

The Spiritual Works of Mercy

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February 20, 2016

During Lent each year we're encouraged to focus some of our Lenten sacrifice on "Works of Mercy." This year these merciful actions, both corporal and spiritual, have taken on even more importance at the direction of Pope Francis, when he designated this to be the "Jubilee year of Mercy."

We've dedicated three Saturday sessions to this topic; beginning today and for the two that follow. Our discussions are timely as we begin Lent and continue to assess not only our own corporal and spiritual needs, but how we'll respond in charity to offer "works of mercy" to others.

This week our focus will be on the "Spiritual Works of Mercy." Next week, Ralph will present the significance of the entire Jubilee Year of Mercy called by Pope Francis. The week after that, Fr. Russ will focus us on the "Corporal Works of Mercy."

"The Works of Mercy are defined as charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in their spiritual and bodily needs. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting, are spiritual works of mercy as are forgiving, and bearing wrongs patiently..." (CCC 2447) Also, included are our prayers for the living and the dead. The Spiritual Works will be our focus today. And their basis is the teaching of Christ and the practice of the Church since apostolic times. These are the seven forms of Christian charity in favor of the soul of one's neighbor, in contrast with the corporal works of mercy that administer to the bodily needs. (MCD pg. 517)

As I was preparing, I was reminded that we're all broken and suffer in some way, if not from material poverty, then from other conditions such as religious or spiritual poverty, and if not us, perhaps members of our own families, friends, or co-workers. Yet we're all called to support each other as best we can. For example; the neighbor who appears happy in his wealth, apparent security and material possessions, but in reality, is empty spiritually and is in need of help. They can be quite poor in the areas most important, lacking faith, which causes indifference, apathy, or wounds which are invisible to us. They can appear secure in their earthly lives but struggling in preparation for eternal life. We're called to support them, but how? This will be the focus of our small group discussion this morning, sharing how to support others, and the different approaches we can take.

So before we begin our discussions, here's a brief review of each of the "Spiritual Works of Mercy."

There's no defined order to these. Depending on the source, they're ordered differently. But, there is consensus about the seven and what they represent. So, while we refer to them as works of mercy, we can also think of them as our responsibilities to support others on their journeys to eternal life.

- 1. Council the Doubtful:** We must be courageous, but also compassionate in calling people to be faithful to Gospel values. We can respond to others' negative comments with our positive statements. We can help put an end to gossip by walking away. We should always be mindful that we have the opportunity to set a good example for others.
- 2. Instruct the Ignorant / the Uninformed:** Let's commit ourselves to learning more about the Catholic faith and, when appropriate, share our understanding of the faith with others. Share our insights instead of just sitting back and listening to complaints or incorrect statements concerning our faith. Become engaged, even at the risk of being unpopular. Make it a practice to stay up-to-date on the current issues of the Church.
- 3. Admonish Sinners:** This is especially difficult. First, we need to hold ourselves accountable, then others, but do this with charity and compassion. We all sin, but isn't it our duty to support one another to get to heaven? Showing our love and friendship toward another person requires that we look after one another.
- 4. Comfort the Afflicted:** We can walk with others through their pain. Be present to those who are struggling emotionally by reaching out to help by listening, and offering our prayers. Offer sympathy to those who are grieving.
- 5. Forgive Offenses:** Let's pray for those who have wronged us and pray for the courage to forgive. Have the humility to ask for forgiveness from others. Let go of grudges; go out of our way to be positive with someone we're having a difficult time with. Let's make that call to someone we haven't spoken with for awhile, and tell them that they're in our prayers, and that we're committed to restoring the relationship.
- 6. Be Patient with those we feel have treated us unjustly:** Work at being less critical of others. Maybe we don't need to bring to someone's attention every little mistake. Give others the benefit of the doubt. Let's pray for those who have wronged us, and assume their actions may, in part, be due to their own pain and suffering about something else.
- 7. Pray for the living and the Dead:** On Ash Wednesday many of us heard: "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." Life on earth is short, and as we read from Matthew's Gospel: "But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone." (Mt 24:36) Each day may be our last. So, let's pray for each other now and forever.

In Summary:

As we consider the questions, it seems that many of these we've discussed before, but just haven't referred to them as "Spiritual Works of Mercy." But the work that we do in serving others is among each of the areas we're discussing. We can also look to the work of Men's Ministry for examples. Our weekly topics, prayer intentions and all the various ways we support our parish community touch on many of the "Spiritual Works of Mercy."

Beyond Men's Ministry; to others we're Catholic men, fathers, grandfathers, friends and co-workers. What we learn here prepares us for the work we have out in the world. This ministry and all the ways we grow in our Catholic faith, prepares us to accept the responsibility and make a difference in all areas of our lives.

Early in his papacy, Pope Francis referred to the Church as a Field Hospital. That's where we fit in and we have a dual role. Sometimes, we're in need of the spiritual support the hospital provides. Also, we have the responsibility to support others by caring for them. In this case, for someone else, we are the hospital.

Finally, on social media this past Wednesday, Bishop Caggiano challenged us. He asked the question: "Are we willing to reach out and let those in need know through our concern and service, that we love them and that God love's them?" For me, that sums up why it's important to focus on the "Works of Mercy." It's showing our love through our actions; in what we say and do, and with our prayers that make the difference.