



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF ANTILEPROSY ASSOCIATIONS

Saturday, 13 December 1980

Dear friends,

1. I am very pleased to have this meeting with you, the delegates of the International Federation ILEP. Through you I greet those people who, with generous sensitivity, have taken upon themselves a noble cause to which they daily devote their energies of mind and heart. Your Federation of Antileprosy Associations, which includes the Associations in twenty-four industrialized countries and which works in close collaboration with some eighty countries where leprosy is endemic, performs the praiseworthy task of facing the problem of this disease in a unified manner; thanks to the proper coordination of initiatives and efforts, it is careful to avoid waste and delay.

On this occasion I am happy to be able to tell you how much I appreciate the lofty aims that inspire your work. I am likewise glad to offer you a word of encouragement to continue as you have begun. I myself have had some personal experience of the work being done to combat this disease: I was able to visit leprosaria during my pastoral visits to both Africa and Brazil. The amount of progress that still remains to be made is considerable, if we are to rely upon the statistics which tell us that at the present time no more than twenty percent of the people affected by Hansen's Disease receive medical treatment. There still remain in the world millions of sufferers who are left to fend for themselves and who are exposed to the consequences of an illness that generally presents little resistance to adequate therapy. This is a fact that cannot fail to be on the conscience of anyone with Christian, or merely human, feelings.

2. You carry out your activities according to a worldwide strategy that seeks to take into account all the needs of the people concerned, both on the level of health and on the economic and social

levels. For this purpose, in harmony with the programmes drawn up by the Alma Ata Conference of the World Health Organization, you have set yourselves the task of making your contribution on the level of “basic medicine”, which counts upon the responsible participation of the communities to which your assistance is directed, in the work of prevention and cure.

You also strive to go beyond any form of therapy that would involve the isolation of the sufferers.

By means of the provision of proper mobile services, it is in fact possible to offer patients the necessary treatment, enabling them to remain with their families and to continue working.

It is easy to see the advantages of this mode of procedure: besides sparing the sufferers the always traumatic experience of isolation, it helps to overcome the age-old prejudices and unjustified fears that still prevail in certain sections of society. The superstitions surrounding leprosy must be dispelled, in order to render ever more effective the various forms of combating it that are already providentially being used in the world.

3. The Associations belonging to your Federation, as also the other Organizations working in this field, are also directing their efforts to the sphere of scientific research. The directions being taken by these studies are numerous, and some are proving particularly promising: I am thinking of the research being done on the Hansen’s Disease bacillus, research which is seeking to determine its exact biochemical composition, to identify its characteristics more accurately, to measure the efficacy of new drugs, and to produce as soon as possible an effective anti-leprosy vaccine.

The financing of this research, as also the production of already known drugs, which are very effective and rapid but also very costly, calls for considerable economic resources. The funds which you can count upon are not sufficient to meet these requirements. You are therefore rightly engaging in an ever wider effort to alert society, with the aim of bringing home to every individual the plight of so many brothers and sisters who, simply because they are sick, find themselves condemned to a segregated and brutalized existence.

I am happy to encourage you in this humanitarian campaign. And I cannot fail to express the hope that the generosity of private individuals will be matched ever more by the efforts of International Organizations and Governments, so as to bring about a full and lasting victory in this far from hopeless battle.

4. This hope, which cannot fail to receive the support of every person of good will, certainly evokes a special echo in the hearts of those who recognize in Christ the Son of God, who through love became the brother of every human being. How can Christians fail to feel the challenge of that hard saying: “As you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me”^[1]?

The Church is preparing to re-live, in the mystery of Christmas, the wondrous event of the entry

into human history of the Word made flesh. It was an event marked by poverty and rejection, by the hostility of some and the indifference of the majority. From the crib, in which he lay surrounded by simple shepherds - a category regarded as "impure" by the society of that time - the Son of man asks every believer how much he or she is doing to combat not only the bacillus of Hansen's Disease but also the bacillus of so many other forms of leprosy, originating and developing in the contagious bacillus of selfishness.

May the contemplation of this prodigy of God's love serve to foster in the hearts of the faithful renewed resolutions of fraternal solidarity; may it bring to you all the consolation of experiencing once more the truth of that "saying" preserved for us by the Apostle Paul: "It is more blessed to give than to receive"[2]. With this good wish I willingly invoke upon you, your fellow-workers and all who support you work with their generous contributions, the abundant blessing of Almighty God.

[1] *Matth.* 24, 45,

[2] *Act.* 20, 35.

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