

YEAR OF FAITH 2012 – 2013

28th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME | October 12-13, 2013

In today's Gospel we hear about the miraculous healing of ten people from the horrible affliction of leprosy. Only one returned to express his gratitude to the Lord for the gift of restoration to health. This man was a Samaritan – an outcast in the eyes of the Chosen People of Almighty God. What caused him to return and to give thanks? Was the good formation that he received in his home and community and which was reinforced through a pattern of practice of the virtue of gratitude the driving force in his return to give thanks? Was there another power at work in the encounter following the healing event? In the course of the history of salvation there have been remarkable accounts of the transformation which has occurred in the lives of people exposed to the presence of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. From the time of the Apostles to Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, many who have been exposed by family and community to good example and solid formation, who have developed proper habits, attitudes and dispositions and who have been the recipients of the grace of Almighty God have experienced a remarkable transformation – a transformation which has empowered them to imitate Christ. The Roman Catholic Church is where the great opportunities for receiving this grace exist.

Ten people are healed – one returns to give thanks to the healer. The grateful man is a foreigner – an outcast. What moved this person to return to the healer in thanksgiving? We can only speculate. Perhaps it was a result of the good training he received as he grew up under the supervision of his mother and father. Given the example of respectful gratitude by his parents and formed in the practice of giving thanks to those who share a kindness of any sort; the Samaritan developed the character to say thank-you to Jesus—the healer of today's Gospel. Psychologists and some moral theologians define character as simply the sum-total of habituated behavior. The more you practice an act the more expert you become in accomplishing a specific task. Thus the truth of the old saying: "practice makes perfect."

Another name for character – one which is often used in the context of the community of faith – the Church – is virtue. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church human virtues are "...firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions and guide our conduct according to reason and faith..." (CCC 1804). Good character – virtue – is the grand result of behavioral traits developed within family and community. Such traits result in the enhancement of good within society. The consistent practice of good deeds leads a person to the joys of a life characterized by the blessings of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. The person of good character – the virtuous person – is immersed in the love of God and radiates that love in every aspect of his or her life (CCC 1804).

Certainly, the formation the healed Samaritan received through the loving kindness of his parents and other members of his community was integral to his development of the virtue of gratitude as it is so powerfully proclaimed in today's Gospel. However, something more was present in the life of that leper. The transforming grace of God was operative in his encounter with Jesus, the Christ. Formed in proper etiquette within the context of family and community, the life of the Samaritan was profoundly enhanced through his experience with the living-God – with Jesus Christ. Yes, the man was healed of

the horror of leprosy but we can only imagine what other graces were bestowed upon him. A brief review of Sacred Scripture reminds us of the transformation – the renewal and revitalization – that accompanies a person’s experience of the Risen Lord. In the Gospel according to St. John we read about the impact of the presence of Christ upon the Apostles on the first Easter Sunday. Men hidden away in fear are turned into people filled with joy and profound peace (Jn 20: 19-23). In the Acts of the Apostles we read of the zealot, Saul of Tarsus, encountering the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. This experience of the Risen Lord brought about his transformation from a “murderous” persecutor of those “who call upon the name of the Lord” (Acts 9: 1-19), to the most zealous of Apostles – indeed the one who, because of his tireless outreach to people in diverse regions of Asia Minor and Europe, is honored with the title: “The Apostle to the Gentiles.”

Throughout the history of the Church, men and women with various degrees of talents have been touched by the grace of Almighty God and have accomplish great things – deeds which far exceed what they, reliant solely upon their own talents, would have been able to accomplish. Consider the example of two people who ministered within the memory of many people who are alive today. St. Maximilian Kolbe and Blessed Teresa of Calcutta were people formed within Christian families and communities and nurtured in the Church through their encounter with the Risen Lord in the Sacraments and the prayer life of the Body of Christ. Accounts of the Life of St. Maximilian indicate that he was a brilliant student and teacher. However, like so many of us, he had his weaknesses. He was known to be irascible – a fancy word which means that he bore the cross of a fiery temper. At times, the degree of his displeasure with an unprepared student or an inconsiderate confrere became acutely apparent. Yet, with the grace of Almighty God, complimentary to his many talents, St. Maximilian was able to manifest the greatest virtue – the theological virtue of love. When he stepped forward to take the place of a fellow prisoner who was selected for execution in Auschwitz, the transforming presence of the Lord Jesus shown forth from Fr. Maximilian and grace and virtue combined to proclaim the victory of goodness and light in the midst of profound darkness.

The recent biography of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta reveals the many great accomplishments as well as the challenges of one of the most remarkable persons of the twentieth century. Being the icon of the love, compassion and service of the Lord, Jesus Christ, in her ministry to the poorest of the poor on the streets of Calcutta and in poverty stricken areas throughout the world (including the United States) she continues to be an inspiration – the great missionary of charity. However, life for Mother Teresa was difficult. Not only were there material deprivations, which she readily accepted, but the moments of doubt and frustration which accompanied the ministry of this saintly servant of God were powerful and only surmounted by the grace of the Lord which transformed her into a person in the image of Christ, the Suffering Servant.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1810) speaks of this integration of human virtue (character) and God’s grace as follows: Human virtues acquired by education, by deliberate acts and by perseverance ever-renewed in repeated efforts are purified and elevated by divine grace. With God’s help, they forge character and give facility in the practice of the good. The virtuous man is happy to practice them.

The Body of Christ – the Church – and all its members are called to sustain an environment where good character is formed – where men and women as well as our youth are able to learn what is right and just and to engage in conduct which is proper and consistent with the challenge presented in the Gospel of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. But the Church must be much more than the tool to inculcate politically correct behavior among its members. It must be the dwelling place – the home – of the Spirit of God. It must be, in the sentiments of the late Prof. James E. Loder (Mary D. Synnott Chair of the Philosophy of Christian Education and Chair of the Department of Practical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary), the place where “...The Holy Spirit, intimately connected to the person and work of Christ, takes up and extends the work begun in the incarnation by enfleshing the presence of Christ, thus transforming human life...” (See: Kovacs, Kenneth E., *The Relational Theology of James E. Loder: Encounter and Conviction*, Practical Theology, vol. 2, New York, 2011). The great mission of the Church must be the proclamation of the Gospel and the presentation of the opportunity for people to experience the transforming presence of God and, in so doing, to exceed the boundaries of human wisdom as one is empowered by grace.

Character, Virtue and Grace are wonderful concepts for people to ponder. However, a great question should be posed by every member of the Church as they consider their call to perfection – the call to put on Christ and to be perfect as Christ is perfect in the Father. The question: What do Character, Virtue and Grace have to do with my quest to be Christ-like in all I think, say and do?

First, all in the Church are to develop habits of mind and body which lead them, like the Samaritan of today's Gospel, to be courteous, to express gratitude for kindnesses rendered, to be attentive to the needs and aspirations of others, and to be civil in their attitude, disposition and conduct toward their brothers and sisters. The virtues of hospitality and respect should radiate from all members of the Church. It is incumbent upon parents and those institutions of society such as faith communities and educational institutions to form the youth and to support everyone in the development and exercise of these virtues. Roman Catholics must constantly strive to be people of good character – to be virtuous. However, the formation of character is only one part of the responsibility of the people of faith. Appreciation for and acceptance of the transforming grace of Almighty God must be the primary focus of the Church. Virtue devoid of the gifts of God (grace) cannot bring a person to fullness of life and to the perfection manifest in the life of Christ. Blessed John Paul II, in the Declaration entitled *Dominus Iesus* (June 16, 2000), addressed the unique opportunities within the Roman Catholic Church by which the grace of God is made available to people for their ongoing conversion and fortification on their pilgrimage as disciples of the Lord. As with the Apostles after their encounter with the Risen Lord, as with Maximilian Kolbe and Teresa of Calcutta consequent to their reception of the Lord through Word, Sacrament and Fellowship, the opportunity for transformation can only be obtained as a person receives and responds to the grace of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

The ultimate fate of the leper of today's Gospel is not recorded in Sacred Scripture. However, the fate of those who have been formed in the goodness of the community of faith and who have received the grace of God has been, and continues to be, a source of inspiration for the members of the Roman Catholic Church. Character – Virtue – enhanced through the grace of God brings a person to fullness of life!

The mission of the Church – the Body of Christ is to proclaim the Gospel and to provide people with the opportunity to be formed in good habits, attitudes and dispositions. The family and the community of faith are best suited to provide this training/formation. However, the training which can be accomplished by family and community can only go so far. The divine presence – the presence of the Risen Lord is what brings about transformation and what leads a person to perfection. The opportunities for grace must be the principal concern and central thrust for the Church. Its mission – our mission – must be the sharing of all good gifts, especially the divine gifts (grace) with all. The development of Character/Virtue enhanced by the grace of almighty God redounds to a person's growth in the direction of perfection – the imitation of Christ.

The body of Christ in its many wonderful facets must constantly be in the process of discerning how best to form its members in goodness and afford all the opportunity to experience the transforming presence of the Risen Lord!

SAMPLE