

December 10, 2013

His Holiness, Pope Francis
Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City

Your Holiness,

For at least 4,000 years, leprosy has been one of the world's most misunderstood and stigmatizing diseases. Over the centuries, countless millions affected by leprosy have been ostracized by their fellow human beings in the belief that the disease is highly contagious, disabling, untreatable, and even a form of divine punishment.

Thanks to modern chemotherapy, leprosy – also known as Hansen's disease – is completely curable today. It is only mildly communicable. With early diagnosis and treatment, leprosy is not physically disabling. But the disease is disabling in other ways because of the cruel stigma. There is no reason to isolate people from society, force them from their homes and places of work or prevent them from going to school because of leprosy.

Unfortunately, old perceptions of the disease die hard and are reinforced by stigmatizing language. The offensive term "leper" used to describe someone with the disease also carries the meaning of an outcast, sinner or a person who is rejected by others for moral or social reasons. Such terminology contributes to the discrimination that people affected by leprosy face and discourages those in need of treatment from seeking help. It is particularly upsetting when these stigmatizing labels are used in front of young people, whose impressions are formed at an early age.

Using the disease as a metaphor for corruption or sin also perpetuates deeply ingrained stereotypes and makes it harder to alleviate the devastating social, economic and psychological impact that leprosy can have – and it is in this context that we, the undersigned, address this letter to you.

We have noted your use of the word "leprosy" in recent months to label aspects of the Church that you seek to reform, such as when you said that "careerism is a leprosy" and "the court is the leprosy of the papacy."

While we are sure this was not your intention, using the term "leprosy" to denote something negative or undesirable undermines efforts to eliminate the stigma associated with the disease and to enable people affected by leprosy to live in dignity free from discrimination. We respectfully request that you refrain from this usage in future.

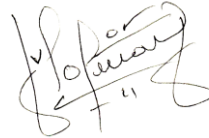
At the same time, we would warmly welcome a strong call by the Catholic Church on the occasion of World Leprosy Day 2014 for an end to stigma and discrimination against people affected by leprosy – including the use of discriminatory language – and we look to you with anticipation for such a message. All of us are ready to join forces with Your Holiness to attack the labels that perpetuate stigma.

Thank you for considering this appeal, which comes from the hearts of millions of people affected by leprosy and their families around the world.

Respectfully yours,



Cristiano Torres
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Movimento de Reintegração das Pessoas Atingidas
pela Hanseníase (MORHAN), Brazil



Jaime Molina Garzón
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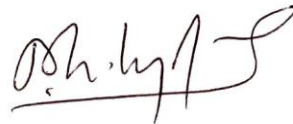
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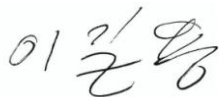
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