

On Showing Yourself To The Priest

It is interesting to speculate at what point the rule was laid down which made the priests the sanitary inspectors of Israel in the matter of leprosy (Hansen's Disease). It is enshrined in the laws, from ancient times; and this is almost certainly concerned with that difficult area where the Old Testament banned the damaged and disabled from worship, just as a damaged or disabled animal could not be offered in sacrifice. Such people were not to "appear before the Lord", and this meant that they were banned from entering the Temple when it came to be built. At the moment of re-admission the sufferer who experienced a cure of leprosy – which in ancient times usually involved the discovery of a mistaken diagnosis – celebrated his return to the community by sacrifice; for which he needed a priest.

Leprosy As A Sign

The tradition is still well-known in Judaism that leprosy was a disease with sign-value. Rabbis pointed to the similarity between the Jewish terms for leprosy and for scandal-mongering, implying that the onset of the disease might be a punishment for the sin. So quite apart from hygienic considerations – Hansen's Disease is not actually very easy to catch – the leper was sequestered from the community by ritual law, the law that declares someone to be ritually unclean. The reasoning was that contact with the unclean could do no good to the powerless toucher or to the unhelpable touched. Jesus is free to disobey this law because its premises are not true: he can help, and does.

I Have Acknowledged My Sins

One of the hallmarks of Catholics was once that they regularly "showed themselves to the priest" in the Sacrament of Penance. Today I know that very many Catholics have ceased this salutary practice, and that to all intents and purposes have lost one of the Sacraments. If the Bishop announced that there would be no more celebrations of the Eucharist for the foreseeable future, I guess there would be a voice or two raised to hint a fault. But the sacrament of forgiveness has been allowed quietly to disappear from most people's lives. If we believed that Jesus had instituted this sacrament, we would not be so

ready to abandon it. I sympathise with those who find it difficult to celebrate in the form the Vatican enjoins: the celebration of communal forgiveness was hugely popular when it happened in the seventies in our Diocese: but the then Bishop was subsequently summoned to Rome and told in no uncertain terms that it should cease, and that the habitual mode of celebrating forgiveness must be a private confession to the priest. This is not a ruling which people have found easy to accept, and it seems awful that they would rather forfeit the sacrament than obey it. After all, it is as representative of the community whose head is Christ that the priest hears confessions and gives God's forgiveness. If this has become obscured and is not understood, we are at risk of standing between Jesus and the people he said he had come to call – sinners to repentance.

Today's Gospel

Perhaps the eloquence of today's Gospel can come to our help. Jesus touches the leper, and draws from him the awful disease. But Jesus himself inherits its consequence: *he could not longer go openly into any town, but had to stay outside in places where nobody lived. Even so people from all around would come to him.* He gathered repentant sinners. We should beware of separating ourselves from this community of repentance, by refusing to acknowledge our sin; if this is taken to its logical conclusion, we might find ourselves standing beside the self-righteous, who cannot bring themselves to ask for pardon, lest they have to face their need for it.

If Priests Are At Fault

I would acknowledge here and now that my fellow-priests have often not helped the meaning of the Sacrament of Forgiveness to appear. Some have been harsh and unforgiving in their response, thus obscuring God's wonderful generosity with all-too-human meanness; some have been insensitive, and made people squirm and blush as they are forced to spell out their sins and relive their shame. I can only promise to do what I can to lighten the load of anyone who comes, and to remember that God's pardon costs me nothing to give. *Fr Philip*