

Francis' Ministry to the Marginalized



Francis lived in a world that was marked by very clear divisions. 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 avoid all occasions of contact with one of them. But as his conversion experiences took deeper root, he began to regard himself and others differently. Isn't everyone a child of God? Francis'

new outlook compelled him to minister to the lepers in the valley below Assisi. And it is at the chapels of San Rufino d'Arce and La Maddalena, remnants of former leper colonies, that pilgrims continue to encounter the loving touch of Francis and Clare. ✚



Scripture

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.



Early Writings

From *The Legends 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.... 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
& 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 unclean and unworthy. Give me the wisdom to recognize the lepers in my life. Challenge me with opportunities to step across the boundaries that separate me from those I fear or distrust. And give me the courage to open my arms and heart to all those you ask me to call brothers and sisters.

Reflection Questions

- Who are the lepers in my life?
- How is God calling me to embrace them differently?