



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS PIUS XII TO THE WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY*

Sala Regia - Monday, 27 June 1949

It is distressing to continue seeing, long after the cessation of hostilities, misunderstandings, prejudices, conflicting interests and ideologies still preventing the resolution of grave problems, the settlement of troubling consequences of the war. Yet a basis for confidence and joy is to be found in a matter of major importance: the great number of nations which, in spite of the tensions that endure among them on economic, social, political and moral grounds, are nonetheless united in working together for the general health. They are prompted not only by a quite justified preoccupation with reciprocal defense but also by a praiseworthy spirit of mutual help and solidarity. With deep satisfaction we welcome you on this occasion when you are engaged in your common task and we thank you for giving us the opportunity to do so.

Often, sad to say, all too often, fear is the origin of many wise measures which because of their origin go beyond the limits set by wisdom. In the present context, what is in itself legitimate defense against the imminent danger of infection, has led, during the course of history, to the adoption of harsh laws and an even harsher application of them. Carried to the point of cruelty, this can only be explained by panic among a whole populace. We do not need to go back as far as the Milan plague of 1630. Among many more recent memories is the deplorable odyssey that occurred in the fall of 1884 when the ship *Matteo Bruzzo* and its passengers roamed the sea, driven from ports everywhere, even by cannon fire, because cases of cholera on board created panic along the whole Atlantic coast.

Without going to that extreme, at one time did not quarantine measures, terrible because of their length and severity, subject poor passengers to a deplorable situation, from both a physical and moral standpoint, not to mention the damage done to the public economy? Thanks be to God, in creating human beings to His image, He has placed in their hearts natural instincts of benevolence, of goodness. Once past the first movement of irrational terror and again self-

possessed, people do try to reconcile, as well as they can, their duties toward humanity with their duties for public security. Little by little, progress in science, hygiene, prophylaxis and therapy, have made it possible, without prejudice to security, to mitigate the treatment inflicted upon travelers suspected of the least possibility of carrying contagion. Moreover, reason argues that it is not enough to spare innocent people, our brothers and sisters, who have already been subjected to unhealthy conditions or some temporary health crisis in their country, punishment only appropriate for criminals. It is our duty to do more, to give them, and them first of all, the help which will protect them from harm and at the same time prevent them from harming the rest of the world.

A just human sentiment of this kind has dictated an initiative which has gradually taken on such vast proportions, that today delegates or observers from almost all nations as well as representatives of intergovernmental organizations connected with the World Health Organization attend its meetings.

Among many peoples, either because of poverty and powerlessness or because their civilization or their science and technology are not yet highly developed, the level of health and sanitation in their countries are far below those of other countries. Periodically recurring epidemics and lasting endemic diseases are destroying them by degrees. Statistics, however recent and imperfect they may still be, attest to the ravages threatening to wipe out tribes, whole peoples. Could we find it tolerable to see our brothers and sisters suffering from diseases and physical defects, sometimes serious enough to bring them to extinction, while many other societies in the world have reached such a degree of good health that early deaths have progressively diminished and one-time unyielding plagues are now gradually giving way?

Private and particular initiatives cannot be too highly praised. By dispensing financial resources and giving inexhaustible devotion, they have improved health in less favored countries, thanks especially to the work of missionaries; yet by themselves they fail short of what is needed and the World Health Organization brings to this eminently human and social undertaking a more universal, more concerted and, consequently, a more effective collaboration with quicker and surer outcomes.

In responding to the noble impulse of benevolence and human solidarity, you serve as well the interests of each of your own countries, even those with the finest equipment and best trained personnel, where the people's health and physical fitness are most diligently promoted, where legislation makes provisions for safeguarding, maintaining and improving public health.

Vigilance, care, institutions, however perfect they may be presumed to be in any one country, cannot suffice to put an end to the ever increasing risks occasioned by the frequency of international relations, the movement of populations, and the voluntary or forced displacement and migration of peoples. To accomplish that, general and concerted action is needed.

Is there a better way of reducing these risks than by working ceaselessly and simultaneously for the improvement of health in all regions and in all classes of humanity? That is what you are doing, gentlemen, and that is what you are devoting yourselves to, particularly during the days of the congress that has just brought you together.

On reading over your program and proceedings one point particularly caught our attention the broad and deep meaning that you give to the expression "health". In your eyes it is not simply negative, as if health, in general, consisted in the simple exclusion of bodily sickness and physical impairment, as if mental health, in particular, meant no more than the absence of alienation or abnormality. Health encompasses the positive spiritual and social well-being of humanity and, on this ground, is one of the conditions required for universal peace and common security.

It follows that the question of health goes beyond the bounds of biology and medicine: of necessity it has its own place in the moral and religious sphere.

The Church, far from considering health as a subject of the exclusively biological order, has always emphasized the importance of religious and moral forces in order to maintain health and has always numbered among the conditions requisite for the dignity and the complete well-being of human beings, their corporal and spiritual, temporal and eternal good.

The social doctrine of the Catholic Church lets no doubt remain that health of body and mind, in the case when healthy social relations also exist, can contribute effectively to establishing a most favorable atmosphere for people's inner and mutual peace. Everything that can effectively serve the cause of true peace is assured of receiving the Church's encouragement and support.

As an expression of that encouragement and support, we offer you our felicitations and good wishes on the increasingly gratifying results of your work, and we ask for God's best blessings on your charge.

**Paths to Peace, p.451-452.*