



SPIRITUAL AND CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY

CATECHETICAL RESOURCE · JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY
ARCHDIOCESE OF PHILADELPHIA · ARCHPHILA.ORG/MERCY

What is mercy?

The Old and New Testaments tell us that mercy is God's love expressed as a response to human suffering. In the words of St. John Paul II, mercy is "love's second name, the specific manner in which love is revealed and effected vis-à-vis the reality of the evil that is in the world, affecting and besieging man, insinuating itself even into his heart and capable of causing him to 'perish in Gehenna.'"¹ God's mercy embraces all human suffering, that which is bodily, emotional and spiritual. Above all, divine mercy is a response to the worst of man's suffering, his alienation from God through sin.

Mercy – as Christ has presented it in the parable of the prodigal son – has the interior form of the love that in the New Testament is called *agape*. This love is able to reach down to every prodigal son, to every human misery, and above all to every form of moral misery, sin. When this happens, the person who is the object of mercy does not feel humiliated, but rather found again and 'restored to value.'²

Mercy is most perfectly revealed and made present in Jesus Christ, whom the Father sent into the world to suffer and die on the cross in atonement for our sins. In Christ Crucified we see with our own eyes the mercy of God made visible, the love that goes to the end to overcome sin and death and restore to man the fullness of his dignity as a child of God. Access to the infinite wellsprings of God's merciful love is found in all areas of the life of the Church, especially in her sacraments, which are in themselves a deeply intimate form of encounter with the living Christ, face of the Father's mercy.

How do we respond to God's mercy?

God's mercy is infinite and inexhaustible. "No human sin can prevail over this power or even limit it."³ However, God has given us freedom so that we might be *participants* in our life with Him. This means that we have a role to play in response to God's offer of mercy. Our response to God's mercy is a life of repentance (sorrow for sin) and continual conversion. This means first and foremost a willingness to look honestly at our sins through the light offered to us by the Church and acknowledge the loss of dignity we have suffered as a result. This posture of humble awareness of lost dignity and our need for God's mercy is itself a work of God's mercy and also the necessary precondition for our reception of mercy.

As true participants in our relationship with God, it is also possible for us to resist God's mercy. "On the part of man, only a lack of good will can limit [mercy], a lack of readiness to

¹ St. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* 7

² St. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* 6

³ St. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* 13

be converted and to repent, in other words persistence in obstinacy, opposing grace and truth, especially in the face of the witness of the cross and resurrection of Christ.”⁴ Each time we excuse our sins by saying “I don’t believe that is a sin,” “I am not sorry,” “God understands” or another form of denial, we are thwarting the possibility for mercy to transform our lives and set us free.

Along with our call to a life of interior conversion, we also have received from Christ a demand that, as we have been shown mercy, we must show mercy to others. “Man attains to the merciful love of God, His mercy, to the extent that he himself is interiorly transformed in the spirit of that love towards his neighbor.”⁵ Just as God’s divine mercy touches our pain and suffering on both the physical and spiritual levels, so our mercy towards others shows itself in both material and spiritual ways. This gives rise to the great works of mercy, both spiritual and corporal, that characterize the life of the Church and her activity in the world.

What are the works of mercy?

“The *works of mercy* are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities.”⁶ They give shape to the Church’s desire to bring mercy to the world as a response to the mercy she has so freely and generously received from Christ. Since the whole human person is the subject of God’s loving mercy, both body and soul, the works of mercy are oriented towards both the physical and spiritual necessities of the human person.

In living the works of mercy, the Church shares in God’s action in the world, namely, the restoration, protection and affirmation of the full dignity of the person made in the image of God. For this reason the works of mercy are patterned after the life of Jesus Christ as he ministered to each human being, body and soul, in order to restore him to fullness of life.

Where does the tradition of the works of mercy come from?

The works of mercy are a sharing in the mission of Jesus Christ. They are never simply acts of social service. As a work of the Church, Christ’s Body, they are a participation in Christ’s own action in the world. At the same time, the works of mercy are also acts of mercy *towards* Christ. Jesus has revealed to us that he is present in all the world’s suffering members. Knowing this, the Church is moved with compassion for them with the same love that moves her with compassion for the Crucified Christ. The works of mercy are, therefore, essentially the acts of love that the Church, the Bride, shows to her Bridegroom, Jesus, present in all of those who suffer.

⁴ St. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* 13

⁵ St. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* 14

⁶ CCC 2447

What are the Corporal Works of Mercy and where do they come from?

The corporal works of mercy are:

- Feed the hungry
- Give drink to the thirsty
- Clothe the naked
- Shelter the homeless
- Visit the sick
- Visit the imprisoned
- Bury the dead

The whole human person, body and soul, is the subject of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. The body has special meaning and is due special reverence as the "temple of the Holy Spirit" destined for eternal life. The body has been assumed by God himself and made holy. For this reason, the Church is called to show special reverence for the dignity of the embodied person and take care that each human person's bodily needs are met in a way that corresponds to his dignity as created in the image of God. From this deep reverence for the body of each person flows the corporal works of mercy.

"The Scriptural basis for the corporal works of mercy is the parable in the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus teaches his disciples about God's criteria for the Last Judgment (cf. Mt. 25:35-42). In this parable, the just and the unjust discover that in their merciful actions on behalf of the neighbor they have been merciful to the Lord Jesus, who identifies completely with the hungry, homeless, sick, imprisoned and even the dead. God, who is rich in mercy, invites His sons and daughters to imitate his abundant mercy and loving kindness towards His children."⁷

What are the Spiritual Works of Mercy and where do they come from?

The spiritual works of mercy are:

- Admonish the sinner
- Instruct the ignorant
- Counsel the doubtful
- Comfort the sorrowful
- Bear wrongs patiently
- Forgive all injuries
- Pray for the living and the dead

In Luke 5, when Jesus healed the paralytic, the first healing he announced was that of the forgiveness of his sins. From this, healing of the man's paralysis followed. In this moment, Christ showed us that the true and deeper healing of the human person is the spiritual one, healing and deliverance from that which keeps us from sharing in God's own life, namely, sin. The greatest suffering of man is his spiritual suffering, being deprived of the fullness of life in God for which he was made. The spiritual works of mercy draw their power from

⁷ Diocese of Juneau <http://www.dioceseofjuneau.org/corporal-and-spiritual-works-of-mercy>

Christ's own zeal for the salvation of souls. "I have come to cast fire upon the earth and how I wish it was already burning!" (Lk 12:49). The fire for souls with which Christ was consumed is the same fire that fuels of the Church's spiritual works of mercy, the impulses that aim to help unburden others from the spiritual burdens that can so often prevent someone from finding the path to life with Christ.

"The spiritual works of mercy are drawn from a variety of Old and New Testament sources: My brothers, if someone is detected in sin, you who live by the Spirit should gently set him right. (Galatians 6:1); Let the word of Christ, rich as it is, dwell in you. In wisdom made perfect, instruct and admonish one another. (Colossians 3:16); Correct those who are confused. (Jude 23); As a mother comforts her son, so I will comfort you. (Isaiah 66:13); Help carry one another's burdens; in that way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:2); Because you are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with heartfelt mercy, with kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. (Colossians 3:12); Pray constantly and attentively for all. (Ephesians 6:18)."⁸

How do the works of mercy create solidarity among people?

All authentic works of mercy create a solidarity between the giver and receiver of mercy. Showing mercy does not create an inequality between the one who gives and the one who receives. This is because the works of mercy are based on the recognition of the supreme good of humanity, which both the giver and the receiver share. Rather than create an inequality, a true act of mercy, shown with the desire to elevate and affirm the objective good of another's humanity, creates a shared bond. "An act of merciful love is only really such when we are deeply convinced at the moment that we perform it that we are at the same time receiving mercy from the people who are accepting it from us."⁹ This is because the human person "finds himself only through a sincere gift of himself."¹⁰ When a person allows another person to show him mercy, he is allowing the giver to become a *gift* and by this means, to fulfill his humanity. Receiving mercy with gratitude is an act of mercy towards the one who offers it.

Are the works of mercy for individuals only, or for society as a whole?

The Church recognizes that human suffering is both a deeply personal matter and also a communal and social matter. Because the human person is fundamentally relational, it is necessary that the works of mercy respond to man in both his personal and relational dimensions. This means that we must work to bring mercy – that is, the restoration and affirmation of the supreme dignity of the person – to both individual circumstances as well as to the structures that govern our society. A social structure that assumes an inadequate understanding of the human person in his full dignity, that subjects the human person to the status of a means to some other end, is essentially unmerciful. We have an obligation to

⁸ Diocese of Juneau <http://www.dioceseofjuneau.org/corporal-and-spiritual-works-of-mercy>

⁹ St. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* 14

¹⁰ *Gaudium Et Spes* 24

work to relieve all human beings from oppression on this scale as much as we have an obligation to work for the relief of the individual.

...It is undoubtedly an act of love, the work of mercy by which one responds *here and now* to a real and impelling need of one's neighbor, but it is an equally indispensable act of love to strive to *organize and structure society* so that one's neighbor will not find himself in poverty.¹¹

How is mercy related to the other virtues?

Mercy is inseparable from all the other virtues. So much so, that mercy cannot be called authentic if it violates another virtue. This is an excellent rule for discernment of the authenticity of an action that is done in the name of mercy. Unfortunately, many things exist in our culture in the name of mercy that are not merciful at all. Examples include assisted suicide, abortion rights, and artificial reproductive technologies, all of which deeply violate many fundamental goods in the name of “mercy.” “In no passage of the Gospel message does forgiveness, or mercy as its source, mean indulgence towards evil, towards scandals, towards injury or insult. In any case, reparation for evil and scandal, compensation for injury, and satisfaction for insult are conditions for forgiveness.”¹² In an era when much confusion surrounds the concept of mercy, it is ever more important for Christians to remember how deeply interwoven mercy is with the rest of the virtues. This will enable Christians to work to preserve and foster a culture of mercy that is truly aligned with the good of the human person.

We see mercy’s interrelationship with all the virtues most fully in the person of Jesus Christ, especially at the moment of his crucifixion. On Calvary, we find the fullest expression of mercy as well as all the other virtues. By suffering the punishment due to our sins, Jesus satisfies the virtue of *justice*. By giving himself in complete self-sacrifice, the *truth* about love is revealed. By choosing to suffer rather than preserve himself, the virtues of *temperance*, *self-control*, and *fortitude* are perfectly expressed. By submitting his will to the will of his Heavenly Father, the virtue of *obedience* reaches its climax. To fully understand the truth about mercy as an integral part of the seamless garment of the virtues, we should spend time before a Crucifix, contemplating the array of virtues being expressed, revealed, and fulfilled to overflowing in Jesus Christ.

Written by:
Meghan Cokeley
Office for the New Evangelization
Archdiocese of Philadelphia
phillyevang.org

¹¹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church* 208

¹² St. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* 14