

IT IS FAITH THAT CLEANSSES US

A reflection by Bishop Bruno of Segni

“On the way to Jerusalem Jesus passed along the border between Samaria and Galilee, and when he was entering one of the villages, ten lepers came to meet him.” What do these ten lepers remind us of? Don't they remind us that we are all sinners and need cleansing? When Jesus, Our Lord, came, not everyone was a bodily leper but all were lepers in their souls; a soul that is leprous is in a much worse state than a leprous body!

What happened when the Lord came to us? Listen to Scripture: ***“Standing a considerable distance off from Jesus, they cried out to him: Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”*** Why did they stand apart? Because no one in their condition was permitted to come close to others. When we continue in sin we are standing far from Jesus and need to be cured of what makes us leprous, so we too must cry out to Jesus: Lord, Master, have pity on us! That cry needs to come from our heart. The cry of the heart is louder than any other. It pierces the heavens and comes to the very throne of God!

So listen further to the Scripture: ***“When Jesus saw the lepers he told them: Go and show yourselves to the priests!”*** God has only to look at us to be filled with compassion. The Lord pitied the lepers as soon as he saw them. He sent them to the priests, but not to get cleansed for he had pronounced them clean already. ***“And as they went they were cleansed”***.

Let all of us who are sinners listen to these words and try to understand them. It is easy for the Lord to forgive sins. Sinners are often forgiven even before they come to a priest. In fact, their repentance and healing occur simultaneously. At the very moment of conversion they pass from death to life. However, we need to understand what conversion means. We need to heed the Lord's words. Listen to them: ***“Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts rather than your clothes!”***

Real conversion is an inward reality. To be really converted one must be so in one's heart! As Scripture says: ***“A humbled, contrite heart God will not spurn!”***

Now listen to what happened as they obeyed the Lord's words. ***“One of them, when he saw that he was cured, when back again, praising God at the top of his voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. Now this man was a Samaritan.”***

This man stands for all who renounce the devil and take Christ as their model. We have been cleansed in the waters of baptism. We have been healed by the sacrament of penance. We have promised to renounce the devil and take Christ as our model. We have promised to follow Christ. We have praised him and adored him and given thanks to him. We must never again abandon his service.

Listen once again to the Scripture: ***“Jesus said to the man: Get up and go your way; your faith has saved you.”*** See how great the power of faith is! Without faith, as St. Paul says, ***“it is impossible to please God”***. ***“Abraham believed God and because of this God regarded him as righteous”***. Faith saves! Faith justifies! Faith heals both body and soul!

HOW TO REMEMBER THE DEPARTED

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. John Chrysostom

Do you wish to honor the departed? The proper way to honor them is by giving alms, by performing good works and by taking part in Divine Services. No good is done simply by arousing emotions, as people without faith do for their dead. We look heavenward! We reflect on spiritual truths and live them. Those without faith simply indulge in excessive expressions of grief. They want to honor the dead by showing how valuable they were when alive. They think to praise the dead in this way.

If we engage in the same sort of practices what will those without faith think when they hear us speak of the resurrection? If we merely express distress over the “loss” of loved ones are we trying to give them a better reputation or expressing how much we depended on their help in some worldly occupation? How can we convincingly proclaim Christ’s resurrection, and that of all the dead, if we don’t show our faith by the way we remember those who have left us to be with God?

You believe the entire message of Christ. We ourselves contemplate death with a feeling of security, don’t we? Grieving can even cause a person’s death, but not a Christian’s. Our emotions, then, mustn’t get in the way of living our faith. We have to be careful that what we do in remembering our departed doesn’t actually offend God!

Even grief and loss can be experienced in a way that draws us closer to God. Let’s reflect on the fact that those who are gone from us have been taken by God. All the departed were mortal to begin with so death should be no surprise. If people indulge in too exaggerated signs of grief either they thought that something above nature should have saved their loved ones from death or they are sorrowing for themselves, because they no longer have the presence and help of people they depended on. You don’t want to do either of these things.

Yes, all of us want to be immortal. God has taken those who have died to be immortal with him everlastingly. That is, of itself, a cause for joy. Immortality comes only from God. We can’t stay alive if we don’t eat. We can’t have immortality if we don’t go to God. You expect to be with God, and then you will once again be with those who have gone before you to God by death. It is part of God’s Providence.

The truth of the teaching on resurrection is defined as an essential part of our faith. We celebrate our belief in that teaching when we remember our departed. Only those who have no faith tear themselves apart in mourning and indulge in excessive expressions of grief. We Christians both accept the lot assigned to all mortal creatures and rejoice that God calls us to what is beyond our natural destiny.

If we want to grieve what we need to do is grieve for our sins. That is the best kind of sorrow. It is sorrow over what separates from God. God has freed our departed from their sins, that too is a defined part of our Christian faith. What is the proper response to this faith? It is to live fully what we believe, both about our present life and about the life God has in store for all those called to share the divine life forever.

PLACING ONESELF IN GOD'S HANDS

A reflection from the Autobiography of St. Teresa of Jesus

“When I began to turn to God Father Alvarez was my confessor. He began to lead me to greater perfection. He told me that I ought to leave nothing undone but seek to become entirely pleasing to God. He treated me with great skill yet also very gently. My soul was not at all strong, but very sensitive, especially as regards letting go of certain friendship, though they were not actually leading me to offend God. They involved a great deal of affection and it seemed to me that if I let them go I would be sinning through ingratitude. So I asked him why it was necessary for me to be ungrateful if I was not offending God. He told me to commend the matter to God for a few days and to recite the hymn, “Come, Creator Spirit”, and that I would then be enlightened as to what was the better thing to do.

“I spent the greater part of an entire day in prayer and then I begged the Lord to help me please him in everything. I began to pray the hymn. While I was doing that a kind of transport came upon me so suddenly I was almost carried away. I could make no mistake about this, it was so clear. It was the first time the Lord had granted me the favor of any kind of rapture. I heard these words: “I will have you talk with angels and not with human beings”.

“This simply amazed me. My soul was very much moved and the words seemed to me to be spoken in the depths of the spirit. For this reason they made me afraid, even though, on the other hand, they brought me great comfort. This remained with me after the fear caused by the strangeness of the experience had dissipated. The words have come true! Never since then have I been able to maintain a firm friendship except with people whom I believe love God and try to serve him. Nor have I been able to draw comfort from others or cherished a personal affection for them. I haven't been in my power to do that. It makes no difference whether they are relatives or friends. Unless I know that a person loves God or practices prayer it is a real cross to me to have to associate with that person. I believe this is the absolute truth.

“Since that day I have been courageous enough to give up everything for the sake of God. In that moment, for what happened took no longer than a moment, God was pleased to make me, as his servant, another person than before. There was no longer a need for my confessor to give me further commands. When he had seen I was so attached to certain friendships he didn't dare tell me to abandon them. He had to wait until the Lord took the matter into his own hands, as he did. I hadn't thought I could ever give them up, even though I had tried to. It disturbed me so much that I put the very idea out of my mind. But now the Lord had set me free and given me strength to carry out my resolution. When these persons saw how determined I had become they were edified. Blessed be God forever! What I had been unable to do was done within me by the One who is almighty!”

ON FAITH AND LOVE

A reflection from a sermon by Martin Luther

In the tale about the ten Lepers the Gospel teaches us faith. In recounting Christ's response it teaches us love. As I have often declared, faith and love constitute the entire character of a Christian. Faith receives, through it we permit God to do good in us; through love we good to others.

Whoever believes has everything from God and is happy and even rich. From that time on one needs nothing more than what one has. Whatever one lives out and does is now ordered for the good and benefit of the neighbor. Though love one does for a neighbor as God has done for oneself through faith. From above, one receives a harvest through faith and gives of it through love to those here below.

If you seek righteousness by your works and try to earn merits you are working for yourself rather than serving others. But if you do that you act apart from faith. We are called to faith and to love in all things.

In the first place, it is a characteristic of faith to dare to trust in God's grace. This forms a bright vision and a refuge in God. One doubts nothing. One thinks God will have regard for one's faith and will not forsake it. Without that sort of vision and confidence there is no true faith. That means there is also no true prayer, and then there is no real seeking for God. Where faith exists it makes a person bold as well as anxious to bring one's troubles to God and to pray to God for help.

Observe the case of the leper who returned to Jesus giving thanks. Observe how faith is constituted. Without any teacher it itself teaches one how one's prayers may be truly fruitful. The ten lepers were confident that Jesus would hear and help them. They instruct us about how to believe.

To this Christ adds instruction on love. Love does to the neighbor what it sees Christ has done to oneself. We are taught in John chapter 13, "*for I have given you an example, that you should also do as I have done to you*". Immediately after saying this, Jesus adds: "*A new commandment I give you, that you love one another*". This means simply: Through me, in faith, you now have everything that I am and have; I am your own. You are now rich, and satisfied through me. All I do and love, I do and love not for myself but only for your sake. I only think about how I can be helpful and useful to you and bring about whatever you need and should have.

Consider, then, this example you have been given. Treat each other as God has treated you. Consider only the need to find ways to be useful and help your neighbor, and to do what is necessary for that neighbor. Your faith has enough in my love and grace. Your love too will give to others that which is enough. See! This is the life of a Christian. Not much teaching and not many books are needed. Everything is contained in the gifts of faith and love.

HELPING ONE ANOTHER LIVE FOR GOD

A reflection from Letters by St. Ignatius of Antioch

“It is proper that you Ephesians act in agreement with the mind of your bishop. This is what you are doing. Your college of priests is a credit to God for it harmonizes with the bishop as the strings of a harp do with one another. That is why the symphony of your concord and love sings the praise of Jesus Christ. But all the members of your church should also form such a choir. You should take the key note from God. It is unity. This is how you become one with Jesus Christ in singing a song to the Heavenly Father. That is why he listens to you and recognizes in your good life the melodies taught by Jesus Christ, his Son. It is very much to your good to continue this flawless unity. By it you will always have a share in God. In your assemblies there must be one prayer, one supplication, one mind, one hope in love, one flawless joy, and all this in Jesus Christ. Come together as one temple and altar to the one Jesus Christ—to him who came forth from the one Father and remained with Him and returned to the One Godhead.

“I am writing to state emphatically that I die willingly for God. Do not interfere! Allow me to be the food of wild beast for they are the means of making my way to God. I am God’s wheat and I will be ground by the beasts’ teeth so I may be Christ’s pure bread. Coax the beasts to leave nothing behind so that I may be a true disciple of Jesus Christ and the world may not any longer see me.

“All the way from Syria to Rome I have been fighting wild beasts, on land and at sea, by day and by night, chained as I am to ten soldiers who act like beasts. Yet in the school of their abuse I am more and more trained in discipleship, although that is not what justifies me.

“The whole universe is of no use to me, nor all the kingdoms of this earth, in comparison to the good of dying and coming to Jesus Christ. I seek the one who died for us all. I love the one who rose again for my sake. I am suffering birth pangs, so don’t get in the way of my being born to a new life. Don’t make a gift to the world of one who wants to be God’s.

“The prince of this world is resolved to abduct me, and to corrupt my Godward aspirations. Don’t help him. Side with me. That is siding with God. Even if I should, after my arrival, plead for you to intervene, don’t listen to me! Pay attention only to what I am writing to you.

My love has been crucified. I’m not on fire with love for any earthly thing. There is within me a living water that cries out, “Come to the Father”. I have no taste for any delight of this life. Bread of God is what I long for. For my drink I want only Christ’s blood. This is incorruptible love!”

REMEMBERING ST. LUKE

A reflection from the History of Eusebius of Caesarea

We all know that Paul preached to the Gentiles and established many churches. He did this from Antioch all the way to Illyricum. We learn this from his Letters and from the testimony of Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. We know too that Luke for a long time was a companion of Paul in his ministry, and that he was Paul's personal physician in many illnesses. He tells us also of the churches in Pontus, Galatia Cappadocia, Asia and Bythnia. Thus it is Luke who tells us about the lives of the churches and of the struggles which occasioned Paul's Letters.

We know too that not everyone was judged worthy to work with Paul in his many labors and that Luke was one of those who was. He is even described as "beloved" and was with Paul even during his imprisonment in Rome. We know, for instance, that Paul had many fellow laborers over the years of his preaching, he calls them fellow soldiers. They are recalled because of what Luke tells us about them in writing the Acts; and so we know that he wasn't eager for praise himself but for praising others.

Luke was born in Antioch and by profession was a physician. It was in this capacity that he got to know Paul, and even others from among the Apostles. A great deal of what we are told in the Acts of the Apostles comes from his personal observations and participation in the events recorded. He was dedicated heart and soul to the Gospel. How hard he worked to proclaim and make it widely known! That can be judged from the fact that he wrote a Gospel as well as the Acts. He tells us that what he writes he learned from "those who were with Jesus from the beginning and became eye-witnesses of what they proclaimed as ministers of the Word".

From Luke's own words we know that he was very much concerned that what he said should be accurate. That is why he consulted eye-witnesses and persons who had been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry. So he wrote on the basis of what others had told him but tried to assure himself, and us, that these persons knew what they were talking about.

At times, in his letters, Paul refers to what he calls "my Gospel". It is thought that he is referring to the Gospel according to Luke. That being the case, we know that Paul was eager to emphasize the Lord's mercy and acceptance of all sorts of people. This was most probably what Luke thought important as well.

Luke was personally acquainted with people like Timothy and Titus, whom Paul himself had called to the duties of a bishop. The greatest recommendation we can have of Luke was the fact that he received the inspiration of the Spirit so that he would write both a Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. They form a significant part of the entire canon of the New Testament. His presentation of the Virgin Mary has formed the church's understanding of the vocation of all Christians, and his presentation of Jesus' ministry has shaped many parts of the Church's annual liturgical cycle of celebrations. His presentations of Jesus' birth and early life have been hugely influential for Christians' understanding of their call to ministry and to the living of a holy life. We can do no better than to imitate him in our own efforts to share the faith we have received through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

HOW THE MARTYRS SUFFERED FOR CHRIST

A report to the Jesuit General

We were informed by some escaped captives of the deaths of Fathers Jean de Brebeuf and Gabriel Lallement. The next morning sent eight men to seek their bodies. At the place of torture we found a spectacle of horror. It seems that as soon as they were taken captive they were stripped naked and some of their fingernails torn out. They were subjected to a hailstorm of blows with clubs over their entire bodies. In spite of this Father de Berbeuf addressed the Christians, many who he had instructed, also being held captive. "My children, let's raise our eyes to heaven in the midst of our afflictions and remember that God is witness to our sufferings and will soon be our glorious reward. Let us die in this faith and let us hope from God's goodness the fulfillment of his promises. The torments will end with our lives but the glory which follows will never end." The Christians replied, "Our spirits will be in Heaven while our bodies are still suffering on earth. Pray to God for us that he may show us his mercy; we will call upon him until death!"

Some enemies of the faith were angered by these words. They cut off hands and pierced others with iron awls. They heated hatchets red hot and held them against the armpits and thighs of those being tortured. They made necklaces of red hot ax heads and hung them about the necks, so that one was tortured in every posture one could take. They made belts of bark filled with pitch and resin and set them on fire, burning the entire upper body.

Father de Brebeuf suffered like a rock, insensible to fires and flames and not uttering a single cry. This astonished the tormentors. When he began to preach to them they became even angrier and gouged out a circle around his mouth, cut off his nose and tore off his lips. His blood spoke more loudly than his words had. They then baptized the Fathers with boiling water, not once but three times. They also mocked their teaching: "We treat you as a friend, since we are the cause of your greatest happiness in Heaven. Thank us for our kind services, for the more you suffer the more your God will reward you!"

Before the two fathers died they had their hearts torn out by means of an opening above the breast. The torturers feasted on these organs and drank their blood while it was still warm. While the fathers were still conscious pieces of flesh were removed and placed on coals to roast. They were then eaten in the sight of the captives. They sliced open their bodies in various places and stuck red hot hatchets into the wounds. They had broiled their tongues by thrusting flaming fire bands into their mouths to prevent them from invoking God while dying.

I have learned all these details from persons worthy of being believed. They saw it all and reported it to me first-hand. They too had been captives but were reserved for death at a later date. Before that time came they had escaped.