



A MESSAGE FROM THE INTERNATIONAL ECCLESIASTICAL ASSISTANT

December 2016

On 11 February 2017, the Church will celebrate the 25th annual World Day of the Sick. The theme of the 2017 celebration is “Amazement at what God has accomplished: ‘The Almighty has done great things for me....’” (Lk 1:49). In his message announcing the celebration, Pope Francis explained that it “is an opportunity to reflect in particular on the needs of the sick and, more generally, of all those who suffer. It is also an occasion for those who generously assist the sick, beginning with family members, health workers and volunteers, to give thanks for their God-given vocation of accompanying our infirm brothers and sisters.” The special 25th celebration will take place in Lourdes, and our International President, Geraldine McSweeney, will represent CICIAMS at this important event.

As we “give thanks for their God-given vocation of accompanying our infirm brothers and sisters,” I would like to invite all of us to reflect upon the story of Jesus’ encounter with a leper in Mk 1:40-45. To help us get the full emotional flavor of this story, it might be helpful to remember that the Book of Leviticus devotes three entire chapters to instruction regarding how to deal with the issue of leprosy. The person with leprosy was to have nothing to do with the community. Nor was the community to have any dealings with the person who was now defined simply as “a leper.” Lepers were unclean and lived apart from the community. They were not to come near healthy people. On the contrary, they had to warn others to stay away. The only appropriate response of religious Jews was to keep as far away from the leper as possible, because any contact would make them unclean as well, even if they didn’t contract the disease. The story of the leper is thus a story of separation and avoidance, a story that is sadly repeated in so many of the sick people that we serve.

Notice, however, that this is not how the story progresses in Mark’s Gospel. Neither the leper nor Jesus do what they’re supposed to do. The passage begins: “And the leper came up to Jesus.” This was not the proper behavior for lepers. But the leper was bold. He came right up to Jesus. And being right next to him – close enough to be touched – he made a request. It is interesting to note that – unlike other miracle stories – he didn’t actually ask to be cured. Rather he said: “If you will, you can make me clean.” He asked for cleansing, not curing. Curing deals with the disease, but being clean or unclean has more to do with one’s relationship with God and the community.

Nor is the surprising behavior confined to the leper. Within the religious context of the time, Jesus’ reaction was equally startling: Not only did he affirm the leper’s request – “I will, be clean” – but he actually touched the leper. Jesus risked becoming unclean himself so that he could make the other person clean – to restore his relationship to God and his membership within the community. The leper’s bold move prompted an equally bold response on the part of Jesus.

As we reflect upon the World Day of the Sick and upon Pope Francis' challenge to give thanks for accompanying our sick sisters and brothers, it might be a good time for us to look at our call to become not only effective nurses and medico-social assistants, but also a cleansing and restoring community, the life-giving people of God. As we are called to pay closer attention to sickness and health, perhaps this encounter between the leper and Jesus can serve as a model for us in our ministries.

Mark's Gospel calls the sick to be as bold as the leper. Even in as we try to be supportive to those who are sick, we may need to remember that sickness itself can isolate people. Our sick sisters and brothers may feel fatigue, pain and discomfort. They may not be as sure on their feet as they once were, and they may be embarrassed to be so dependent on others once again. They may be angry with God because of their illness and feel that they can't talk to anyone about these feelings – others just wouldn't understand. All of this may lead to a desire to avoid other people. Their illness might even be a threat to others, as they remind others of the mortality we all share. As members of CICIAMS, we need to help our sick sisters and brothers overcome avoidance and be as bold as the person with leprosy.

Those of us in the healing ministry may also find many good reasons to avoid truly encountering our sick sisters and brothers. We may be more comfortable simply doing what is medically necessary and not really offer support to our sick sister or brother. Although we can give many excuses for our behaviors, Mark's Gospel says that we too need to be bold. Especially when we cannot cure the sick person, we can be involved in spiritual and emotional healing. By our presence we can let our sick sisters and brothers know that they still are valued and valuable members of the community – that they are not abandoned.

The ministry of healing is a reciprocal ministry. All of us – the sick and those of us who care for them – need to be fully involved. Those who are ill are not simply objects of our ministry. By witnessing to the truth of their sickness they build up the community of Christ. They minister to the rest of the community by helping others confront their own limits and mortality. Those who care for them must also build up the community. We can show our sick sisters and brothers that we can be depended upon by not doing the minimum necessary but rather by reaching out to them and touching their lives.

Pope Francis asks us to be amazed at what God has accomplished. As we reflect on Mark's Gospel, what at first seems like a simple story of an encounter between Jesus and a person with leprosy can become a model for what it means to be the community of Jesus, a community of cleansing, healing and restoring, a community where all – sick and healthy alike – can be amazed by what God accomplishes through them.

I pray that you all may have a holy 2017 and that God may abundantly bless all of you and your healing ministry.

Fr. Tom Nairn, OFM