



“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God
and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows
in their affliction” - James 1:27

Oct 2014: Reflection - James 1:27-2:10,14-17

There is a beautiful story from the life of St. Francis that merits our reflection. St Francis was riding on horseback when he encountered a leper. His immediate reaction was one of horror and disgust. But as he paused and reflected on his commitment to the love of Christ, he realized that he had to overcome the repulsion and fear that distanced him from his brother. He dismounted his horse and drew near to the man. Not only did he give the leper a coin, but also a kiss.

When we compare the nations of the world today we notice incredible disparities in living conditions and opportunities. But such disparities are also found within our very own cities. Somehow, the poor and the homeless tend to be moved out of the educated and wealthy parts of towns and into areas that we call slums, shantytowns, ghettos, etc. In many neighbourhoods, even if a homeless person was just sleeping, he would be driven out either by the neighbours or by the police. Poorer families are pressured to move out of prospering areas so that their

presence does not discourage affluent persons from moving in. Some areas even have anti-begging laws making it impossible for the poor to live there. The net result is that as a society we tend to give preferential treatment to the rich and exclude and ignore the poor; we “say to the poor man, ‘Stand there,’” while to the rich man we say “Have a seat here, please” (Jas 2:3). By building walls between ourselves and the “unacceptable” and “substandard” members of society, we falsely make our own lives more convenient and less burdensome. In many places, an average well-to-do person does not even have to see such people, much less interact with them or show compassion. In other places, it is natural to act as though they are invisible as we walk past them. Meanwhile, the poor in many neighborhoods are left without proper infrastructure, clean air, education, opportunities to encounter beauty (gardens, fountains, etc.), or even good role models and mentors. Sitting high on the horse of our social class and busy riding along with our own errands and ambitions, how easy it is to not see the lepers!

These invisible brothers and sisters could be within a few short miles of where we live and work. The first step is to pause from our routines and reflect. Where are my blind spots? Who are the poor around me? What walls have been built to keep them away? And then, what does the love of Christ urge me to do? St. James answers this question for us with an emphatic exhortation, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction...” We must break through the all-too-convenient walls of division. We must *visit* them, visit them *in their affliction*. Indeed, faith requires action. This is what we see in the story of St. Francis. After he paused and recalled his resolution to be a true servant of Christ, his faith compelled him to action. He dismounted his horse and visited the leper in his affliction. For us too, it is not enough to simply wait and hope that someday a disadvantaged person will come our way. Instead, we must proactively seek out the poor around us and visit them in their affliction.

Coming down from his horse, St. Francis gave the man not only a coin but also a kiss. In a pontificate distinctly inspired by and named after St. Francis, our Holy Father asks, “Tell me, when you give alms do you look into the eyes of the man or woman to whom you give alms? . . . And when you give alms, do you touch the hand of the one to whom you give alms, or do you toss the coin?” The Option for the Poor is not just about the distribution of food and money; it is not just about efficiency. Rather, the love of Christ must impel us to come close to the affliction of our brother, to love him and from that love provide for his needs.

Finally, let us hold before us the example of Christ. When he saw us in the misery of our sin, he did not toss a coin to us from heaven. Rather, he visited our lowly world; he came to meet us in our affliction. Indeed, he “dismounted” from the heights of divine glory in order to become a human being like us. He did not wait for us to come to him, but he came to us while we were still sinners - he broke through the walls of sin that divided us. In his public ministry, he gave us teachings, healings, miracles, and he left us with a perfect example to follow. But his visit reached its culmination only in the kiss of the Cross, for “greater love has no man than to lay down his life for his friends”. Through the Cross, Christ has embraced us along with all of our afflictions. “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Is 53:4). And yet, by the same embrace, he has also lifted us up to share in his own divine life. By relying on his grace, let us also move closer to the afflictions and suffering of the poor and touch them with our hands and embrace them in our hearts.