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Church supports World Leprosy Day to raise awareness, stop stigma

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While the global rate of new infections of Hansen's disease, or leprosy, continues to decline, the stigma associated with the disease has not, and that often is the focus of annual church statements marking World Leprosy Day.

For the past 60 years, Christians around the world have marked the last Sunday of January as a day to pray for those with Hansen's disease, to raise awareness about it and to thank ministers and health care workers -- many of them Catholic -- who offer treatment, therapy and support to patients.

Pope Benedict XVI and the president of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry traditionally both issue messages for World Leprosy Day, which is Jan. 27 this year.

According to the World Health Organization, which provides free medication for Hansen's disease patients around the world, since 1985 there has been "dramatic decrease in the global disease burden." WHO reported the number of Hansen's cases went "from 5.2 million in 1985 to 805,000 in 1995 to 753,000 at the end of 1999 to 181,941 cases at the end of 2011."

While great strides have been made in eradicating the disease, WHO said, "pockets of high endemicity" remain in some areas of Brazil, Indonesia, the Philippines, Congo, India, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nepal and Tanzania.

World Leprosy Day was begun by Raoul Follereau, a French writer and poet, who first encountered people with Hansen's disease in North Africa in the late 1930s and began speaking tours and raising money for treatment facilities. In 1964, he met Pope Paul VI at the Vatican and asked the pope to beatify Fr. Damien de Veuster of Molokai, Hawaii.

In 1873, de Veuster was assigned to work at what was then called a leper colony on Molokai. He soon gained a reputation as a pastor, medic, adviser and guardian to the 800 members of the colony. He campaigned vigorously for improvements in the colony and for greater respect for the dignity of people with the disease, who were treated as social outcasts at the time.

De Veuster contracted the disease in 1884 but continued working in the colony until a month before his death in 1889, at age 49.

De Veuster was beatified in 1995 by Blessed John Paul II and canonized by Pope Benedict in 2009.

In October, Pope Benedict canonized St. Damien's successor, Mother Marianne Cope of Molokai, a Sister of St. Francis who traveled from Syracuse, N.Y., to Hawaii to take over the ministry.

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