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Message of the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development for World Sight Day (12 October 2017)

The following is the text of the message from the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, His Eminence Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, for the 30th World Sight Day, to take place tomorrow, 12 October 2017:

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Message from Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson

The celebration of the 30th World Sight Day, promoted by the World Health Organisation, the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness and the World Blind Union, which takes place on 12 October 2017, is for me an opportunity to address a fraternal and cordial greeting to all those in the world who are engaged in the fight against blindness.

It is estimated that eye diseases are currently responsible for 39 million cases of blindness and 246 million cases of visual impairment. The latter number doubles if those who have limited vision due to lack of glasses are considered. We can not remain indifferent to sight problems: four out of five cases of blindness are preventable or curable, 90% of people with vision are concentrated in the poor countries of the South of the World, where one child in two dies within a year of becoming blind.[1]

Today, thanks to advances in medicine, blindness and visual impairment can be considered as infectious diseases: with adequate and timely care, they become largely preventable or curable. The origin of action - says Bonhoeffer - is not thought, but willingness to take responsibility. This is the deepest meaning of World Sight Day: the themes “Universal Eye Health” and “Make vision count” are intended to raise public awareness, to emphasise the need for quality eye care for everyone, and to enable understanding of the importance of sight.

Yes, seeing well is often a premise for being able to live. The life of blind or visually impaired people, especially when combined with conditions of poverty, can lead to marginalisation and can endanger life itself. It is necessary to address the factors that most affect the causes of blindness and visual impairment, which include

the lack of qualified professionals, the difficulty of accessing appropriate care, as well as climate change that adversely affects the planet's ecosystem, harm the health, especially of the poorest peoples of the earth.

The Church, following the example of Jesus, has lovingly cared for the patients and the blind, creating structures for treatment and, more recently, collaborating with initiatives promoted by institutions, public and private, national and international.

The World Health Assembly, in Resolution 66.4 of 2013, launched the Global Action Plan 2014-19 "Universal Eye Health" asking the nations of the World that all people be given access to the necessary promotional, preventive, curative and rehabilitative services in the field of eye health, without having to suffer unsustainable impoverishment as a result.

In full accordance with the Gospel invitation and with the demands of the Global Action Plan, the Dicastery for the Integral Human Development Service is holding an international conference on "Addressing Global Health Disparities" in the Vatican in November 2017. The work of caring for vision is fully reflected in this reflection on the equitable distribution of health resources. In addition to restoring dignity to the person, giving back vision to a blind or visually impaired person is among the most cost-effective interventions in terms of health care costs. Although significant progress has been made in the treatment of infectious diseases causing blindness (trachoma, oncocercosis, leprosy, etc.), the increase in the average age of the world population is also causing an increased incidence of age-related degenerative eye diseases (cataracts, glaucoma, maculopathy, etc.). It is necessary to proclaim the "right to sight" as a universal law, linking it to a precise and concrete "ethical duty": to create the preconditions for this to happen. The involvement of the governments of poor countries and the training of local staff must go hand in hand with the establishment of decentralised healthcare facilities and the sharing of service protocols based on international best practice.

For this purpose, the Church asks for the help and involvement of the network of Catholic hospitals in the world and the experience of the most important non-governmental organisations dealing with blindness.

The challenge is therefore open: we know that the encouraging results obtained up to now clash with the new healthcare emergencies linked to poverty, migration and aging. We are all called to take on a new responsibility: to fight against avoidable blindness, counting on the help and tenderness of our God.

"Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings" (Psalm 17: 8).

Vatican City, 12 October 2017

Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson
Prefect of the Dicastery
for Promoting Integral Human Development

[1] Cf. World Health Organisation, *Global Data on Visual Impairment 2010*.