

Corporal Works of Mercy
34th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Mt 25:31-46)

In the Sacrament of Penance we prepare for Judgment Day by examining our conscience and confessing our sins while there is opportunity for forgiveness. The examination of conscience begins with the Ten Commandments, which articulates the moral law (Mt 19:16-17). In addition, we need to look within, to the Seven Capital Sins, which are the root cause or “sin behind the sins.” But finally, our examination of conscience is not complete without the Corporal Works of Mercy, as Jesus indicates in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats.

The Corporal Works of Mercy articulate the Great Commandment, what it means to love God above all things, and our neighbor as our self. Jesus explicitly identifies the love of God with care of one’s fellow man: “*whatever you do or fail to do for the least of my brothers, you do or fail to do for me.*”

And whereas the Ten Commandments and Capital Sins tend to be thoughts, words, or deeds, sins involving the Corporal Works of Mercy are sins of omission. Jesus makes clear we can go to hell as much for “*what I have done,*” as for “*what I have failed to do*” (Penitential Rite, *Confiteor*). Charity is not merely having good intentions, or the desire to help others. Charity is actual good deeds.

Jesus lists the “Corporal Works of Mercy”:

- 1) Feed the hungry
- 2) Give drink to the thirsty
- 3a) Welcome the stranger
- 4) Clothe the naked
- 5a) Care for the sick
- 5b) Visit the imprisoned.

The Church’s catechetical tradition combines visiting the sick and imprisoned; welcoming the stranger and sheltering the homeless; and adds two more:

- 3b) Shelter the homeless
- 6) Ransom the captive
- 7) Bury the dead.

They are called “Corporal Works of Mercy” because they provide for man’s basic bodily needs. And yet, each of them has a spiritual focus, in that they uplift man’s dignity, since they recognize the image of Christ in human nature. The goal

of the Corporal Works of Mercy is never simply to provide man's material well-being, but to uplift the spirit through the love of Christ.¹

Feed the Hungry. There are places in the world where famine and starvation are daily realities, but in our nation we are blessed with a superabundance of food. And yet, we suffer terrible "eating disorders," obesity, diabetes, and unhealthiness. The main American dietary staple is literally called "junk food." When speaking of God's goodness, Jesus once said, "*What father, when his child asks him for an egg, would give him a scorpion?*" (Lk 11:12). And yet, we regularly do this: we give our children that which is not nutritious, we feast on that which is bad for us.

Food must be connected with love. Feeding the hungry begins at home, and the task of preparing the family meals is a work of mercy. That is to say, it is an act of true charity requiring time and attention, which builds up the individual in his dignity, and nourishes the family in its spiritual bonds. It is a service to Christ, like that of Martha providing hospitality to Jesus from her kitchen (Lk 10:38).

Give drink to the Thirsty. Alcoholism is not merely a "chemical-dependency" problem rooted in the bio-chemical needs of the body, but a spiritual problem rooted in the injury of the soul. It is a profound thirst that seeks to be satisfied with drink that only exacerbates the problem. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus said she should ask him for a drink, and he will provide her living water (Jn 4:10). "*Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life*" (Jn 4:14).

To give drink to the thirsty means leading one's brother to the grace of Christ, which alone satisfies the thirst in the soul. The "Twelve-Step" program is one such program that accomplishes this. It is a spiritual method, calling for faith and repentance, which are the doorway of the Gospel. It is a successful program for this very reason.

Welcome the Stranger. This work, too, begins at home, with the very people around us whom God has put in our lives. People can live under the same roof and yet remain strangers to each other, being isolated by so many distractions, and even raising their own barriers to communion. The "smartphone," while helping to connect people in many ways, also becomes a distraction that takes us away from the people before us. Likewise, television demands that its audience focus on it, drawing people away from interaction with each other. Young children

¹ This is why government welfare programs (and many "Catholic" charities) cannot be considered works of mercy, and why they are often a degrading cruelty, instead of mercy. Social welfare without evangelization is an abnegation of the Gospel, not a fulfillment of the divine mandate.

clamoring for attention are often placed before the television instead, which becomes their new friend and companion. Work and chores can also become preoccupations to the point of harming relationships. To welcome the stranger means giving the time and attention to the person before us, to the people around us. It means allowing ourselves to be interrupted and inconvenienced by the priority of the person. And in this way we lift the dignity of our fellow man, serving Christ.

Clothe the Naked. Pornography is a scourge of our times, and a sign that God has been abandoned by the society. To engage in pornography requires becoming “shameless,” which means suppressing one’s personal dignity as expressed through the body. The reverence expressed in the veil is taken away, in order that the sacred might be profaned. In baptism we are literally “clothed with Christ” (Gal 3:27), receiving the dignity of the children of God. It is a work of mercy to avoid pornography, and when it is encountered, to make the conscious act of “clothing the naked,” beginning within our own thoughts and intentions, and the modesty of our dress. The other person’s dignity is best affirmed and maintained, when our own dignity is not compromised by participation or indulgence in indecency.

Visit the Sick/Imprisoned. It is particularly the homebound elderly and the sick in nursing homes who experience the cruel prison of isolation and abandonment. Unable to fully take care of the usual tasks, an increasingly isolated by the deaths and similar handicaps of their peers, the spiritual well-being of these “least of the brethren” depends upon regular visitation by their fellow man. God so designed our human nature that in its beginning and ending we are fully dependent upon others. Charity is a requirement of human nature. The church’s practice since the beginning, of bringing Eucharist to the homebound who cannot attend Mass, is the model of this work of mercy. It is Christ who visits, and Christ who is visited.

With this last parable in Mathew 25, we complete the teachings of Jesus prior to his Passion, and we bring to conclusion our church year. It is the final word on the Christian life. When all is said and done, and we stand before the judgment seat of the glorious King, it all comes down to charity: what we did, or failed to do, for the brother of ours in reduced circumstances.