are like the Good Samaritan who stoops to care for the weakest and to restore to them the rights denied to them, and their dignity.

Today's symposium is being held a few days before the Seventieth World Leprosy Day, initiated by Raul Follereau in 1953 to raise public awareness of a disease that may believe has been eradicated. What should concern us, today more than then, is that not only the disease can be forgotten, but also the people.

Leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, is one of the most ancient diseases in human history. Even the Bible, alone, is not enough to remind us that stigma linked to leprosy continues to cause grave violations of human rights in various parts of the world. "For all the progress we have made, we are still 'illiterate' when it comes to accompanying, caring for and supporting the most frail and vulnerable members of our developed societies. We have become accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, ignoring situations until they affect us directly" (Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 64). We cannot forget these brothers and sisters of ours. We must not ignore this disease, which unfortunately still afflicts many people, especially in the most disadvantaged social contexts.

On the contrary, convinced of the human family's vocation to fraternity, let us allow ourselves to be challenged and to be asked: "Will we bend down to touch and heal the wounds of others? Will we bend down and help another to get up?" (ibid., 70). Therefore, we must seize the opportunity of World Leprosy Day to revise our models of development, and to denounce and try to correct the discrimination they cause. This is a fitting occasion to try to renew our commitment to building an inclusive society, that leaves no-one at the margins.

Indeed, denunciation must always be accompanied by a proposal, as a synthesis of the good that already silently exists, and prophetic visions, capable of inspiring structured charity and a more just co-existence. Your contribution, the impetus and aid you give to the local Churches, is valuable in this, so that they may be at the side of those who are rejected and know how to actively accompany processes of inclusion and integral human development.

Specifically, we must ask ourselves how best to collaborate with people affected by leprosy, treating them fully as people, recognizing them as the key protagonists in their struggle to participate in fundamental human rights and to live as fully-fledged members of the community.

I hope that this conference may contribute to bringing together voices from all over the world to discuss the measures that can be adopted to further promote respect for human dignity.

I express my closeness to those who suffer from Hansen's disease, and I courage you to continue to work to ensure they do not lack spiritual support and healthcare. May the Christian communities allow themselves to be evangelized by these brothers and sisters, and may they be at the forefront of efforts for their full integration.

Dear friends, may Mary Most Holy, and the many saints who served Christ in people affected by leprosy, sustain you. I bless you from my heart, and I pray for you, for the sick, their families and those who lovingly take care of them. May everyone experience that Jesus came so that every man and woman might have life, and have it in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10).

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 17 January 2023, Memorial of Saint Antonio Abate.

Francis