

Pilgrimage Reflection

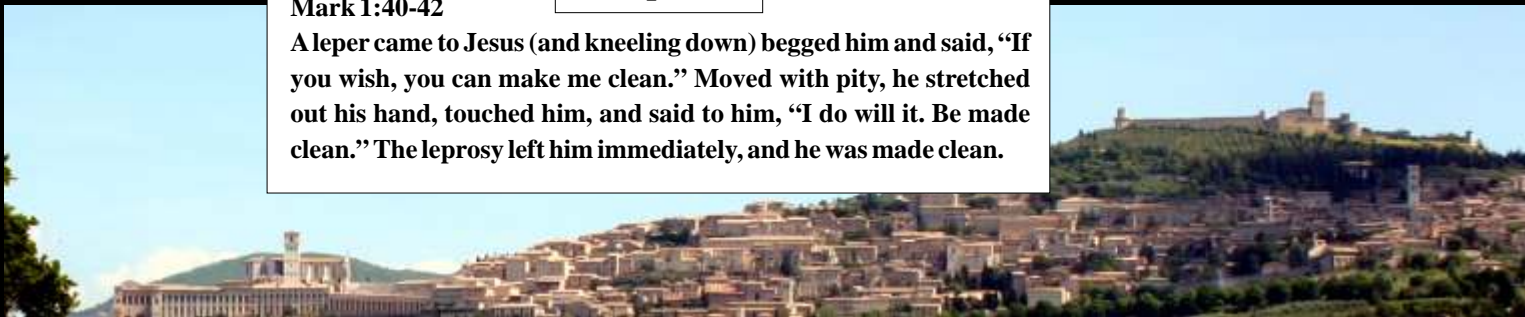
Francis' Ministry to Lepers

Francis grew up in a world that was clearly marked by division. Aristocrats and workers. Rich and poor. Supporters of the Papal State and supporters of the Empire. And, sadly, clean and unclean. The lowest rung of society belonged to the lepers, those whose disease and deformity so scared others that they were cast outside the protective walls of the city to fend for themselves. To be declared a leper was essentially a declaration of death. The curse of leprosy did not fall lightly on Francis. He was taught to fear lepers and to vigilantly avoid all occasions of contact with them. But as his conversion experiences took deeper root, he began to regard himself and others differently. Isn't everyone a child of God? Doesn't God love all equally? Francis' new outlook compelled him to minister to the lepers in the valley below Assisi. It is at the chapels of San Rufino d' Arce and La Maddalena, the only remnants of former leper colonies, that pilgrims, even today, continue to spiritually encounter the loving touch of Francis and Clare.

Mark 1:40-42

A leper came to Jesus (and kneeling down) 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.

Scripture



Early Writings

From *The Legend of the Three Companions*

One day [Francis] was riding his horse near Assisi, when he met a leper. And, even though he usually shuddered at lepers, he made himself dismount, and gave him a coin, kissing his hand as he did so. After he accepted a kiss of peace from him, Francis remounted and continued on his way. He then began to consider himself less and less, until, by God's grace, he came to complete victory over himself. After a few days, he moved to a hospice of lepers, taking with him a large sum of money. Calling them all together, as he kissed the hand of each, he gave them alms. . . . With the help of God's grace, he became such a servant and friend of the lepers, that, as he testified in his *Testament*, he stayed among them and served them with humility.

Regis Armstrong, Wayne Hellmann and William Short, eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, The Founder*, Vol. II (New York: New City Press, 2000), 74.

Prayer

Gracious God, you helped Francis overcome his fear of lepers and inspired him to lovingly embrace people he once set apart as different, unclean, and unworthy of respect.

Give us the wisdom to recognize the lepers in our own lives. Challenge us with opportunities to step across the perceived boundaries that separate us from those we fear or distrust.

And give us, please, the courage to open our arms and hearts to all those you ask us to call brothers and sisters.