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General audience: mercy cleanses the heart

Vatican City, 22 June 2016 – The healing of the leper as narrated in the Gospel of St. Luke, the meaning of this act and his plea, "Lord, if You will, You can make me clean", were the theme of Pope Francis' catechesis during this Wednesday's general audience in St. Peter's Square, in which a group of refugees participated, seated beside the Holy Father.

The leper, as the Pope explained, not only asks Jesus to cure him, but rather to "cleanse" him, to purify him completely in body and heart, as leprosy was considered as a sort of divine curse, a form of profound impurity. Lepers were obliged to stay far from others; they were denied access to the temple or to any form of divine worship. "Far from God and far from men - what a sad life these people led", Francis exclaimed.

However, the leper resigns himself neither to the disease nor to the laws that would exclude him. To reach Jesus, he is not afraid of breaking the law and entering the city, which was prohibited, and when he encountered Him he knelt before Him and said "Lord, if You will, You can make me clean". "Everything that this supposedly impure man says and does is an expression of faith", the Holy Father remarked. "He recognises Jesus' power; he is certain that He has the ability to heal him and that everything depends upon His will. This faith is the strength that enabled him to break every convention and to seek an encounter with Jesus, and kneeling before Him, he calls Him Lord. The leper's plea shows that when we present ourselves to Jesus, it is not necessary to utter long speeches. A few words are enough, provided they are accompanied by full trust in His omnipotence and His infinite mercy".

Francis went on to reveal that at night, before going to sleep, he repeats the same words: "Lord, if You will, You can make me clean", and recites the Lord's Prayer five times, once for each of Jesus' wounds, "as Jesus cleansed us with His wounds", and he invited those present to do likewise.

"Jesus is profoundly affected by this person", he continued. "The Gospel of St. Mark underlines that 'moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, I will; be clean'. Jesus' gesture accompanies His words and makes His teaching more explicit. Breaking the Law of Moses, which prohibited people from approaching a leper, Jesus stretches out His hand and even touches him. How often do we encounter a poor person, who comes towards us! We too can be generous, we too can have compassion, but usually we avoid touching him. We offer a coin, but we avoid touching his hand. And we forget that it is the body of Christ. Jesus

teaches us not to be afraid of touching the poor and the excluded, because He is in them. Touching the poor can cleanse us of hypocrisy and make us concerned about their condition".

"Today I am accompanied by these young people", he added, indicating the people seated with him. "Many think it would have been better if they had stayed in their own land, but there they suffered greatly. They are our refugees, but many consider them excluded. Please, they are our brothers. The Christian excludes no-one, but instead offers a place for all, and lets everyone come".

The Pope went on to indicate two more aspects of the healing of the leper. Jesus commands him not to tell anyone, but instead asks him to go and show himself to the priest in the temple, and make an offering for his cleansing, as Moses commanded, as proof. "This phrase of Jesus' demonstrates at least three things. First, the grace that he works in us does not seek sensationalism. In general it moves in silence and without fanfares. To cure our wounded and to guided us on the way of holiness, it patiently works to model our hearts on that of the Lord, to conform increasingly to His thoughts and feelings. Secondly, by officially verifying his recovery to the priests and by making an expiatory sacrifice, the leper is readmitted into the community of believers and into social life. His reinsertion completes his cure. As he himself had requested, he is now completely cleansed. And finally, by presenting himself to the priests the leper bears witness to Jesus and his Messianic authority. The strength of the compassion with which Jesus heals the leper leads the faith of this man to open up to mission. He was excluded, now he is one of us".

"Let us think about ourselves, in our miseries – everyone has their own", Francis concluded. "Let us think sincerely. How often do we cover them up with the hypocrisy of 'good manners'! At these times we need to stay alone, to kneel before God and to pray: 'Lord, if You will, You can make me clean!'. And do this, before you retire to bed, every evening. Let us now say this beautiful prayer together: 'Lord, if You will, You can make me clean'".