

Doctorate Honoris Causa to Dr. Claire Vellut  
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium)

Homily given by Dr. Claire Vellut during the celebration  
2nd February 1989

To day we celebrate the first manifestation of Jesus Christ light to illuminate all the nations. To day we reflect on some manifestations of the Lord in our life.

To John's disciples who were asking Jesus if He was the one to come or if they have to wait for someone else, He said : "Go back and tell John what you see and hear : the blind see again, the lame walk, leprosy patients are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead raise to life and the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (Mt 11,2-6).

Damien, who is remembered specially in this year centenary of his death, left for Hawaii to accomplish God's work. He was ready to give himself to the poorest, to the most needy. When he heard the plea of leprosy patients, he volunteered to work among them and share their suffering. At that time there was no treatment. He could not cure them. The only way Damien could share with them God's love was to share their segregation, their rejection, help them to live a decent life, building houses, dressing their wounds, be one with them up to the end. The end was that he contracted leprosy and died amongst his brothers.

His dead shook the world and made the world realise that no man can condemn and forget their fellowmen because they have a disease.

Mahatma Gandhi had a deep admiration for Damien and mentionned more than once that it was worthwhile to look for the source of such an heroïsm.

Our AFI team went to India in 1954. At the beginning our project was not clear, except that we want to go where basic medical needs were the greatest. But in 1955, after meeting Dr. F. Hemerijckx, our choice was clear; like Damien, we could be witness of Christ love in caring for leprosy patients. BUT the situation had indeed changed; having a treatment and a cure of the disease, we choose to care for the patients without removing them from their normal milieu, their village, their family. We wanted to reach them before the disease marks them and disables them for life.

The cause of the disease and treatment have been identified. Now the patients' needs are a diagnosis at an early stage, a treatment that does not disturb his life near his home and a cure without deformity. Since 1955, new medicines have been found : a long

treatment, sometimes given life long, has become more effective and short; the patient can hope to be cured after 6 months to 3 years therapy. Education has made the patients conscious that all deformities can be avoided.

You may wonder then why there are still 12 millions leprosy patients in the world, out of which 4 millions in India. Why there are still 1.047 new cases of leprosy during 1988 in Polambakkam control area ?

Leprosy, like several communicable diseases, is linked with poverty (poor hygiene, poor nutrition, over crowding). Unless this situation is remedied, the transmission will go on. Some patients are not yet treated, because we do not reach them, because drugs are not always available, because the days the patients attend treatment, their daily wages may be cut.

We have to innovate, to find new solutions, to fight for the right of the patients to be treated; this is how we live with them God's gift.

Mahatma Gandhi narrated that, on a trip to South India, he visited two famous temples (Palani and Madurai), he visited also a colony of leprosy patients. He said that he saw God in this last place only. He included leprosy work in the constructive programme as one of the essential eighteen items. The Government of India is now implementing a national programme for the eradication of the disease by the end of the century.

This doctorate is a recognition for a service given not only by me but by many people who were and still are associated with me in the fight against leprosy. The joy of a cured leprosy patient is difficult to understand unless we witness it. It is like opening the gate of a jail. Many bless us and all the ones who made this liberation possible.

With many on this day we can say that the Lord made great things through us. Great is His name.

prepared by S. Liegeois and C. Vellut.  
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