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PRE-CONGRESS WORKSHOP: LEPROSY HERITAGE SITES

Leprosy Heritage Sites in Italy

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(Summary)

Introduction: Medieval Italy had a large number of "lazzaretti" or leprosy homes, almost cities had at least one. Often these centres were outside the city limits in places called "San Lazzaro" or "Via del Lazzaretto".

New cases of leprosy among Italians occurred regularly till 1950-60s and since then have reduced considerably. In the recent past, 1-2 new cases in 5-10 years may still occur among Italians, more commonly new cases are among immigrants (around 6-7 cases per year).

In 17th and 18th century, many of the leprosy homes were closed and reconverted for other purposes. Some of the last remaining leprosy homes functioned till 1930s-1940s. At present, Italy has 4 national reference centres for persons affected with leprosy - in Genoa, Gioia del Colle, Messina and Cagliari.

Information about persons affected with leprosy who receive a monthly pension dates back to late 1980s. Since then, this information is not available.

The catholic church was usually involved in management of leprosy homes. Thus, through the local churches, it is usually easy to access historical records about the old leprosy homes. Italy also had a strong culture of maintaining old buildings, thus usually the old leprosy homes are well preserved, though most persons do not remember the old links with leprosy.

This presentation focuses on 2 leprosy heritage sites - a church in Rivotorto near Assisi in central part of Italy and an old leprosy home in Genoa, in the north-western part of the country.

The church in Rivotorto: Rivotorto, a few kilometres from Assisi, was the place where young St Francis had encountered a person affected with leprosy. The story goes that Francis was very afraid of leprosy during this first encounter. Some years later, as young Francis developed mystic vocation, he came to live together with persons affected with leprosy in Rivotorto. Later he is supposed to have written some documents explaining how this experience had affected him.

A church was built at the place at the site where St Francis had lived with persons affected with leprosy. It was supposed to have inside the St. Francis' hut. It was destroyed in an earthquake in 1853. In 1854, a new church was built at that site that was renovated some years ago. Inside the church it still has some huts that are described as "the huts where St Francis lived". The church courtyard has different sculptures depicting St Francis with leprosy affected persons.

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However, most information materials for tourists and pilgrims coming to visit St Francis related sites around Assisi, do not use the word "leprosy", rather they talk about "poor and marginalized persons".

San Martino leprosy hospital of Genoa: It started as a leprosy home in 1150 AD. The whole area around Genoa was known to be a leprosy-endemic area and new cases of leprosy among local persons were frequent till a couple of decades ago. In the 18th century, when the railway station of Genoa was built, parts of San Martino building were demolished to make way for railway tracks, and the hospital was shifted to a hill.

During the centuries of San Martino's existence, there were numerous occasions when residents of the leprosy home wrote letters to the Popes and to archbishops, to complain about the persons managing the home and to ask for better living conditions. All these have been documented in a book.

During the second world war, between November 1943 and April 1945, a group of persons working with the local church to save Jew citizens of Genoa, had used the leprosy home to hide them from the Nazi officers. While some of the persons involved in this initiative were caught and killed, the German forces never came inside the leprosy home.

A request for renovating the hospital was made by Prof. Raedeli in 1920s, but the work was completed only in 1935 when the new leprosy department was inaugurated by Mussolini.

Inside the hospital, leprosy part was kept separately from the rest of the hospital and persons lived in it till 1980s. After that, during early 1990s there was an attempt to shift the residents to another building outside, the old hospital for persons with mental illness. However, persons affected with leprosy living there, did not like it and protested. After the protests, the plans of shifting were given up.

Now, the building is used mainly as a hospital, though old residents are free to come back to stay inside, if they wish. An area where persons affected with leprosy had built their huts and lived independently, has been closed to public and is maintained as it was, along with a separate passage that allowed persons to come and go from the hospital without coming out on the street.

The hospital also has a small chapel, where persons affected with leprosy could participate in the prayers from a balcony on the first floor, without coming in contact with other persons. Even this has been maintained.

Conclusions: Italy is full of sites linked to history of leprosy. Lot of documents and information regarding old leprosy homes are kept in the local churches and local libraries. However, usually the authorities and local persons are not so keen to give publicity to these buildings as "old leprosy homes".