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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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SICKBEDS

Francis of Assisi had a long association with lepers, beginning with his conversion or perhaps even before. In his Testament he writes: "The Lord granted to me, Brother Francis, to do penance in this way. When I was in sin, the sight of lepers was very bitter to me. And the Lord himself led me into their midst and I practiced mercy with them. And, when I left them, that which had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And after this, I stayed a little while and then left the world." So powerful was his experience with lepers that Francis demanded that all his friars have, as much as possible, the very same experience. All novices had to work at the care of lepers; in their travels, the friars frequently stayed at the places where lepers lived and were tended; and in his first written rule, Francis said that the friars could beg alms not only for themselves, but also for the assistance of lepers.

The Little Flowers, chapter 25, tells how one day Francis was resting at a place not far from a hospital where some of his friars were serving the lepers and other sick people. There was one patient there, a leper, who was so impatient, haughty and unbearable that the friars were convinced, as was in fact the case, that he was possessed by a demon. They tried to care for him, but he cursed them and blasphemed, using such vile and obscene language about Jesus and Mary that after a while no one could or would tend to him. The harder the friars tried to help him and bear his insults with patience, the more abusive he got, until finally they decided just to leave him be. They did not, however, want to take this course of action without first checking with

Francis, and so word was sent to him at his nearby hermitage.

As soon as he heard this, Francis went himself to the hospital, approached the sick man, and gave him his customary greeting, "May God give you peace, beloved brother." The leper was in no mood for courtesy, and shot back, "And what peace can I expect from God, who has taken from me peace and every other good, and has turned me into a rotting, stinking mass?" He was not exaggerating: in the 13th century, a person in the advanced stages of the disease looked and smelled more like a decaying corpse than a whole man. Francis urged him to have patience, adding that the diseases of the body which God gives us in this world are really for the good of our souls and can be a source of great merit if borne with patience. And how can I have patience, the leper snapped, when this sickness tortures me day and night without let up, and not only that, but your damned friars are adding to my pains by not treating me as they should.

At this point Francis did the most practical thing possible – he left the man by himself, and went off to pray for him for a while. Returning to the sickbed, he said, "My son, since you are not happy with the others, I will take care of you personally."

"Fine," said the sick man, "but what can you do for me more than the others?"

"I will do whatever you want."

"What I want," retorted the leper, "is that you bathe me from head to foot. I stink so bad that I cannot stand myself."

At once Francis had water heated, into which he mixed sweet-smelling herbs. He undressed

the leper and began to wash him with his own hands, while one of the friars poured the water. And by divine grace, wherever Francis touched the sick and smelly flesh, the disease disappeared. By the end of the bath, the man was completely cured. The physical cure, the author reports, was followed by a spiritual one, for the man started to feel great contrition for his sins, and began to cry most bitterly over them. In a loud voice he said, "Woe is me! I am worthy of the fires of Hell for the insults and injuries I did to the friars who tried to help me, and for my anger and blasphemies against God!" He prayed for God's mercy, and sought out a priest, to whom he made a full and complete confession. Francis gave all glory to God for the cure, both the bodily and the spiritual, and because of his humility he immediately left the area.

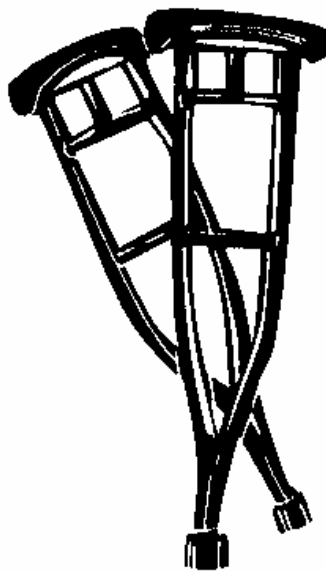
The story ends with the man dying two weeks later of some other illness. As his soul heads for heaven through the air, he stops off to appear to Francis, to bless him and to console him with a prophecy of the good that will yet be done by his efforts and those of his friars. It all ends happily and to the praise of God, as so many of the stories in *The Little Flowers* do.

Very different, indeed, is the ending of the story of the cure of a paralyzed man by Jesus in the fifth chapter of John's gospel. As that story opens, Jesus happens upon a man whose bed of pain is scarcely less pitiable than that of Francis' leper. For thirty-eight years he had been paralyzed, and for all that time he had lain near the pool of Bethesda, whose waters, when stirred, would cure the first person who went down into them. John's style is very different from that of the author of *The Little Flowers*. The medieval writer gives us a super-abundance of detail, and takes us into the minds of the characters, telling us exactly how each felt and what each thought. John is much more terse,

giving us the bare bones of the narrative and forcing us to struggle to see the rest.

John tells us that as soon as Jesus saw the paralytic, he knew how long he had been sick. Jesus asks him a simple, straightforward question, one we might think was way too obvious to need asking: "Do you want to be healed?" A silly question, we think to ourselves, wouldn't anyone in that position want to be cured? And so the answer that comes from the sick man startles us, for it is not a simple and eager "Yes" or "Of course!" but the much longer and seemingly off the point, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled, and while I am going another steps down before me."

John does not hammer home to us the mind behind such words, as the writer of *The Little Flowers* surely would have done, but the very words suggest a soul that has thoroughly settled into both his sickbed and his resentments. Not as prone to violence and abuse as Francis' leper, he nevertheless reveals himself as possessed of a nature much more cramped and unyielding. The leper rages against his illness, by which we know that despite his coarseness he would welcome a change and is open to it. When Francis asks him what he wants him to do for him, he has an immediate answer, something that he wants and that is in Francis' gift. The paralytic, in contrast, cannot respond affirmatively to Jesus' much more direct question – Do you want to be healed? – but instead launches into a verbal attack on those who have not helped him, and evades the query of the one who can cure. We begin to suspect that his answer is not just a statement of fact, but a justification for, and a defense of, his remaining in his present condition. It is not his fault, it is their fault. He is the victim here, and although Jesus offers him word of a cure, it seems he would be much happier with a word of sympathy or commiseration. His sickbed has become his life, his command cen-



ter from which he orders and dispatches his armies of resentments against the healthy and the inattentive. To us, it may not sound like much of a life, but he has embraced it as his own and will more eagerly justify remaining in it than seize upon a hope of changing it. His sickbed has become his identity, his zone of comfort. Seething with resentment and hostility, he sees hope as an enemy and the promise of healing as a hostile act. He is perhaps easier to be around than the stinking, insult hurling, blasphemy speaking leper, but his real, interior situation is much uglier, more offensive and more desperate.

If we have any doubts about this, they are dispelled by the aftermath of the cure. Jesus will not brook the paralytic's inertia, but steps forward and cures him, ordering him to take up his sickbed and walk. The former paralytic does as he is told, picks up his bed and walks away. No word of thanks to Jesus nor praise of God escapes his lips. He is not even curious enough to ask the name of his benefactor, the which suggests to us that he does not, in fact, see Jesus as a benefactor. In curing him, Jesus has taken away his reason for hating others and has turned him out of his sickbed, the only life he has known for thirty-eight years and the life to which he has grown accustomed. His body is cured but his heart is still all wrong, still consumed with the old habits of dark resentment.

Jesus knows this, and so seeks him out to give him a salutary warning: "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you." The man accepts these words with no more grace than he had earlier accepted the cure. He goes to the Jewish leaders, who are already beginning to oppose Jesus, and informs them of the one who had cured him on the sabbath and who had ordered him to carry his bed on the sabbath. His resentment, previously focused on those who were inattentive to him and his needs, has now found Jesus, his healer, as its new target. He may be walking about after thirty-eight years of paralysis, but on the inside he has not changed a bit. The body can now move, but the heart is still frozen.

How much different was the man Francis had to deal with! Like the paralytic, his cure brought

him more sorrow than rejoicing, but it was the kind of sorrow that is more appropriately named "compunction" or "contrition." He is able to look back upon his anger and rage, his abuse of others, his despair and his contempt for God, and he knows how sinful it all was, how much more corrosive and corrupting it was than the leprosy that had been rotting his living flesh. His sorrow is not the resentment that hardens one against all good, but the sorrow that leads to true repentance and renewal. He avails himself of the sacraments of the Church, and when he is struck down two weeks later and takes to another bed, this time a deathbed and not a sickbed, he is not enraged that his new found health has lasted only a brief time, but he is at peace, trusting in the Father's love and goodness, and sure that he is being gathered into the kingdom of heaven. His dissolution is not a disappointment but a passover in joy, a joy which he pauses to share with Francis as he races to his merciful judgment.

Times have changed, and the novices in the order founded by Francis no longer pass the year in caring for the lepers and the sick. Still, I have put in a bit of time in both hospitals and nursing homes, enough time to know that not all sickbeds are identical, in spite of the sameness of the institutional furniture. Indeed, since every sickbed contains a unique life with its own proper history, no two are even that much alike. And yet there is a kind of a divide, a separation into two wards, with the beds gathered into each looking a lot more like one another than they resemble anything in the other ward. It is not a division based on kind of illness or the nature of one's medical condition; two patients with the exact same cancer could well find themselves in the two different wards I have in mind. In the first ward are those like Francis' leper, eager for more than what they have and so open to hope and holiness. In the second are those like Jesus' paralytic, sullen and hostile, settled into what they have and mistrusting of any suggestion that more is available and on offer. At the end, this is the only division that matters.

—*Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.*

