

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time.
Feb. 14 & 15, 2015

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My dear Brothers and Sisters. There is a great contrast between the first reading from the Book of Leviticus and the Gospel reading according to Mark. One might put it this way: the contrast is between the Old Covenant and the New, that is between the Promise and the Fulfillment of the Promise.

Consider our love and respect for life in three historical stages of progression.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, we read in Leviticus, The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall keep his garment rent and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean!' He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp. In those days leprosy was looked upon as punishment for sin. Realizing that it was also contagious, and there being no cure, it was important to protect the community and cast out the leper.

In the Gospel of Mark we read: A leper came to Jesus and kneeling down before him he begged him and said, 'If you wish you can make me clean.' Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, 'I do will it. Be made clean.' The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. What was needed was Jesus power to heal, and the man's faith in Jesus.

What about leprosy today in our time? Here is a statement from the World Health Organization: Today, the diagnosis and treatment of leprosy is fairly easy and most endemic countries are striving to fully integrate leprosy services into existing general health services. This is especially important for those under-served and marginalized communities most at risk from leprosy, often the poorest of the poor. What follows from this statement is the need of our knowledge to heal the disease and our compassion and cooperation to eradicate the disease as well as the dire poverty that harbors this disease in our world. In this way we become the good servants of God's love and mercy in true faith.

Here I presented to you three statements, one from the Book of Leviticus written by Moses around the middle of the 14th century BC, then the account given by Mark in the 1st century AD, and the present situation in our own 21st century. We can discover in these three stages a most wonderful unfolding history of faith and knowledge, and an invitation to us to become more and more part of God's ongoing and loving creation. How true it is what Karl Rahner wrote in the Sesquicentennial issue of Theology Digest: 'Human nature is open ended, and we are actively involved in its finalization. That opens for us a wonderful task of faith and knowledge!

The recognition of this unfolding progression in our historical journey would not have been possible for us, without the labor of Pope John XXIII in the early 1960s by initiating the second Vatican Council, and so opening the windows of the Church to present knowledge. This is clearly stated in one of the council's documents, *Gaudium et Spes*: The Church in the Modern World. In §62 we find the words: "Let it be recognized that all the faithful, clerical and lay possess a lawful freedom of inquiry and of thought, and the freedom to express their minds humbly and courageously about those matters in which they enjoy competence." And indeed: it is knowledge that gives realism to our faith, and it is our faith that renders our knowledge meaningful.

I would like to conclude this brief reflection with a few words of caveat. It is important that we always respond to present needs with present knowledge. This is what people did in the past. They responded the best way they could with the knowledge of the time. This is what we find in the Book of Leviticus, in the Gospel of Mark, and what we should recognize today in our present situation. If we try to respond to present needs with past knowledge we become dysfunctional. Being dysfunctional causes loss of credibility, and loss of credibility damages our faith. But one could say: It worked well in the past why should we change it? Simply because: the

present is not quite the same as the past. We need to respond to present needs with present knowledge and so become more and more part in God's unfolding creation. Jesus, the Word of God, is our guide in the Scripture and in the Eucharist, and the Holy Spirit is our strength and love and life as we try to do the best we can through faith and knowledge. Amen.

