

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time B: February 11, 2024  
“Lord, if You wish, You can make me clean!”

Today we use the term Hansen’s disease, the phrase coined from the doctor named G. A. Hansen, who discovered the bacillus that destroyed the lives of so many people down through the ages. We normally call the disease by the name *leprosy*. It occurs to me, as I sit here pounding away at my familiar keyboard, that probably no one that reads these words, have ever seen or ever been close to a leper, as I have, when I lived for six months as a student in the Holy Land many years ago. Of course, the poor lepers I saw then have long since died, only to be replaced by many, many more suffering people.

Leprosy – Hansen’s disease. The Old Testament reading from the Book of Leviticus describes the beginning symptoms very well: “If someone has on his skin a scab or pustule or blotch which appears to be the sore of leprosy, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest...” (Lev. 13. 3) Actually, the beginning of leprosy can look even more harmless. On the middle of the top of my right hand is a very small, very white spot. If I remember correctly, that spot, where there is an almost complete loss of pigmentation, is the result of an accident while cooking at the stove in my teen years. However, oddly enough, the beginnings of leprosy often look exactly the very same way. Isn’t that strange? If, Heaven forbid, I lived in the time of Moses, I, myself, might have had to follow the dictates of the Law:

*The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall keep his garments rent and his head bare, and shall muffle his beard; he shall cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean!’ As long as the sore is on him he shall declare himself unclean, **since he is, in fact, unclean.** He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp. (Lev. 13. 45-46, emphasis my own)*

Can you even begin to imagine the horrors falling upon you – at a moment’s notice – inescapable – with no place to hide? One moment, you are a happy person with a life; the next moment, your life, your health, your family, your home – gone. And you have nothing to face but darkness, sickness, loneliness and a painful, hideous death. One would certainly want to cry, like Job, to the Heavens: “Where are You, God?!”

How different a picture we find in the New Testament, in the Holy Gospel of St. Mark. Just as in last week, we can still hear St. Peter telling Our Lord: “Everyone’s looking for You! (St. Mark 1. 37) The outcry, the need to see Jesus is so great that He hardly has time to be with His Father (even though He is never separated from the Father in prayer); Jesus goes out to the desert early in the pre-dawn to communed with His Father.

In this Gospel Our Lord meets a leper: “... si vis, potes me mundare: if You wish, You can make me clean!” “... ait illi, volo mundare: I do will, be made clean!” (St. Mark 1. 40-41) At seeing the leper Jesus is “moved with pity” at the man’s state. Whether we

realize it or not, whenever we suffer, no matter how deep the darkness, no matter how dark the solitude, Jesus, looks upon us and is always “moved” with an infinite pity!

Is that all there is to this Gospel, can we learn nothing more? There are two points, one in the Holy Gospel and another point from the first reading from Leviticus that might give us pause to think, and, for that matter, enrich our understanding of the Man/God Who comes to do not His will, “but the will of Him who sent” Him. (cf. St. John 6. 38)

Did you notice that Jesus, having performed His act of merciful healing – *He acts with authority – the demons and grave sicknesses, even leprosy and death are subject to Him* – subjects, not only the healed man but, by extension, Himself, to the authority of the Priests and the Law? “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets. I have come, not to abolish them, but to fulfill them!” (St. Matthew 5. 17) [This comes from the beginning of Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount.] Thus, as Jesus is consistent in all things, He orders the man-now-cured, “... go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them.” (1. 44)

How are we to understand Jesus’ insistence that the man follow the Law, which we have seen, in our first reading in Leviticus, to be so harsh? What is the meaning of Our Lord’s behaviour? If we return to the first reading, we may find the answer.

In the last line of the passage of Leviticus, we read an instruction for the leper: “He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp.” (Lev. 13. 46) If one thinks for just a moment, one can see that this command, *living outside the camp – in isolation*, makes the leper’s life a life of complete abandonment. It is this *abandonment*, and *living outside the camp* that links the leper of the Old Testament to Jesus, Himself. Why?

If you remember, Mount Calvary, which St. Thomas Aquinas referred to as “the place reeking with the stench of corpses, which is called Calvary” (1), was purposely located outside the gates of the city, Jerusalem. I say, purposely, because, this was the Law. As Mons. Sheen reminds us, all victims, all crucifixions, anything unclean and accursed, must be taken outside the city walls: “This was the Law of Leviticus that the sin offering should be driven outside the city gates or the camp.” (2) Thus we find another curious passage in the Book of Leviticus, a passage concerning *the sin-offering*, which states:

*The sin-offering bullock and goat whose blood was brought into the Sanctuary to make atonement, shall be **taken outside the camp**, where their hides and flesh and offal shall be burned up in the fire. (Lev. 16. 27, emphasis my own)*

Here, in this rather obscure passage from the Book of Leviticus, we can begin to glimpse the Mystery of the Person of Jesus in His Atonement-Love. Let me explain. All lepers must, by order of the Old Law, remain “outside the gates, outside the

*camp.*” Jesus, having preached His Sermon on the Mount, is getting ready, very soon, to embark with the Twelve, on boat across the Sea of Galilee. They are, indeed, *outside the gates*, somewhere in the region of Galilee. Jesus meets the poor leper, and, “*moved with pity,*” when told by the man that, “... *if He wills to cure him, He can,*” Jesus responds, “*I do will it, be cured.*” (1. 40-41) But then He Who is the fulfillment of the Law, immediately instructs the man – now made whole, to submit himself to the Law – that is, to go from being “*outside the gates, outside the camp*” to being “*inside the gates, inside the camp.*”

At this point, we are still rather at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. And we tend to ‘break things up,’ as it were, taking each and every act of the Lord piece-meal. Our Holy Father, writing as Cardinal Ratzinger, takes a radically different approach, which, from my humble point of view is much richer, and profoundly more instructive.

Using a passage from St. John’s Gospel, “... *it is not to do My own will that I have come down from Heaven, but to do the will of Him Who sent Me,*” (St. John 6. 38) then-Cardinal Ratzinger looks at a question regarding the two wills of Christ – human and Divine, which reside in His one Divine person. What does Cardinal Ratzinger mean when he speaks of the ‘two wills, human and Divine, in the one Divine Person of Christ?’ Very simply, Christ, the Man Who came as God, had/has (!) a human will and a Divine will, both equally working in His Divine Person, the Second Person of the Most Blessed Trinity. But what does that mean? What that means is, that that ‘Second Person of the Trinity’ is Jesus’ ‘I.’ When Jesus said ‘I,’ He meant the Second Person of the Trinity, that is, the Son of God; or, to put it negatively, Jesus did/does not possess a human ‘I,’ simply a Divine ‘I.’ Yet, Jesus, the God Who came as Man, retains both His Divine will and His human will. If this seems difficult, it is! This theological conundrum has plagued theologians and deep thinkers for ages. Did His human will just get subsumed, sucked-up, into His Divine will? If it did, if the Lord’s human will is simply taken away, then our human wills, our very humanity, would effectively not be touched by the Lord’s humanity. Is there an answer for this? There **is!**

Think for just a moment. My will doesn’t will. My person wills. **“I will! “I choose!** Thus, then-Cardinal Ratzinger, reflecting on an ancient Council of the Church, Constantinople III explains:

The Council of Constantinople analyzed the question of the two-ness (i.e., the two natures) and the one-ness (i.e., the one person) in Christ by reference to the concrete issue of the will of Jesus. It resolutely maintains that, as man, Jesus has a human will which is not absorbed by the divine will. But this human will follows the divine will and thus becomes one will with it, not in a natural manner but along the path of freedom. The metaphysical two-ness of a human and a divine will is not abrogated, but in the realm of the *person*, in the realm of

freedom, the fusion of both takes place, with the result that they become *one* will not naturally, but personally. This free unity – a form of unity created by love – is higher and more interior than a merely natural unity. It corresponds to the highest unity there is, namely Trinitarian unity. The Council illustrates this unity by citing a dominical (i.e., one of the Lord’s) word handed down to us in the Gospel of John: ‘I have come down from Heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him Who sent Me.’ (St. Jn. 6. 38) Here is the divine Logos Who is speaking, and He speaks of the man Jesus as His will, the will of the Logos. With this exegesis of John 6. 38 the Council indicates the unity of the subject in Christ. There are not two ‘I’s in Him, but only one. (3)

Though I realize this is a rather difficult passage from our Holy Father – perhaps you have never stopped to think about this concept: when God became truly Man, a Man in all things save sin, it would mean that He must have a human mind, a human heart *and a human will*. And, how often have I heard even clergy make the mistake, referring to the Lord’s *personality*, as if He had a *human personality*, the implication being that, if He did/does not have a *human personality*, then, He is not really one of us. In this rather long passage of very terse reasoning given to us by Cardinal Ratzinger’s meditation on the teaching on the Council of Constantinople, we find an answer, deeper than we could possibly imagine.

In the depths of the Heart of Christ, a decision was made to give His human will completely over to His Divine will, such that each and everything He did, would be an act of the God made Man. Thus, when He met the leper, already “*outside the gates, outside the city,*” moved with pity, He placed the man back in the City, with the full knowledge that the days were coming when He, Himself, would first be greeted as a King, and then, scourged, mocked, and dragged outside the City, there to make atonement for all mankind, for all eternity. In cleansing the leper, He, Himself, would become the Leper of all time, taking sin upon His back, and becoming Sin, itself.

“*Lord, if You will, You can make me clean!*” “*I do will it. Be made clean!*” Did that poor leper possibly have any idea what he started?!

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, Q. 46, art. 5, corpus
2. Archbishop Fulton Sheen, *Life of Christ*, McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., New York, 1958, pg. 385
3. His Eminence, J. Cardinal Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One*, Ignatius Press, 1986, Pgs. 38-39