

Unofficial summary by Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen's Disease) Initiative of WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination Yohei Sasakawa's audience with His Holiness Pope Francis at the Vatican on January 26, 2023.

Sasakawa: It is an honor to meet you. I am committed to the elimination of leprosy around the world. In particular, leprosy is a disease associated with discrimination, and I am also working to eliminate the discrimination.

Thanks to the cooperation of the Holy See, we have been able to hold an International Symposium on Hansen's Disease at the Vatican titled "Leave No One Behind" on January 23 and 24, and the symposium came to a successful conclusion.

There are many persons affected by leprosy in Catholic countries in South America, especially Brazil. It is a great achievement that we were able to hold a symposium on leprosy at the Vatican. I will continue to be active in South America, and hope to have the opportunity to report back to you again in the future.

Pope Francis: The door is always open.

Sasakawa: Leprosy is a disease that is discriminated against by society, even when it has been cured. In some countries, discriminatory laws remain; even if someone is completely cured, they may not be able to go to a restaurant. Due to this discrimination, many persons affected by leprosy make a living as beggars. With the help of Your Holiness, I would like to work to eliminate leprosy from the world, improve the lives of those it affects, and resolve this as a human rights issue.

Pope Francis: The fight against leprosy continues in [my native country] Argentina. Leprosy still exists there, and we, the Catholic Church, are working with passion and spirit.

Sasakawa: I pledge to work to reduce the number of leprosy patients in Argentina to zero as well.

I would like to congratulate Argentina on winning the recent Soccer World Cup. Did you watch the World Cup?

Pope Francis: I was so busy communicating with people that I couldn't watch. But today I am glad to hear from you the result.

Thank you for your efforts to eliminate leprosy. It is important and encouraging that the disease is curable.

Sasakawa: With the introduction of multidrug therapy from the 1980s, some 16 million people have been cured of leprosy. But it is also true that there are still hidden cases.

Pope Francis: You have to actively seek them out.

Sasakawa: Exactly. Meeting you today has filled us with courage and strength.

Pope Francis: Thank you.

Sasakawa: When you visited Japan, the people of Japan gave you a warm welcome. Do you have any memories of that visit?

Pope Francis: I visited Nagasaki and Hiroshima. I was very moved in Nagasaki. I felt some kind of special connection. In Nagasaki, I saw a photo from the war. I'll show you the picture now. It was a photograph of a boy who was a victim of the war, and it was very moving. It shows an older brother carrying his deceased brother on his back. The photo was taken by an American photographer. Unfortunately, I couldn't meet the photographer because he was not in good health, but I was able to meet the photographer's son in Japan.

Sasakawa: Is there anything you would like to say to the people of Nagasaki and Hiroshima?

Pope Francis: They endured much suffering in the war. I pay my respects to the people of Japan. This photo shows a boy waiting his turn at a crematorium to cremate his deceased brother. It was taken by an American photographer. The boy is biting his lip and has a pained expression on his face.

Sasakawa: World leaders are gathering in Hiroshima (this year) to prepare for an era without nuclear weapons. You have visited both Nagasaki and Hiroshima. What were your impressions?

Pope Francis: War is a tragedy. War must never happen again. War must never happen again.

Sasakawa: When I was 6 years old, I experienced war. There was an air raid and my mother and I barely survived. I believe that it is the responsibility of survivors to work for the benefit of people of the world.

Pope Francis: That's wonderful

Sasakawa: Finally, I have a request for Your Holiness. People in Europe tend to think of leprosy as a disease of the past, but there are still many leprosy patients in Africa, Asia, and South America. I would like to display this banner around the world and I would be delighted if we could have a photo of you with this banner. (Indicates a "Don't Forget Hansen's Disease" campaign banner.)

Pope Francis: Of course.

Sasakawa: This one photograph will help persons affected by leprosy all over the world. Thank you very much for your time.

Pope Francis: I salute your activities.

The Boy Standing by the Crematory

The historic photograph was taken in Nagasaki, Japan, in September 1945, by American photographer Joe O'Donnell. The expression on the boy's face, as he bites his lip to the point that it bleeds, cannot be expressed in words.

