

## Close Encounters with a Modern Day Leper

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I had just returned home to St. Anthony Rectory in Long Beach, California, when the doorbell rang. I was alone in the house because of the July Fourth holiday. I opened the door to find a grimy looking man in his mid-50s. He was thin, unshaven, watery-eyed, and his clothes were baggy and soiled. He stood staring at me, unsteady on his feet. He reeked of alcohol.

“What can I do for you, sir?” I asked, breaking the silence.

Hesitantly, he thrust into my hand a piece of torn wrapping paper on which he had written: “I have just had my tongue amputated because of cancer. I am terribly distressed. I don't really know my God and I wonder if you could teach me about the Lord and the Catholic Church. I need help.”

His note certainly got my attention, “but I realized he was in no condition for catechism just at that time. “Come on in, and I'll give you one of my cards.”

“If you ever need me,” I wrote on the back, “get this card to me and I will find you.” Then, caught up in my parochial ministry, I soon forgot the incident. A few months later, a nurse came to St. Anthony Rectory and presented me with the card I had given the man that day. It was now soiled, bent, and torn. On the back, however, was a note. “Father,” he had written, “I need you now! I am a patient in Harriman Jones Clinic on the second floor.” He had also written his name and room number.

A promise kept

Immediately, I drove to Harriman Jones and was escorted to his room by a nurse, but before we entered, she stopped. “Can you,” she asked, “handle cancer that is very disfiguring?”

“What do you mean?” I replied.

“In all my years of taking care of cancer patients,” she responded, “this man's cancer is the most repulsive that I can ever recall.”

As she pushed open the door, a terrible odor came rushing out of the room. Seated in an armchair facing the window was the most frighteningly deformed person I had ever observed. It was the man who had appeared at the rectory door that Fourth of July evening. The cancer had been so cruel. His head had doubled in size. One ear was gone, as was his right eye. The top right side of his head had a potato like growth. His lower lip and jaw were gone.

As I looked, I became rather dizzy. “Oh my God,” I blurted, “Will you help me? I can hardly bear looking at you.”

The man gazed at me with his one functioning eye and nodded. I took a deep breath and approached him. With a pad and pencil he wrote, "Will you teach me? I want to be a Catholic." God has left him with a good eye and a good ear, I realized then. He can see, listen, and write. Therefore, I can certainly teach him about the truths of the Catholic faith.

As I said good-bye, I assured him I would teach him. "I'll be back," I said. On my way out, I checked at the nurses' desk about his condition. They said he could live for a number of weeks. Still, I asked them to alert me promptly of any change.

We began brief but formal lessons two or three times a week. And what a student he was! He wanted answers, even challenged me on certain points of faith. Within a matter of a few visits, I no longer saw before me a hideous man. Instead, I saw a beautiful human being. I actually began to look forward to our visits. Indeed, he'd become a tremendous source of grace for me as well as an enormous affirmation of my priesthood.

His progress was great. But one afternoon, I came at our regular meeting time only to discover the blinds drawn and the lights out. Against the sunlit window, I saw the silhouette of my friend standing with his big heavy head resting on the sill, arms hanging at this side. It was the sight of utter depression and hopelessness.

I knew no words could help, so I turned and walked out. My friend was unaware that I'd been there. But the Holy Spirit works in strange ways. For some reason, the thought came to me, "What he needs is a crucifix." I got in my car and drove to a nearby religious goods store. There, I found a beautiful, small wooden crucifix. I purchased it and drove back to the hospital.

Upon returning to his room, I found my friend in the exact position as before. This time, though, I turned on the lights and opened the blinds. I took him in my arms and sat him in his chair. Still, he looked at me in absolute despondency. I was filled with overwhelming compassion to see him suffering so terribly, but I felt helpless. So I took the crucifix out of my coat pocket and placed it in his hands.

He looked at the crucified Christ intently with his one eye. Suddenly, a tear formed, rolled down his cheek, and fell off his upper lip. His face seemed to light up. Then, taking his pad and pencil in hand, he wrote, "I understand. I understand!"

Shortly after, I received him into the church. Sustained by the sacraments, he eagerly awaited his personal meeting with Christ and though he was physically unable to receive the Eucharist, he made many spiritual communions. I could see the change: He was now at peace.

As expected, I received a phone call from Harriman Jones Clinic early one morning informing me of his passing. I went to the hospital and blessed his body and prayed

ver him. At last, his journey was over.

Later, it dawned on me what a gift I'd received. Truly, this man had an indelible mark on my priesthood-it is a joy for me to share this simple little story with you. But, more important, it is consoling to know that Christ used me a little bit in that beautiful conversion.

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