

**Reconciliation**  
**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday In Ordinary Time (B)**  
**(Lv 13; Mk 1:40-45)**

In his early public ministry, Jesus became famous throughout the region of Galilee for his teaching and miracles, to the point (as we heard in today's Gospel) that he couldn't enter the towns due to the crowding that would result from people flocking to him. Instead, he remained in deserted places outside the villages, and people came to him there. And among the healing miracles for which he became famous, one in particular stood out: the healing of leprosy.

Leprosy, as described in the first reading (Lv 13), is a corrupting infectious disease on the body ("sore, scab, pustule, blotch). It includes Hansen's Disease which is commonly called leprosy, but is actually a broader category of illnesses. Other diseases from history that would qualify biblically include Bubonic Plague, Smallpox, Ebola, and possibly AIDS. In all cases, "Leprosy" is *contagious* and requires *quarantine* in order to protect the community.

The Law of Moses (Lv 13) sets forth the exact procedures to be followed when someone needs to be quarantined due to an untreatable infectious disease. They must live apart from the community, and they must warn any passersby ("Unclean! Unclean!") not to come too close. Should their condition improve, in order to be readmitted to the community they must be placed under observation for a time and inspected by the priests. Formal readmission includes ceremonial offering of sacrifice.

Thus *leprosy* involves a two-fold suffering for the one afflicted: a physical suffering in the body, and the pain of being isolated from family and friends, exiled from the community, unable to work or worship with the congregation.

There is poignancy in the statement of the leper to Jesus: "*If you will, you can make me clean.*" He knows Jesus can heal the sick (as happened in last Sunday's Gospel when Jesus cured Simon's mother-in-law who had a fever), but can he heal a *leper*? The answer, "Yes, I do will it."

It is a momentous event, because Jesus comes up to the boundary of the law which is established through Moses for the protection, holiness, and *wellness* of the people, and goes right through. Jesus "*stretches out his hand and touches him.*" He violates the quarantine. But is he violating the law? The law is there to protect someone from being infected. Jesus is not infected. Jesus cannot be infected by illness, which is a consequence of the Fall, since he is Life, he is Grace. As demons must flee before the Light, so illness must evaporate before Strength, and uncleanness must vanish before the Holy One.

Jesus doesn't undermine the Law, he removes that which required the protective law to begin with. In proof of which, he requires the leper to observe the other requirements, to "*go to the priest and present yourself for examination.*"

All illness is a consequence of sin – Original Sin – and exists because man's nature lacks the original Grace which would have prevented illness from gaining the upper hand over the body. Illness therefore serves a purpose in the ministry of Jesus, since it can illustrate (physically and graphically) the nature of sin (which is spiritual and invisible). Illness is a *symbol* for sin, and the healing miracles of Jesus serve the greater purpose of his coming, which is to heal man of sin and its devastating consequences in the soul.

If one could "see" the soul and the effects of sin in the soul, it would look like leprosy: ugly infected sores and pustules that corrupt and stink. And kill. A mortal sin "kills" the divine life of grace in the soul, and brings "eternal death" to the soul.

Of all the various kinds of illness and disease, the best one for illustrating the nature of sin – and the purpose of Jesus' coming – is leprosy. This is because of the *two-fold* suffering caused by leprosy: the physical suffering and corruption in the body, and the social suffering of isolation and exile. Sin also has this two-fold effect on the individual: the corruption of the soul, and alienation from others.

Sin corrupts not only individuals, but *relationships*. Sin harms not only the sinner, but the whole body of the community. St. Paul will later teach that we are members of the one Body, and if one part of the suffers the whole Body suffers (1 Cor 12). In other words, sin is *infectious*, and in more serious cases requires "quarantine." A thief or murderer must be put in prison or permanently removed as necessary (executed, "amputated" from the body) for the spiritual and social well-being of the community. A heretic or one who otherwise corrupts or seriously undermines the common good of the Church must be excommunicated.

But even before the community may have to formally act and "quarantine" the sinner, the sinner by his sin already removes and isolates himself from others, from "communion." If we have done something unjust against another, we have created a barrier in that relationship that has placed a "distance" between us. When we are guilty of mortal sin, we cannot approach to receive Holy Communion at Mass. Not because we *shouldn't*, but because our sin is already an alienation that has cut us off, so that even if we violate the precept and receive the Eucharist anyway while in a state of sin, we only thereby commit sacrilege, adding further sin and condemnation.

Leprosy, then, is a graphic illustration of the problem of sin. And it is precisely this situation of man that Jesus wills to overcome.

It is in the sacrament of Penance (Confession) that Jesus heals the sinner by touching the infection, and cures spiritual leprosy. And it is important to realize that by means of this sacrament Jesus accomplishes the *two-fold healing* necessary in the case of leprosy: the cleansing of the individual from his corruption (sin, uncleanness), and the restoration of the individual to the congregation. It is no coincidence that this healing by our Lord requires the ministry of priests, and a formal act. It mirrors the process by which the leper is fully healed.

The first part of the healing, by which the individual is made clean, is called “absolution” or more commonly the “forgiveness of sin.” Jesus wipes away the offense and restores the penitent to his baptismal purity. Confession makes us “clean” again. The second part of the healing, by which the individual is restored to others, beginning with God Himself, and through God with his neighbor, is called “reconciliation.” It is important to realize then, that the Sacrament of Penance, which is one of the two “healing sacraments,”<sup>1</sup> is ultimately a sacrament for the healing of the whole Mystical Body, in addition to the particular member of that Body. By reconciling the penitent to God and his fellow man, the Church itself is being healed, the relationships are being restored, the alienation is being overcome. By means of the sacramental absolution, the sinner is restored to “Holy Communion.”

As with the Law of Moses, the priests of the Church continue to be the ones who preside over this readmission to the community, and it is in this spirit that we are to understand the penance assigned by the priest. The penance given should have reference to the *reconciliation* that needs to be achieved (on a human level) in the penitent’s life. Did he steal? He must make return. Did he lie? He must go tell the truth. Is it his family members he offended? It is them he must now serve, pray for, and do good toward.

Jesus said elsewhere, “*If you come to the altar to offer your gift and there remember that your brother has anything against you, go first to your brother and be reconciled, and then come offer your sacrifice*” (Mt 5:23-24). To be fully a member of the congregation, of the People of God who offer sacrifice, one must be forgiven and reconciled, healed of leprosy.

This, then, is the famous healing miracle of Jesus, given in the Gospel for our benefit as the Church continues the healing work of Jesus today, a healing which is accomplished above all through the great Sacrament of Penance.

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<sup>1</sup> The other being Anointing of the Sick.