

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Year B: Lev 13:1-2, 44-46; Ps 32; 1Cor 10:31—11:1; Mk 1:40-45
February 14, 2021
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“If you wish, you can make me clean.” These are the words of faith spoken to Christ by the poor man with leprosy in the Gospel passage for this Sunday’s Mass. Jesus said to him, *“I do will it. Be made clean.”* And the leper was immediately and miraculously cured. It’s an example of a time that God immediately granted a request from someone who was desperately in need.

But, perhaps the first question that comes to mind for many after hearing this Gospel passage is, “Why does God grant some prayer requests and not others?” Some who hear of this miracle in the Gospel might immediately think of all the things they have asked for from God but have *not* received – perhaps certain requests they made in faith for others in need, but which were not granted. And it can even happen that some might feel a bit of envy of the poor man with leprosy who was miraculously cured by Christ. Why did Christ will to grant *his* request, but not so many others that are made of Him? Certainly, all of us have begged God for things that have not been granted. So, why does He sometimes *not* desire to grant our requests? Why is it sometimes *not* His will to heal the sick who cry out to Him?

This question raises the whole issue of God’s mysterious will – something that we can never fully understand in this life. And learning to accept that God still loves us even though He might not desire to grant our requests is one of the most difficult lessons of the Christian life. If something we ask for in prayer is not granted, we can only wonder why. But we should try to do so religiously and reverently, with faith and respect for God’s majesty and His divine providence. And that means we should try to imagine what *good reasons* God has for not granting our requests.

In the Gospel, we are told that Jesus was *“moved with pity”* and compassion for the poor man with leprosy, and so reached out to heal him. Jesus knew how miserable the man’s life was. As we heard in the first reading from the Book of Leviticus, those with leprosy in the ancient world were outcasts in a primitive form of quarantine, because the disease was so contagious and so dangerous and there was no cure. This meant that lepers were isolated from their families and left to die alone, without any comforts or consolations. It was a miserable existence, and Jesus was moved with compassion by the poor man’s plea for help.

But, when we ask why Jesus healed this man, but not others who cry to Him, we should consider what *other* reasons Jesus may have had in mind. We know that Christ was always more concerned about the spiritual healing He came to bring than about physical healings. He makes that clear throughout the Gospel (cf. Mk 2:5; Mt 10:28). And, because Jesus is divine, He was able to see and know the future. So, perhaps He saw how a physical healing would help the poor man with leprosy come to eternal life, how a physical healing would assist his conversion and bring him ultimately to salvation.

In the same way, when we ask why God chooses *not* to grant some of our requests, we should consider what good reasons He has in mind. For example, perhaps God denies our requests because He sees what would happen to us if He *did* grant them. Because God can see the future, perhaps He sees how earthly prosperity and comfort might distract us from relying on Him, how receiving some earthly benefit might make us start to live our lives only for ourselves, or how we might become inflated with pride and forget to turn to Him for guidance and support. It's possible that God does not grant some of our requests in order to increase our reliance on Him. Jesus said, "*I am the vine, you are the branches. ... [W]ithout me you can do nothing*" (Jn 15:5).

Our faith tells us that God always hears our prayers and gives us what is good for our salvation. So, when we make a request of God, we should trust in *His* calculation, not ours, of what is best for our salvation. God sees better than we do what is good for our souls. He sees the long-term benefit for our souls, and He grants what is good for us in the long-run. God "plays the long game" when He decides whether to grant our requests.

And, lastly, it can happen that, with the passage of time, we come to realize why it was best for us *not* to receive what we asked for in prayer. Sometimes we come to see why God's decision not to grant our prayer was best for us, and we end up thanking God for unanswered prayers – like Garth Brooks. (It's a great song. You should listen to it, when you have some time. I think you'll like it.)

We might never know for certain, in this life, why God chooses to grant some prayer requests and not others. We can only wonder in faith at His possible reasons. But, we should do so religiously and reverently, trusting that God has *good* reasons, because He loves us and He knows what will best bring us to live with Him forever in Heaven.