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Eradicate the stigma of leprosy: the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers to hold an international conference

Vatican City, 7 June 2016 – "Towards holistic care for people with Hansen's disease, respectful of their dignity" is the name of the international conference organised by the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, in collaboration with the Good Samaritan Foundation, the Raoul Follereau Foundation, the Sovereign Military Order of Malta and the Sasawaka Memorial Health Foundation, to be held in the Padre Agostino Trape Auditorium of the Augustinianum Patristic Institute, Rome, from 9 to 10 June 2016.

The initiative was presented in the Holy See Press Office this morning by Msgr. Jean-Marie Mupendawatu, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, Fr. Augusto Chendi, M.I., under-secretary of the same dicastery, Yōhei Sasakawa, president of the Nippon Foundation and World Health Organisation goodwill ambassador for the eradication of leprosy and goodwill ambassador of the Japanese government for the human rights of persons affected by leprosy, Dr. Roch Christian Johnson, medical advisor of the Raoul Follereau Foundation, and Ivo Graziani, head of the Cabinet of the Grand Hospitaller of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and Malta.

Fr. Chendi explained that the aim of the conference is "to propose once more that simple gesture of touching and welcoming; a simple gesture, but formerly unheard inasmuch as it was prohibited by the Mosaic Law, in relation to people who as a result of a cultural heritage that has still not been entirely eradicated from our subconscious, suffer not only the consequences of a terrible disease but also those, more atrocious, of marginalisation, abandonment, and reduction to a subhuman condition. However, leprosy is completely curable and at minimal cost, although prejudices against the reintegration in society of those who have been cured remain strong. Nerve damage, without rehabilitation therapy, continues to cause disabilities and deformities also once the disease has been cured.

This heavy social stigma, is accompanied by another, more directly linked to justice. Indeed, leprosy remains widespread among the poor of less developed countries, which are also those that experience the greatest difficulty in obtaining access to cures. "Therefore, any effort to combat leprosy must not be limited to the medical dimension, but for the people directly affected and for their families, the social aspects must also be involved, so as to eliminate as far as possible the underlying causes of the illness: poverty and under-development, timely diagnosis and treatment, and informing and educating the population to cancel social stigma, which

unfortunately remains deep-rooted and persistent."

In this respect the Church as the under-secretary noted, has always carried out the task not only of treatment and care, but also solidarity and tenderness, as well as social protest according to the historical moments and logistical situations in which she has worked. Many of her saints have dedicated their attention to lepers, such as St. Francis of Assisi who washed and treated the wounds of one who did not want people to come near him. Others include St. Damian De Veuster who served in the leper colony of Molokai, Raoul Follereau, and Fr. Josué de Cas who worked in South Sudan, St. Marianne Cope, Blessed Jan Beyzman and Dr. Albert Schweizer.

"Likewise, in our time too, there are many religious orders and congregations, and religious and lay voluntary associations that offer the world the witness of effective silent daily solidarity, alongside lepers and their families. Therefore, following in the wake of such grace, and in particular accepting Pope Francis' invitation to perform works of spiritual and corporal mercy, from this Year of Mercy onwards, the dicastery intends, also through this international congress, to make this challenge its own – or rather, to face the provocation not only in terms of healthcare but above all in relation to culture and justice, that Hansen's disease presents to the Church and to society as a whole, urging those who enjoy good health to help those who are still victims of an unjustified social stigma to live in a dignified way."

Dr. Johnson, medical advisor to the Raoul Follereau Foundation, remarked that the institution continues its founder's fight against exclusion, whether caused by disease, ignorance or poverty, basing its programmes and projects on four main commitments: supporting leprosy control and health programmes; rescuing children in distress; supporting development projects, and promoting social reintegration through employment in France, Follereau's homeland. He reiterated that although it is an old disease, leprosy remains a current health problem. "Two hundred thousand new cases are diagnosed each year worldwide with still a relatively high number of patients detected with disabilities: 14,110 or 6.6% of new cases in 2015. The number of children under 15 years reported each year by the World Health Organisation (18,869 or 8.8% of new cases in 2015) shows us that the transmission of the disease still continues."

Msgr. Jean-Marie Mupendawatu commented that the congress, in which around 70 people were initially expected to participate, will instead be attended by around 230, including doctors, professionals, volunteers and former patients from more than 45 countries from all five continents, and has already started to bear fruit in the form of three projects in Mali, Brazil and South East Asia. "The wish to obtain direct and almost immediate results is one of the characteristics of the 'spring congresses' organised by the dicastery and the Good Samaritan Foundation", he explained. "To give an idea, it may be recalled that the conference on visual impairment and blindness, held in May 2012, led to the initiation of a programme of prevention and cure targeted at school-age children from various villages in the valley of Coroico, Bolivia, and the 2011 congress on HIV-AIDS gave rise to a Test and Treat project in Tanzania, in the diocese of Shinyanga, enabling ten thousand people including many children to benefit from assistance, formation, nutrition and, where necessary, anti-retroviral therapy."
