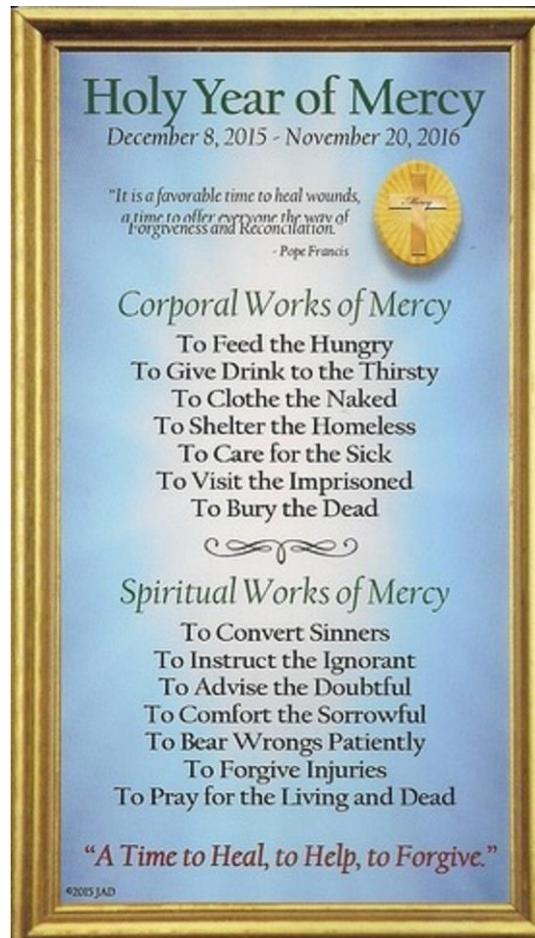


THE CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY

Year of Mercy Lent retreat 5th March 2016



Perhaps our first reaction upon reading this traditional list might be, "This list is a bit out of date. After all, when do we ever have the opportunity in the modern world to 'give drink to the thirsty' or to 'clothe the naked'? And who in their right mind would fail to bury their loved ones these days!"

We must not be too hasty, however, in dismissing the usefulness of this old list of the corporal works of mercy. It may be more helpful than we think in challenging us to discern new ways that our Lord is calling us to follow Him.

Moreover, in the practice of each of the corporal works of mercy there is both a *personal* and a wider *social* dimension, and a true disciple of Jesus Christ will not want to neglect either one. Our Lord is the true and rightful Lord of all creation, and that includes every aspect of human life: personal life, married and family life, ecclesiastical life, and even the social, economic and political dimensions of our lives. We should not be afraid of seeking His will in the latter areas: it does not necessarily mean we must engage in "partisan politics," but we are sometimes called to struggle against extreme and manifest social evils that degrade the human person, such as racism, poverty, tyranny, or violations of the fundamental human right to life, such as abortion and euthanasia and everything incompatible with His reign of compassion and merciful love.

THE CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY

This is the way of life to which our Lord is calling us. Centred on the Merciful Heart of Jesus, whose love is poured into our hearts especially through prayer and the Eucharist, we are to let His merciful love flow through our hearts toward anyone in need whom we meet along life's way.

Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta taught this way of life clearly, and manifested it beautifully in her apostolate. She used to say that there are two kinds of "Real Presence" of our Lord in this world: the Lord's Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament, where He fills us with His light, His life, and His love, and our Lord's real presence in the poor, both in those materially poor and those spiritually poor, where He is waiting for us to give Him back His light, His life, and His love.

"We are in The Holy Year of Mercy. I hope that in this Jubilee, all the members of the Church will renew their faith in Jesus Christ, the face of the Father's mercy, the way who united God and man. Mercy, then, is the foundation of the life of the Church; the first truth of the Church, indeed, is Christ's love" *Pope Francis, Jan. 29 in the Vatican's Clementine Hall.*

TO FEED THE HUNGRY

The world produces enough to feed the entire global population of 7 billion people. And yet, one person in eight on the planet goes to bed hungry each night. According to the United Nations, about 21,000 people die every day of hunger or hunger-related causes. This is one person every four seconds. Sadly it is children who die most often.

"For I was hungry and you gave me food"

TO GIVE DRINK TO THE THIRSTY

Clean, safe drinking water is scarce. Today, nearly 1 billion people in the developing world don't have access to it. Yet, we take it for granted, we waste it, and we even pay too much to drink it from little plastic bottles. Water is the foundation of life. And still today, all around the world, far too many people spend their entire day searching for it.

"I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink"

TO CLOTHE THE NAKED

One of the stories that has caught the imagination of countless generations of all ages, is that of St Martin, drawing his sword to give half of his cloak to a beggar who had no proper clothes against the cold.

It is still a noble gesture when we give our surplus clothes to charity, especially in our culture which is so sensitive to the messages transmitted by the clothes we wear: everywhere there is an obvious link between clothing and respect for one's dignity.

But the real issue is not just about giving unwanted things away, but about owning less and offering support to those who do not have enough.

"I was naked and you clothed Me"

TO SHELTER THE HOMELESS

During his visit to Mexico, this February, Pope Francis, made a politically charged stop at the US-Mexico border to highlight what he called the “human tragedy” faced by migrants.

The pope said the world can no longer deny the crisis generated by untold numbers of people who have crossed deserts, mountains, and inhospitable zones, by whatever means necessary, to flee violence and poverty.

“The human tragedy that is forced migration, is a global phenomenon today,” said the pope. “This crisis, which can be measured in numbers and statistics, we want instead to measure with *names, stories and families.*”

As we struggle with these huge questions, Christ’s words that in welcoming the stranger we are welcoming Him, speak to our heart, and mercy is first of all a thing of the heart. Before and beyond anything I might do, the biggest struggle of all takes place in my heart: what place does the migrant have in my heart? Does he have a place or is he asked to stay outside, for there is no place for him at the inn?

“I was a stranger and you invited Me in”

TO VISIT THE SICK

This is probably the work of mercy that lies most within our reach, for we all know many sick people. When we are ourselves sick we understand how true it is that visiting the sick is a work of mercy. What the sick person really needs is something simple and most precious....our presence above all. Even being present in silence is of great support and comfort, it is often enough.

“I was sick and you visited Me”

TO VISIT THE IMPRISONED

Prisoners and former prisoners are perhaps that category of people we spontaneously consider least worthy of mercy.

We might start by remembering that even the prisoner guilty of the most awful crime is still created in God’s image and is loved by God no less than God loves you or me.

We can also extend the meaning of this work of mercy to consider those who are imprisoned metaphorically in other places: the elderly isolated in nursing homes (or their own homes); people imprisoned by their addictions or their fears or their ignorance; people imprisoned by others’ views of them (immigrants, non-English speakers, people with disabilities...)

The Work of Mercy of visiting the imprisoned can be as simple as a welcome that breaks down the wall of mistrust. That, each of us has the opportunities to do every day.

“I was in prison and you came to Me”

TO BURY THE DEAD

This is the last of the corporal works of mercy, the only one not found in Jesus’ list at his speech about the Last Judgement in chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew. But it was added later on, for it is a deed highly praised in the Bible, particularly in the book of Tobit.

It is not within our reach to perform this act of mercy, though as we see every day in the news this is not so all over the world. Yet it is certainly a real work of mercy to console those who have lost a loved one, to attend a neighbour’s or a friend’s funeral.

I would give my bread to the hungry and clothing to the naked. If I saw one of my people who had died and been thrown behind the wall of Nineveh, I used to bury him. Tobit 1:17

