

SIA-6608

June 13, 2013



His Holiness, Pope Francis  
Apostolic Palace  
00120 Vatican City

Your Holiness,

Felicitations from Japan. I write to you in my capacity as WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination and Japanese Government Goodwill Ambassador for the Human Rights of People Affected by Leprosy.

First, I would like to thank the Vatican for the support it shows to persons affected by leprosy every January on the occasion of World Leprosy Day. I note with appreciation the message Your Holiness delivered this year and also the annual message from the Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care to raise awareness of leprosy and the challenges faced by those affected by the disease.

Further, I was most grateful to the president of the Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care in 2009 for joining with other faith leaders to endorse my annual Global Appeal to end stigma and discrimination against people affected by leprosy and their families. A copy of the Appeal is enclosed for your information.

As you well know, Your Holiness, leprosy is one of the oldest diseases known to humankind. Down the centuries it has caused untold suffering—physical, emotional and psychological. Despite the fact that the disease is now completely curable, people affected by leprosy in some parts of the world continue to be stigmatized and discriminated against as a result of myths and misconceptions about the disease.

In recent years, a great deal of work has been done to tackle the issue of leprosy-related discrimination. In addition to the Global Appeal, in December 2010 the U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution approving Principles and Guidelines on the elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members. Efforts are now under way to see that these Principles and Guidelines are fully implemented, but it is not an easy task.

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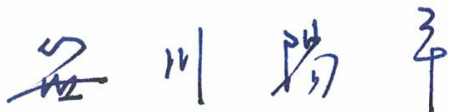
It has come to my attention that in a speech Your Holiness gave to the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy recently, you equated "careerism" with leprosy. This is a most unfortunate analogy as it draws on deeply ingrained stereotypes about the disease.

While I am completely certain that it was not your intention in any way to reinforce the stigma against leprosy or to cause anguish to people affected by the disease, I fear this will have been the result. As your words have such reach and influence, I beseech Your Holiness to be sensitive in your choice of language. In South America in particular, where there are many Catholics and still quite a few people affected by leprosy, I believe what you said will have had a big impact.

May I also take this opportunity to humbly request an audience with Your Holiness at a time of your choosing in order to apprise you of the work being done to restore the dignity and human rights of people affected by leprosy?

In conclusion, let me reiterate my appreciation for the important support provided by the Vatican on World Leprosy Day. I look forward to working together with Your Holiness for a world without leprosy and its consequences.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of four distinct characters: 'S', 'A', 'S', and 'A', which are the initials of Yohei Sasakawa.

Yohei Sasakawa

Chairman, The Nippon Foundation

WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination

Japanese Government Goodwill Ambassador for the Human Rights of People Affected by Leprosy

cc:

His Excellency Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski, President, Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care

His Excellency Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Joseph Chennoth, Apostolic Nunciature of Japan

His Excellency Mr. Eiichi Yamaguchi, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Embassy of Japan in Vatican

Encl. 2009 Global Appeal