

Infectious Spirits
10th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Mk 3:20-35)

In the Gospel Jesus makes reference to the impure spirits that are cast out as part of his healing work. Healing is twofold, because man is both a body and a soul. The body is the physical, “visible” part. The soul is the spiritual, “invisible” part. Because man’s soul is rational, it is not only the life principle of the physical body, but also a *person*, a spiritual being who has his own intellect and free will. Man has a spirit, man is a human spirit, through his immortal soul.

Just as man’s body can become ill or injured, man’s spirit can be hurt. The Original Sin of Adam has wounded man in his entire nature, body and soul. Thus, when the New Adam seeks to restore fallen human nature, he brings healing to the wounds of body and soul, both of which are harmed by sin.

When the body is injured or becomes ill, it requires special healing care. Left untreated, an illness will spread, and a wound will become infected. The infection is a double suffering, worse than the original injury, and often more deadly. In order to prevent infection, the wound must be cleaned and medicated, so that healing can take place.

Likewise in the soul, there can be injury and sickness, which left untreated can become worse, “infected.” The sicknesses of the soul result, like physical illnesses, from the condition of the fall, from Original Sin. The sicknesses of the soul include the capital sins: pride, envy, sloth, etc. But the soul can be further injured through sin: one’s own personal sins and those of others.

For instance, by the sin of “scandal” (a violation of the fifth commandment) one person harms another’s soul by compromising his brother’s holiness, failing to guide him in the right path and paving the way for him to fall into evil. By sin, real damage is done to the soul, both of the sinner and the sin’s victim.

As with the body, this injury too requires care and healing, so that it may not become “infected” and cause even worse harm. An example of how a soul becomes “infected” is when someone who has been hurt seeks to retaliate, becomes bitter or hateful, and loses faith. This latter situation is far worse than the original injury.

In the body, it is the “germs” which infect a wound. In the soul, it is the demons, unclean spirits. Demons are to the soul what germs are to the body. They are always present, and seeking opportunity to enter and accomplish their deadly work of corruption. In the case of demons it is a spiritual being they seek to enter and not simply a body. Spirits are made for communion and union with other spirits. Spirits can interpenetrate each other, dwell in each other, the way different

rays of light can be united. God created the human spirit so that man could love others, and above all so that God Himself could dwell with man by His Holy Spirit.

With sin, however, man's spirit becomes host to the dark fallen spirits that infect and harm him, bringing him to darkness and misery. The gateway for evil spirits to enter the human spirit is the injury caused by sin, particularly when this weakens the human will.

When the body is healthy and strong, and the living environment is clean, infection and illness are kept at bay. Likewise, when we are strong spiritually, we are inoculated against the corrosive activity of evil spirits. Even when they may succeed in bringing harm or misfortune to the body or our worldly situation, they cannot touch the soul and will, which remain firmly in God's grace.

It is by means of a sacramental life, together with prayer and Scripture, that we remain spiritually healthy. Baptism creates in us a spring of living water that perpetually washes and renews the soul, keeping it clean and free of the devil's dominion. Confirmation anoints our soul with the Holy Spirit of God, imprinting in us the image and full stature of Christ, in whose name and by whose authority we can cast out demons. The Holy Eucharist fortifies us with the divine life itself, from which the harmful spirits take flight. Prayer and Scripture provide the daily discipline and spiritual exercise that keep us strong in the life of grace. The only danger is sin.

When sin has occurred, which is spiritual injury, healing and treatment is immediately necessary, and this is the profound purpose of that other sacrament of Penance. Regular confession, like regular doctor visits, are necessary in the spiritual life. And instead of x-ray and blood tests looking for illness in the body, a full "examination of conscience" is made to identify problem areas of the soul – particular sins and sinful tendencies. Confessing the sin is very important, because this act exposes and reveals the sin directly to the Divine Healer. It allows the actual healing to take place. Christ "touches" our wounds with merciful love and absolves them, removing them, like a cancer being taken out. And it has always been the Church's tradition to understand that penance together with the "amendment of life" which follow the sacrament, is something medicinal: it is the "prescription" to help us with ongoing healing and prevention of the sin's return.

Exorcism is a necessary part of Christ's, and the Church's, healing work. It is related to the forgiveness of sin but distinct from it. In order for God to heal sin and help people live in spiritual and physical health, the demons must be kept at bay, man's spiritual life must be kept clean, and healthy. Exorcism creates the healthy environment where healing and true living can take place. The chief demon Jesus refers to in the Gospel, "*Beelzebul*," has a name which aptly means,

“*Lord of the flies.*” Demons are dirty and impure. They live on decay and corruption, like a garbage dump. They want to take away man’s dignity as a child of God and make him live in a spiritual garbage dump with flies and maggots. That is why Jesus always referred to hell, the abode of demons, as “*Gehenna*,” which is the name of the garbage dump in the valley outside Jerusalem.

This is what demons do to human life. Instead of the fruitful environment of peace and joy, they infect man with hatred and violence; they inflame his selfishness and lust; they provide an environment of death and despair.

God taught His people via the Law of Moses to be “clean.” They were to wash daily, prepare foods carefully, and only eat certain kinds of healthy food. They were to practice proper personal hygiene and public sanitation, and deal decisively with infectious diseases such as leprosy. Garbage and waste was to be carefully buried or disposed “outside the camp” (cf Lv 11-15,17-18). And they were to live apart from evil and immoral people, never to intermarry. By means of this way of life on the level of the body, God taught His people the corresponding spiritual truth of holiness; the two go together: “cleanliness is next to godliness.”

Exorcism by itself does not guarantee holiness, just as the Law of Moses cannot be identified with true righteousness. But it creates the conditions in which a life of holiness can be lived. It places man in a better situation, corresponding to his true dignity, where he can live out the sacramental life of grace and holiness. He must carefully seek to avoid the occasions of sin, and the temptations which would lead to another fall. He must studiously protect himself from the “world,” which is filled with so much impurity and ugliness. In order to infect Christians, demons work overtime to tempt them, and at any cost to pull them away from the Sacraments and prayer, away from Christ.

It was unforgiveable wickedness, therefore, when Christ was accused of expelling demons by means of the chief demon, or that he himself was possessed of an evil spirit. How do you confuse the Holy Spirit of God with its very opposite? The accusation is itself demonic activity, a desperate lie designed to try weaken people’s faith and trust in Christ and his Power. The Church continues the battle and suffers the full assault of the gates of hell. But within the Church is Christ and the Holy Spirit, and thus absolute power over evil. Within the Church is the one place on earth where man can live free of the putrid demons, inoculated to their infectious corruption.