

St. Francis of Assisi once wrote: “What was once bitter to me became sweetness.” He wasn’t referring to a newfound love of animals, the environment, peace, or the sweetness he found in prayer. These are the words St. Francis of Assisi used to describe another conversion at the center of his unfolding Gospel life—namely, his encounter with the leper near his hometown.

Francis was already following Christ and yet, the soon-to-be saint still struggled to accept, love, and see God in those most marginalized members of society. Lepers were the “throwaways” in the community and Francis, though an idealist, accepted this type of thinking, feeling, and acting without question, even though it was fundamentally contrary to the Gospel.

Then one day he had an encounter that would change him forever and forever change the trajectory of his Gospel movement. He encountered a leper, the “other,” the person he couldn’t stand to be around, the one he even found repulsive. Instead of accepting his own old and bitter patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting toward “those people,” he came to know the leper’s wounds. Through this encounter, Francis surrendered to the

transformative mercy of God and experienced a powerful and life-altering conversion.

In life, all of us are at times like the leper and like the person showing mercy to a leper. We are all inter-connected, and like Saint Francis, we are invited to encounter the “lepers” if you will in our society, and also remember that our conversion is, like his, an ongoing process.

Alan Livingston, an author who today lives in Las Vegas, was, shortly after hurricane Katrina hit, living in Biloxi, Mississippi, came to realize this one afternoon when he had an encounter that changed his life.

He writes that on that afternoon, springing from the driver’s door of the old pickup he had parked, a man in his 20’s trotted across the street towards him. “How you doin?” he said. He was shirtless and tanned, clad in shorts and work boots, with his hair cut in a mohawk. There were several other guys with him.

“Great,” Alan said unenthusiastically, despite thinking “what the heck do you want?”

Moments earlier, blaring music announced the slow rolling truck coming around the bend at the wrong time to suit Alan. Yes, he says, he judged them, with no reasons beyond his state of mind, their bad timing, and his 50-year old bias against them. That day, at that moment, these strangers were the last thing he wanted to deal with.

Their neighborhood was on a peninsula jutting into the Back Bay of Biloxi. They didn't fare well when Hurricane Katrina brought 30 feet of water across it. Since moving back into their lot to live in a tent a couple of weeks after the storm, they had watch the tourists roll through, gawking at the debris strewn where upscale homes stood no more. They would smile, wave, say "thanks" for their good wishes, and then get back to work trying to find anything salvageable.

That afternoon, as Alan dug through the rubble, his mind was on old family photographs. A half-hour before the truck pulled up, he recalled one photo in particular. Its disappearance deflated him, occupied his mind, and disrupted his progress. It was a single snapshot on Disneyland's Main Street in 1984, his beaming mother standing arm-in-arm and cheek-to-

cheek with Mickey Mouse. Maybe the park employee portraying Mickey struck that pose a hundred times each day, but the pure joy on his mom's face showed the once-in-a-lifetime thrill it gave her. She died just two years after the photo was taken.

Remembering that lost image brought a rush of memories of other pictures he'd never see again. He was standing there engaged in his self-pity and reflection when the man in the Mohawk walked up to Alan, extending his hand for a shake.

"Hello, sir, my name is John," he said. Alan exchanged his firm grip as he stared directly into his eyes.

Alan didn't introduce himself in return. Coldly, he asked "what do you need, John?"

"Well, we were just driving around looking for a way to help and saw you out here working. We're here to work for you," he said.

Seemingly every day, Alan reflected, someone stopped by with requests ranging from taking their debris to sell as salvage to asking boldly for money. While there were literally hundreds of legitimate people who helped, those unofficial offers made Alan grow suspicious.

“No thanks, I’m good” Alan said as he kept sweeping the section he’d been working, hoping John would just go away.

“You sure?” John said. “We’ll do anything you need.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I’m good. Thanks,” said Alan. He admits looking back it was perhaps the lamest lie ever told. At that moment, a look around their lot explained better than words the true depth of his needs. John’s face showed he knew Alan was full of it, but he didn’t challenge him.

Instead he continued “we just got in after driving nonstop from Pennsylvania. We’re looking for anyone we can find who needs help.”

“Pennsylvania,” Alan said as he cast a doubtful look at his license plate, only to confirm the registration. The distance they’d traveled though wasn’t what caught him off guard. It was what came next.

“Yes, sir. We’ve been watching the news almost constantly since Katrina hit. We saw on TV what happened here, and we wanted to do something. Our church began collecting food and clothing, but we felt God drawing us here to start helping people now. So, my buddies and I piled into my truck and left. Drove straight through all night. Here we are!”

Alan felt horrible that he had originally treated these men less honorably than they deserved. Like everyone on the Coast, he needed more help than he could ever find.

“No thanks” he said to John. “I really appreciate it. I do. But I’m sure you’ll find somebody pretty quickly who needs a lot more help than me.”

He looked at the others in the crew cap and bed of the truck, about six guys, seeing them in a much different light than moments before.

Originally, Alan had misinterpreted their eager stances as a bunch of guys

looking to party. Now, he saw it was actually their eagerness to spring into helpful action. Still feeling horrible about himself, Alan declined their offer one last time. There was resignation in John's face.

"May I ask your name, sir?" he asked. Alan told him. He reached his hand toward Alan in what he assumed was to be a goodbye hand shake. When Alan grabbed it though, something was in his palm. Alan flinched. He clasped their hands, holding them together with his free hand.

"Mr. Livingston," John said. "God loves you. He wants you to have this, and He wants to remind you of the blessing of our meeting. We are all blessed to have met you, sir. Please know that we'll be praying for you." Paper pressed between their hands, and Alan suspected it was money. He let go and looked to see what he had been given by John. It was a hundred dollar bill. "Have faith. God will get you through this," John said to him.

"No, John. I can't...I can't take this," Alan stammered, believing he and his friends needed the money much more than Alan did.

"Please, take it. It's not much, I know, but it's from our church, please."

Alan tried to insist that it was a wonderful gesture but too much.

John wouldn't let him though. "Please sir," he said. "If you won't let us work for you, use this toward a chainsaw or gas for your generator. You'll find a good use for it." He began walking away, already waving while Alan stood there, dumbfounded. "Know that it comes with all our prayers for your recovery. God bless!"

Alan collapsed into a folding chair, physically and emotionally spent by those few minutes in a way he had rarely known, for reasons he never fully understood. Before he learned his last name or how to contact him, John and his friends had left.

He looks back and says few moments through their Hurricane Katrina experience touched him like his encounter with John that day. Many years later, the meeting lingers with Alan still. He learned there were many angels like John who came to help the Katrina victims. Alan says he learned about the goodness of strangers, but more importantly, he learned not to judge someone based on appearance and his own biases.

All of us are, in a sense, like Alan in that we have needs; in his case he needed help, but had a hard time admitting it because, as he says, he had a bias. But we are all also called to be like John, reaching out to others just as Saint Francis did long ago.

In the time of Jesus, there was very little understanding of medicine, but skin conditions could be seen. And the way to handle them was to keep people away who had them; Leviticus, our first reading, describes how to handle such situations. They are so isolated that they were cut off from the Temple and worship of God as well. Many saw their condition as some kind of curse from God; at best though they needed to stay apart so as not to infect others.

The leper in the Gospel though comes to Jesus, and he knows that, as Jesus has said prior, there is something greater than the Temple here, the Temple is where God and man meet, and this is in Jesus. He appeals to the will of Jesus; he has incredible faith. The priest would inspect someone to see if they were clean; however this man, despite knowing that he was to

keep away from everyone, has the incredible faith to know that Jesus can help him.

The leper teaches us the importance of reaching out and letting God heal us. Typically a leper would shout “unclean, unclean” to keep people away. But the man knows that Jesus can heal him, and so he commits this faux pas, not worried what others will think about him. I think at times, we can feel like a leper in the sense our sin perhaps has made us unclean to come to Jesus, or that we aren’t like one of the “good” Christians. Many people battle something spiritual on the inside; they regret the past; they struggle with some sin in private, or carry shame with them. But notice what happens when the man comes to Jesus; Jesus does not recoil in horror, but he touches Him. He says yes I do will it that you be made clean. Jesus is here today too to speak to you and me as sinners through the sacraments, especially reconciliation and the Eucharist to say you and I are loved. Lent especially is a great time to spend more time in prayer and be reminded of how we are loved, but also to confront the things we battle and learn how to reduce them in our life. But it all starts by being reminded that we are not alone, and we are loved.

But note then what happens; the man goes and publicizes the whole matter. Evangelization. The sharing of his joy; the response to faith. It's what led John and his friends to go from Pennsylvania to Mississippi to help strangers in need. Through his actions, he was saying I have been healed by Jesus, and I want you to have this same experience too.

If we are going to do this, its worth thinking about who are lepers? Who gets thrown away? Really it's an endless list. Pope Francis said once we live in a throwaway culture. So who is hurting in our world? At school Masses, I often remind the kids of not just being nice on the surface, but looking for those who are excluded, and asking themselves if they may have bullied or also been silent when someone was picked on or demeaned. We as adults can do the same thing through our gossip and putting down of others. So a starting point with lepers is looking at how we treat others who God puts into our life. Do we take them for granted, or see some people as "unclean" based on their past, or who they associate with, or their political leanings?

Seeing others as all sons and daughters of God, we do what Francis of Assisi and John of Pennsylvania did - we build a culture of encounter.

John wanted to listen to Alan. Jesus listens too; he hears the story of pain and the cry for help. How do we listen to people? Do we show patience and try to listen to what someone is saying who has a need so we can recognize if someone is going through a tough time, or needs someone to talk to, or maybe like Alan has a need but they just can't come to admit it?

John also did outreach by driving all those miles. Evangelization takes work, and takes many forms. There's the kind of volunteering like John and like we do at Saint Joes with people going to Fr. Terry Hoppenjans parish in Kentucky to help out or to Haiti; but there's also the outreach of talking about our faith with others and not being afraid of being rejected or "canceled" by cancel culture; there's the outreach of recognizing when someone has a problem or an addiction or something they are battling and maybe think is hidden and saying "I'm here for you" to try to help them. Problems don't go away just because they are ignored; rather they just get worse, and so too does the marginalization.

John also did what Jesus does - he prioritized the pain of the leper. John and his friends just wanted to help, but it was a true commitment. They

drove all those miles but were willing to work and help wherever they could, which takes a lot of effort. Evangelization does too. It's one thing to say "Jesus loves you." It's another to put the time into listening to someone; or to put the time into helping a person get back on their feet, or to journey with them. Who are the people God is asking us to truly journey with so they can be free of their pain and leprosy?

And lastly, the healing. Alan's eyes are opened not because he wanted \$100, but because he gets that his own bias got in the way of seeing this young man as someone there to help him. It changed his life and his perspective on things. The leper is healed and brought back into the community. This takes a lot of effort. Sometimes we want to give up when we fall in the moral life after confessing something or seeing progress; or give up when a person takes one step forward and two steps back. But the healing can come, it just takes time. On our part we keep our eyes fixed on the goal knowing that conversion and change is possible, because God's grace and mercy are far more powerful than sin.

As we are all aware, there is so much division in our world today, but it's nothing new, it's always been with us. The Eucharist reminds us though that we are all one, and when we hear "This is my body, given up for you,"

that is God's statement to you and me that He wants to cleanse us from our sins, our pain, our anxiety. So let God take that away. Let it open our eyes as it did for Alan so we see first not the exterior or the labels a person has, but someone created in God's image. Sometimes like Alan we look at someone and think this person is just so different than me why bother. Or other times we look at ourselves and think "how did this happen" and hide away the sores on our soul. Jesus though has another plan - the plan of love and mercy. So as we prepare to receive Him, let Him heal you, but also let Him open your eyes to see who you are called to proclaim love and mercy to. You don't have to drive a thousand miles to do it either, for throughout our lives God puts into our lives people who are in pain, who are hurting, and who need someone to help make them clean. What a beautiful gift mercy is; let us receive it and not be afraid to share it with the world as we now join with the angels and saints at the table of the Lord.