

COMPASSIONATE MINISTRY TO THE EXCLUDED

Part of my Discernment Process before re-entering the seminary here in England was undergoing a 3-Day Psychological Assessment at St Luke's Centre in Manchester. Although it was a rigorous and nerve-racking endeavour, I learnt a lot about myself in that process. One of the questions they asked me to address honestly was: **Is there any part of the Church's Teachings you do not accept?** My honest answer was: Although I accept all the Teachings of the Church, I do not understand nor accept the Church's practice of exclusion/condemnation of certain people, such as:

- The lack of women in positions of leadership in the Church
- The exclusion of good divorced and remarried Catholics from the Eucharist
- The constant condemnation of the LGBTQ Community
- The lack of youths in positions of leadership in our parishes

During my face-to-face assessment interview, I was asked to elaborate on the above; I cited various passages of the Gospel where Christ acted against the directives of the religious precepts of His time, and told them how unchristian it was that the Church established by that same Christ was famous for its exclusion of so many people, instead of following in the footsteps of Christ who welcomed everyone excluded by the Jewish religious laws, interpreters, and leaders. At the end of my speech, I thought they would ask me to pack my bags and vanish; instead, Sr Eithne got up, approached me, and gave me a big hug. She then told me to always minister to the excluded in any parish I would find myself. It is this ministry to the excluded, outcasts and outlaws, that we encounter today.

In today's First Reading from Leviticus Chapter 13, we encounter the miserable state, subjugation, and exclusion of lepers. During the time of Jesus, leprosy was a deadly infectious disease and lepers were excluded from the rest of the society. That stark reality was laid bare for us in today's First Reading thus: **"A man/woman infected with leprosy must wear his/her clothing torn and his/her hair disordered; he/she must shield his/her upper lip and cry, "Unclean, unclean." He/she must live apart, outside the camp."** It was in this state of exclusion that the unnamed leper in today's Gospel pericope found himself and begged Jesus to cure him. Although our Gospel passage used the English phrase – Feeling sorry for him; however, the Greek word used there is *splagchnizomai* meaning to be moved in the nobler inward parts of a human being; these inward parts include the heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys. Yes, Jesus was moved in His guts, and He did something about the situation. For Jesus, touching and healing the leper were more important than obeying the Levitical Law on leprosy and ritual cleanliness.

My friends, are there people still excluded in our Church and society of today? I think of the many wonderful women who have not been fully integrated in leadership positions within the Church even though they are ones who make up 80% of the

Church's population. I think of the many good and holy Catholics who tried so hard to save their marriages but had to escape abusive and toxic relationships, found love afterwards and remarried, but have been excluded from the Holy Eucharist. I think of the many LGBTQ Catholics who have been told by the Church that they are intrinsically disordered, and in some parts of the world are labelled as being possessed by the devil, are tortured, and even killed. I think of the many young people in our Church who are yearning to serve but are treated as nonentities while only the old and grey-haired are called to serve. Finally, I think of the so many people with mental health conditions who are ostracised, looked down and pushed away from the rest of the community. The one thing I am certain of is, if Christ were to be physically here and now, He would be seeking them out, touching them and ministering to them.

The challenge for all of us today is: **What are the ways we exclude other people here in our parish?** As your parish priest, I would like to point out 2 Key areas:

1. **Forming of Cliques:** Cambridge Dictionary defines this as “**A small group of people who spend their time together and do not welcome other people into that group.**” Is it possible that in our parish there are small groups of people who like mingling only with themselves without thinking of other people? Is it possible that in our parish there are those who see themselves as lords instead of servants? I wish to remind us of what I said at the beginning of my ministry here in the parish – **We are here to serve and not to wield authority.** If I encounter anyone in a position of service who is wielding authority, I will ask the person to step down. The same goes for me, if you notice I am wielding authority, do petition the Bishop and ask him to remove me. Nothing destroys a parish more than the formation of cliques. We are here to worship God and not to worship any human being no matter how important he/she might be.
2. **Our Discussions and Emails:** There are some people whose discussions and emails always starts from the position of negativity. In all honesty, whenever I get their emails, I do pray to the Holy Spirit before I read them. In a world that is full of negativity, as Catholics, it is important we always look on the bright side of life, as Monty Python admonished us in his song. Negativity destroys and excludes people, it has broken up husbands and wives, parents and their children, priests, and their parishioners. As St Paul reminds us in today's reminds us in today's Second Reading – **Never do anything offensive to anyone – to Jews or Greeks or to the Church of God.**

Like Christ who compassionately ministered to the excluded, outcasts, and outlaws, let us become Ministers of Inclusion to all peoples, especially those on the peripheries.

Fr Johnpromise Umeozuru

Homily for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B (11/02/2024)