

**CONSECRATED MEN AND WOMEN AS GOD'S INSTRUMENTS OF MERCY  
IN OUR CONTEMPORARY WORLD**

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**ABSTRACT**

*In this article, Professor Michael Ogunu describes the role of consecrated men and women as God's instruments of mercy in our contemporary world. He defines the concept of mercy, what Christ teaches about mercy, reasons for showing mercy as well as conditions for obtaining God's mercy. Drawing from Sacred Scriptures and the works of eminent experts on works of mercy, he describes practical ways in which consecrated men and women, and indeed, all Christ's faithful can perform the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy to be effective instruments of God's mercy in our broken world.*

**Introduction**

When Pope Francis issued the Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy *Misericordiae Vultus* (MV) on April 11 2015, he outlined the purpose and the ways the Jubilee of Mercy was to be celebrated.

He explained that he wanted the entire Church to celebrate the Jubilee year to enable all of us to gaze more attentively on the mercy of God so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives (see MV, no. 3). What this means was that the Jubilee year is to assist everyone of us, bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated persons, and the laity to become more effective instruments of mercy. The theme that was chosen to celebrate the year, “**Merciful like the Father**”, is itself very instructive. Jesus is the one who shows us the face of the Merciful Father. In the words and actions of Jesus Christ we see the Face of the Merciful Father (see MV, no. 1).

In Christ, we find that there is no sin that cannot be forgiven because of his mercy. The Holy Father underscores this point when he states:

When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive. I will have the joy of opening the Holy Door on the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. On that day, the Holy Door will become a *Door of Mercy* through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instils hope (MV, no.3).

We as Christians are invited to also reflect the face of the merciful Father in our dealing with our brothers and sisters.

In this Paper, I shall define the concept of “mercy” and explain what Jesus teaches us about it. Some practical ways of performing works of mercy will be explained. I shall also identify some reasons why we should show mercy and the conditions for obtaining God's mercy and describe some practical ways and means in which consecrated men and women can perform the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy to be God's effective instruments of mercy in our contemporary world.

### **Mercy Defined**

As defined in the *Catholic Encyclopedia for School and Home, Volume 7, (1965)*, mercy is “That virtue by which kindness, tenderness and compassion are shown toward one in need”. It was highly esteemed among the Israelites who saw it, first of all, as one of the outstanding attributes of God, especially revealed in His covenant with Israel (Deuteronomy 7:9).

God was consistently merciful to the Israelites, despite their numerous lapses into sin. So great was the connection between God's love and His mercy that the Hebrew words for these virtues were often used interchangeably.

In the context of the works of mercy, mercy is regarded as a virtue influencing one's will to have compassion for others and, if possible, to alleviate another's misfortune. St. Thomas Aquinas is regularly quoted as stating that mercy is the greatest attribute of God. Aquinas does not state it in this fashion in the *Summa*, but he does imply that in relation to His creation, God's actions essentially are merciful. Mercy, explains St. Pope John Paul II, is the “most stupendous attribute” of God! It reveals to us what God is like. It is “love's second name”. The Bible, tradition and the whole faith life of the People of God provide unique proof ... that mercy is the greatest of the attributes and perfections of God (John Paul II, *Rich in Mercy 14*).

What better time to get this gift than in a Holy Year, the Jubilee Year of Mercy wherein we have been called to recall and make our own God's ever flowing mercy. Its pertinence is obvious because with indulgence we get closer to Christ who committed no sin yet was wounded for our transgressions, and by his wounds we are healed (cf. Is. 53:4f); it helps us seek our way to the Father through the performance of good works and by penitential expiation which are key elements in this Jubilee Year of Mercy. It obtains for us the graces required to overcome sins, especially the sins confessed. It keeps us holy and pure. Consequent upon this then, in this Year of Mercy, let us make prayer and good works ours so that we can gain the necessary indulgence which will go a long way to secure our spiritual communion with the saints and ultimately with the Father in heaven.

### **What Jesus Teaches Us about Mercy**

Jesus teaches us many things about mercy through his actions and parables.

First, Jesus taught us that proclaiming the Gospel to the poor is his first pastoral priority. When Jesus announced the Jubilee year in the fourth chapter of Luke, he described his mission as announcing the good news to the poor, liberating captives and giving sight to the blind. This provides us, as Jesus' disciples, a template for our task in the Year of Mercy. In setting our individual actions, priorities, plans and strategies of evangelization, let us also prioritize the sharing of the Gospel with the poor.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis issues the following challenge: “I want to say, with regret, that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessings, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care”.

Second, Jesus explains that mercy comes from God, who is our merciful Father. As we learned in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, after welcoming home a child who was lost and forgiving him, the Father rejoices. Mercy brings joy to both the reconciled sinner and to God.

Third, Jesus affirms that he is the face of the merciful Father. He is the Good Shepherd who takes the first action to seek out and find those who are lost. As we learn in his first meeting with Matthew, the tax collector who became one of the Apostles, Jesus seeks to be with us who are sinners and help lead us back to the Father. He looked on Saint Matthew with mercy and chose him for a great mission. He wants to do the same for us. When he saw a large and hungry crowd, Jesus felt compassion and fed them. When the sick were brought to him, he healed them. When the widow expressed her grief that her son died, Jesus raised him from the dead. When a public sinner like the woman caught in adultery was brought to him, he taught that those without sin should condemn her first, and then when they all left, he forgave her and told her to sin no more. Jesus was sent to reconcile us to the Father.

Fourth, Jesus wants us to know that his true disciple is the one who practices mercy. In the beautiful Parable of the Good Samaritan, after the priest and the Levite pass by the beaten and dying man, Jesus tells us of the Samaritan who overcomes prejudice and existing cultural norms to care for the wounded man. The true neighbour is the one who shows mercy. Jesus ends the parable by saying: “Go and do likewise”. As committed followers of Jesus, we must strive to be a face of mercy, an ambassador of the merciful Father. We must practice mercy within our families, parishes and communities. Often, we can be so quick to criticise, to be cynical and to complain. We must practice mercy with those closest to us and be people of reconciliation in a world of such polarisation.

Fifth, Jesus taught us that the Father's mercy and forgiveness are limitless and that we, likewise, should forgive repeatedly. Saint Peter asked him how often he should forgive and Jesus replied “seventy times seven” times. Jesus then told Saint Peter the parable of how the king had mercy on a servant who couldn't repay his debts, forgiving him of what he owed. The servant then didn't do likewise to a fellow servant who was in his debt. The king was furious, asking him, “Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow servant, in the same way that I had mercy on you?”

Sixth, Jesus promises us that mercy and forgiveness will be ours if we practice it. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy”. In the Our Father, he taught us to pray, “Forgive us our trespasses (debts), as we forgive those who have trespassed against us (debtors)”. After teaching us that famous prayer, he taught those with him very directly that, “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions”.

### **Why be Merciful?**

The Metropolitan Archbishop of Benin City, Most Rev. Augustine Obiora Akubeze, in his 2016 Lenten Pastoral, titled “*God's Mercy Calls us to be Instruments of Mercy*” explains why we should show mercy to others. According to him,

We show mercy because that is what Jesus commanded, “Be merciful like the Father”. If we are children of the Father, we would desire to behave like our Father who is Himself merciful by nature. The mercy of God is the principle that grounds the Christian teaching on mercy. We show mercy to others because we have first been shown mercy ourselves even when we did not merit it. God's mercy is gratuitous and God does not expect us to place conditions on our showing mercy to our brothers and sisters.

James Keenan identifies six motives for showing mercy in both Scripture and the teaching of the Church Fathers:

- First, Proverbs 15:27 encourage us to practice mercy for the remission of our sins, that is, in gratitude for God's merciful stance toward our sinfulness. John Chrysostom sees mercy, as queen of the virtues, outweighing all our burdensome sins.
- Second, Tobit 12:8-9 tells us that for our prayers to be heard by God, works of mercy should accompany them. This is corroborated by the preaching of several of the Church Fathers, namely, Augustine, Cyprian, Leo the Great, and John Chrysostom.
- Third, Matthew 6:20 suggests the works of mercy will lead to eternal reward, a motivation that Augustine uses.
- Fourth, Matthew 25:40 shows to us that any merciful action is for the sake of the Lord. Cyprian calls this ‘the most powerful of all motives’. Here, the example of Martin of Tours who gave a portion of his cloak to a beggar becomes instructive.
- Fifth, Lactantius and Ambrose urged mercy to fortify human solidarity and to extend the circle of fellowship in the Lord.
- And finally, Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, and Leo the Great remind us that works of mercy bring us into the life of perfection. By practicing mercy, we become more like the God who entered into our own chaos.

## **Conditions for Obtaining God's Mercy**

To obtain God's mercy, the following conditions must be fulfilled: First, there must be repentance and conversion of heart. Second, we should be merciful to others. Third, we should forgive those who have hurt us. Fourth, we should have complete trust in Jesus. Each of these requirements is explained below:

### *Repentance and conversion of Heart*

The first requirement for receiving God's mercy is repentance and conversion of heart. The greatest sin imaginable is not too great to be forgiven, if the sinner is truly repentant. "I desire not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ez. 33:11). Even the worst of sinners God gives sufficient grace to repent and amend their ways. "If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white as wool" (Is. 1:18). While hardened sinners are never excluded from the grace of conversion, they can and at times do, resist God's invitations and inspirations, clinging to their own will and ideas.

### *Be merciful to others*

The second requirement is to be merciful to others. God wants us to receive His mercy and let it flow through us to others. He wants us to extend love and forgiveness to others just as He does to us. While both the Old and New Testament reveal the limitless dimensions of God's mercy, the New Testament goes beyond the old in its emphasis on mercy as a divine characteristic which men must share. If they are to be the recipient of mercy, they must practice mercy.

The devotional practices revealed through St. Faustina were given to us as "vessels of mercy" through which God's love can be poured out upon the world, but they are not sufficient unto themselves. It is not enough for us to hang The Divine Mercy Image in our homes, pray the Chaplet every day at three o'clock, and receive Holy Communion on the first Sunday after Easter. We also have to show mercy to our neighbours through the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy summarized by the Church as *The Seven Corporal Works of Mercy* which are: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to harbour the harbourless, to visit the sick, to visit the imprisoned and to bury the dead and *The Seven Spiritual Works of Mercy* which are to admonish the sinner, to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the afflicted, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive offences and to pray for the living and the dead.

### *Forgive those who have hurt you*

The third condition for receiving mercy from God is to forgive those who have hurt us.

Jesus tells us that he will deal with us in the same way and according to the same measure with which we deal with one another. We can sum it up by saying: What we give to others is what we ourselves will receive from the Lord. Jesus emphasizes this point about the measure of mercy:

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“Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Lk 6:37-38).

We all carry the burden of our sins, the wrongs we do to offend God and to hurt one another. Therefore we always stand in need of God's mercy. We would be spiritually blind if we never acknowledged ourselves as sinners in need of forgiveness from God as well as from those whom we have offended. On the other hand, if we want God's forgiveness, we know we must be ready to forgive. This is what Jesus taught us to ask of our Heavenly Father in the prayer we call the Lord's Prayer: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”.

Our Lord stresses that it is important that we forgive our erring brothers and sisters from our hearts. If our prayer is to be heard, we must pray with a heart that is not closed or hardened by a lack of mercy. Otherwise, we will experience the heart of God closed to us when we offer our prayers and petitions to him. Jesus teaches us:

“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go: first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Mt 5:23-24).

In his book titled “What To Do When Jesus Is Hungry” Fr. Andrew Apostoli, C.F.R. cites a moving example of someone who showed extraordinary mercy to another who had done him great harm, and how that mercy brought about a remarkable conversion. A Florentine nobleman named John had a brother who was murdered. According to a common practice of the day, he felt obligated to avenge his brother's death. With the help of some hired henchmen, he tracked down his brother's murderer. The man was unarmed, and John was about to slay him. It was Good Friday. As John approached, the man begged John to forgive him for killing his brother just as Jesus, on the first Good Friday, forgave those who were putting him to death on the Cross. At that moment John was deeply moved by God's grace. Throwing down his sword, he forgave the man who killed his brother and even embraced him. On his way home, he entered a Benedictine Church to pray, and the figure of Christ on the crucifix bowed his head to him in recognition of his generous act of mercy. Because he forgave so profoundly from his heart, John, the would-be murderer, received the grace to become a saint. He is known in Church history as Saint John Gaulbert. He died in 1073 and was canonized in 1193.

Probably the most challenging form of mercy to practice is our Lord's command to forgive even our enemies. He taught this in the Sermon on the Mount. He began by quoting the Old Testament norm of moral behaviour, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy”. What Jesus would teach us would be far different:

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you



love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:44-48).

Our enemies include all who have done harm to us. We must forgive them because we wish to be forgiven. We have already seen an example of this in the story of the forgiveness of Saint John Gaulbert. What our Lord meant by “enemy”, however, is not strictly someone who is out to kill us or someone we love. What Jesus meant by “enemy” also includes someone difficult to love, or toward whom we feel a certain repugnance, or whom we may even judge as unworthy of our love or kindness. In other words, an enemy can simply be a stranger whom we may never see again, someone who will not be able to do us good in return for anything good we may do for him. But we must still reach out with kindness and compassion if that brother or sister is in need, no matter who they are. The term “enemy” can also apply to notorious sinners like the woman caught in adultery; we do not condone the sinner's actions but we grant forgiveness because God loves the sinner and seeks to save him from his sins. Forgiving others for wrongs they may have done can give them the courage and trust to believe that even God would be ready to forgive them.

Jesus' teaching tells us that our love must be a love that costs us something to give. He contrasts this with the love that even pagans are capable of. For example, to love people who are friendly or kind to us does not require much effort. It comes naturally. To love someone who has hurt us is another story. But don't we want God to love us even after we have offended him by our sins? If we share only with those who would share with us, we are not doing any more than thieves would do. Rather, the love we give to our enemies, which has to be a very generous, giving love, makes us like our Heavenly Father. He sends the sunshine not only to good people but even to those who are bad! He lets the rain fall on the fields of the just and on the unjust as well. It is no surprise then that Saint Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, is quoted as saying: “If you don't have an enemy, you had better go out and find one because you need an enemy to teach you how to love”. This is because loving an enemy requires that we open our hearts more fully in order to forgive. Loving an enemy separates a convenient love from a sacrificial, total, and self-forgetting love.

#### *Completely Trust in Jesus*

The fourth condition for receiving divine mercy is to completely trust in Jesus. Trust in Jesus is the essence of the message of mercy. In repeated revelations to St. Faustina, Our Divine Saviour makes it clear that the fountain is His Heart, the water is His mercy, and the vessel is trust. The Lord made it clear to St. Faustina that the more we trust in Him and try to live in His will and not ours, the more graces we will receive. He told her, “*Tell (all people), My daughter, that I am Love and Mercy itself. When a soul approaches Me with trust, I fill it with such an abundance of graces that it cannot contain them within itself, but radiates them to other souls*” (Diary, 1074).

On another occasion, the Lord told St Faustina, “*Let souls who are striving for perfection particularly adore My mercy, because the abundance of graces which I grant them flows from My mercy. I desire that these souls distinguish themselves by boundless trust in My*

*mercy. I myself will tend to the sanctification of such souls. I will provide them with everything they will need to obtain sanctity. The graces of My mercy are drawn by means of one vessel only, and that is trust. The more a soul trusts, the more it will receive. Souls that trust boundlessly are a great comfort to Me, because I pour out all the treasures of My graces into them. I rejoice that they ask for much, because it is My desire to give much, very much. On the other hand, I am sad when souls ask for little, when they narrow their hearts” (Diary, 1578).*

## **The Role of Consecrated Men and Women as God’s Instruments of Mercy**

The Church enumerates ways and means by which all Christ's faithful including consecrated men and women can be ambassadors of God's mercy in our broken world. These are commonly referred to as the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy which are: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to cloth the naked, to harbour the harbourless, to visit the sick, to visit the imprisoned and to bury the dead and the Seven Spiritual Works of Mercy which are: to admonish the sinner, to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the afflicted, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive offences and to pray for the living and the dead.

In the following section, some practical ways in which consecrated men and women and, indeed, all Christ's faithful, can perform the above listed works of mercy will be described.

### **The Corporal Works of Mercy**

#### *Feeding the Hungry*

Giving food to the hungry is the first corporal work of mercy. Of all human sufferings, hunger and thirst rank among the greatest. They are also among the most widespread. Countless people in the world go to bed hungry each night. Many people also daily face a critical shortage of drinking water. It is no wonder that Jesus mentions these two human needs, first among all the ways we may serve Him by attending the neediest of His brothers and sisters: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink ... as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt. 25:35, 40).

Jesus was greatly concerned about those who suffered hunger. On more than one occasion, he multiplied bread to feed the hungry crowds who had followed him for days while he was preaching.

This divine injunction to feed the hungry is in imitation of God Himself who allowed man to eat freely of all the trees in the Garden of Eden except one and even fed the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness. This same God who cares for us as a father will bless the work of our hands if we feed the hungry.

A passage from Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* can serve as a synthesis since it makes the work of mercy “feed the hungry” a responsibility of the Church coming from the very action of Jesus of Nazareth:



Life in many poor countries is still extremely insecure as a consequence of food shortages, and the situation could become worse: hunger still reaps enormous numbers of victims among those who, like Lazarus, are not permitted to take their place at the rich man's table, contrary to the hopes expressed by Paul VI. Feed the hungry (cf. Mt. 25:35, 37, 42) is an ethical imperative for the universal Church, as she responds to the teachings of her Founder, the Lord Jesus, concerning solidarity and the sharing of goods. Moreover, the elimination of world hunger has also, in the global era, become a requirement for safeguarding the peace and stability of the planet. Hunger is not so much dependent on lack of material things as on shortage of social resources, the most important of which are institutional.... The right to food, like the right to water, has an important place within the pursuit of other rights, beginning with the fundamental right to life. It is therefore necessary to cultivate a public conscience that considers food and access to water as universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination.

In the works of mercy, we should not only feed those who are physically hungry, we should also try to gratify their spiritual hunger. Hungering for the word of God means desiring to hear that word. It is a longing and a welcoming of the word of God into our minds and hearts. Anyone who comes to love God's Word has a certain relish for it. Hearing the word of God gives them comfort and consolation, courage and guidance. Being deprived of the word of God leaves us with a great hunger for it. We spiritually fulfill this work of mercy to feed the hungry by sharing the word of God with those who long to hear it. According to Fr. Andrew Apostoli, C. F. R. in his illuminating book titled '*What To Do When Jesus Is Hungry*', "When priests preach their sermons, when catechists instruct the young in the faith or when sponsors prepare converts for entrance into the Church, in each instance, someone is ministering the word of God to others who are hungering to receive it". We can also spiritually fulfill the work of mercy of feeding the hungry by encouraging people to receive Jesus often in the Holy Eucharist. We should encourage people to be properly prepared to receive Jesus worthily, especially by being in that state of grace. We should encourage others, especially the young to prepare themselves for receiving Holy Communion by consciously living a good Christian life.

Finally we could also encourage a love for Jesus in the Eucharist by encouraging people to spend time in Eucharistic Adoration. In all these ways, we will be truly feeding the hungry in their need for the greatest food of all, the Holy Eucharist.

To feed the hungry is an obligation. It is an obligation because God wants us to do so and He also feeds us. Everything we have is a gift from Him and should be shared. Thus, the gap between the haves and the have-nots was not in the original plan of God. The early Church understood this well by gathering gifts for the poor after the breaking of the bread. Today also, there are many hungry people around us. It is estimated that more than 25,000 people die every day from malnutrition. From this number, majority of them are children. The awareness that the hungry do exist should incite us to action. Jesus tells us today, "give them food by yourselves" and that we must surely do.

An inconveniencing but painful truth is that our excess bread does not belong to us. Thus, when we give food to the hungry, we are in no way doing them any favour but rather are returning what actually belongs to them. Wastage therefore is a sin. The food we waste does not belong to us. It belongs to those who have nothing to eat. According to Pope Francis, when we throw away food, we are stealing from the table of the poor. Finally, we will not only aim at feeding the hungry, we must move a step further by enabling them to produce food by themselves. In this way God will keep on blessing us.

#### *Giving Water to the Thirsty*

According to Pope Francis, “fresh drinking water is an issue of primary importance, since it is indispensable for human life and for supporting terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem...” (*Laudato Si.* 26).

Among the practical ways of observing this Corporal Work of Mercy are the following:

- ❖ Offering a glass of water to a stranger who strayed to your home
- ❖ Giving drinking water to those who are unable to provide it for themselves
- ❖ Fetching drinking water for the sick, elderly and others who cannot do it by themselves as a result of their conditions
- ❖ Individual owners of wells/bore holes should extend a tap outside to supply water to the needy, free of charge
- ❖ Donating wells or contributing to build wells in areas with poor access to clean water.
- ❖ Organizing the youth as a sports team, to deliver water to individuals and families in need
- ❖ Forming Christian groups to sponsor water projects in poor villages and towns
- ❖ Helping to pay for the cost of installing water pipes in impoverished communities
- ❖ Providing irrigation for farmers especially in areas ravaged by drought
- ❖ Engaging in the salvation of souls (giving living water to them)
- ❖ Satisfying people's thirst for prayer (Psalm 42:1-2; 63:1-2)

#### *Clothing the Naked*

Among the Lord's words on the Canon of judgement on the last day as recorded in Matthew 25:36a are the following: “I was naked and you clothed me”.

Clothing is one of the basic necessities of man. Among us, there are those who are naked and are in need of dressing. Showing charity to this group by donating clothes to them is our concern. It is a work of mercy if we can really share our excess clothes in our wardrobes with others who are in need of clothes to cover their nakedness. Any cloth in our wardrobes that we do not wear in a year does not belong to us. It belongs to the poor and should be given out to them. In clothing the naked, we do not give them our rags or our rejected clothes. We give them from our excess and our excess does not mean our rejected rags.

There is a form of nakedness which is psychological. When someone comes to you as a priest either at the confessional or in a private sharing and discloses his or her privacy to you, the person has stripped himself or herself naked before you. You have become his or her confidant and it is your duty then to cover his or her psychological nakedness. You are

therefore morally bound not to discuss whatever the person discloses to you elsewhere. It is also part of the clothing to affirm the person and give him or her confidence and sense of purpose. The person must leave you feeling better and relieved. Above all, it is a grievous offence to gain an undue advantage of one who has confided in you just as it is for a doctor to sexually exploit his patient. The type of power we have over those who have stripped themselves naked before us whether physical or psychological is called aesculapian power or the healer's power – from the Roman god of healing called Aesculapius. An abuse of it is a mortal sin we must avoid. Let us learn to clothe the naked in all forms. Such work of mercy has its own blessings.

### *Sheltering the Homeless*

Our Lord stressed our responsibility to meet the need for shelter among the least of his brothers and sisters when He told us: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt. 25:35). After our need for food and drink, the need for shelter is the most important physical need we experience. We cannot not live our life with security and dignity in this world without some place that provides us protection from the elements as well as a place we can call “our own, even if temporarily”. Homelessness is a sociological evil. It deprives children of home training and exposes one to danger of all kinds. The state of homelessness appears in different forms today. Many children are on the street with no shelter at night. Tenants run temperature and blood pressure at the beginning of the year. They are afraid of being ejected by their landlords and landladies. Many face threat of house demolition. They go out in the morning only to come back in the evening to notice that their house is no more. Many live in slums and cubicles.

The evil of homelessness gives birth to other evils. Lives are exposed to dangers, the terrors of the night and the violence of the day. Home is the first seat of education. Any child without this basic education is likely to grow up with a defect. Homeless children are exposed to fear. With time, fear becomes so much part of them that they are no longer afraid of anything. At this, their psyche is damaged. They become prone to all sorts of crime. One notices then why evil is on the increase in slums and other poor living environments. Homelessness produces prostitution, armed robbery and assassination as well as quasi mafia groups. Above all, homeless children can easily be groomed as agents of violence. Children who grow up sleeping in the streets at night and carrying plates during the day begging for food with no school to attend practically have no values. Killing means nothing to them. Simply said, homelessness creates a climate of fear. This fear affects everybody.

Having seen the evil of homelessness, what shall we do? We should appeal to landlords to always put themselves in the shoes of their tenants. They should have a rethink and stop harassing their tenants. Increasing the house rent arbitrarily is a sin. Providing shelter is not a prerogative for only landlords. People can also squat with us till they secure their own shelter. Above all, let us open our hearts to serve as a home for those who feel unaccepted for, according to Blessed Teresa, that is the greatest disease today. When we feel too proud and too important that people no longer have access to us, when we turn ourselves into a deity to be consulted, when people leave us feeling smaller, we are in no way better than those who deprive others of the necessity of shelter. In our Churches and organizations, we should erect places of encounter for the young people or build houses for the homeless. We should also get involved in the work to care for refugees and support construction of shelters in our areas

through gifts of time or treasure. When we do all these, Yahweh will be our own shelter, shade us from the heat of the dry season and our refuge and cover from storm and rain (Isaiah 4:6).

### *Visiting the Prisoners*

Visiting prisoners is also included in Christ's Canon of judgement in Matthew 25. Jesus also sees himself in the person of a prisoner and even appears before us in his guise. Paul the great missionary and writer of the epistles was also in jail and some of his works like Letters to the Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon and Philippians are called chain letters because they were written in the prison. Many of the apostles suffered imprisonment. Thus, imprisonment marked the early Church. Paul was converted on his way to chain and imprison the followers of the way (cf. Acts 9:1-19). It belongs to the character of his conversion that the captor became the captive. It is thus not out of place for him to describe himself as a prisoner in the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Eph 3:1, 4:1, Philem 1). Christ knew that imprisonment will also be the lot of some of his followers and he thus did not hesitate to identify himself in the prisoners. In fact, the mission statement he read in the synagogue which is taken from the prophecy of Isaiah has as one of its elements the liberation of the captives (cf. Lk 4:18, Is 61:1). Even the restoration of sight to the blind has a liberating interpretation. The dungeon is a dark place and those caged in it are considered blind because they do not see the sun. Their liberation from the dungeon is like restoring their light by leading them away from the darkness of the prison to the light of freedom. The Jubilee year is a year of liberation and social egalitarianism.

The initial idea of prison was to be a place of detention till the actual punishment is carried out. The Romans were highly noted for this. In fact among them, there were various forms of punishment depending on both the gravity of the offence and the social status of the offender. For example, citizens are not crucified. That was why Peter was crucified while Paul a Roman citizen was not. He was instead decapitated. Later, prison came to adopt the model of monasteries as a place of rehabilitation. Like the monks, prisoners live in cells, each in his own room to enable contemplation and remorse. Through work, instruction and other exercises, the prisoner experiences an inner change and at the end of his detention, he comes out a better person and is fully integrated into the society. Today, the prison has become an instrument of torture and intimidation. Instead of cells, the prisoners are dumped together in a small space as if thrown into a zoo. Their living condition is deplorable. The prison becomes a place of encounter for criminals. Innocent people suddenly find themselves mixing up with this set of people and unconsciously imbibing their vices. With this, the aim of imprisonment is defeated. Prisoners come out worse than before. They are psychologically damaged. This also contributes to the fact that today, going to prison is a stigma. The Church therefore is called upon to look into this type of liberation.

The description of what is required of us in this Corporal Work of Mercy can be outlined as follows:

- Participate in parish or diocesan visits to prisons
- Support socio-economic needs of prisoners: Donate food and clothes to prisoners and contribute to their personal care, and improvement of prison environment

- Support children and family dependants of prisoners. Donate to charities that care for prisoners and dependants of prisoners through Society of St. Vincent de Paul
- Speak up for the dignity of prisoners e.g. overcrowding and dehumanizing conditions for prisoners and guards alike.
- Support programmes of restorative justice to help former prisoners integrate back into society e.g. Job training and employment
- Welcome former prisoners into our parish communities with a commitment to walking the journey of reintegration with them and helping them not to give up hope.
- Visit and care for persons who live in isolation, imprisoned by the circumstances of life e.g. the homebound elderly members; the residents of the homes for the aged and the physically handicapped

Visiting those in prison certainly does not mean being “soft on crime”. On the contrary, there are some crimes so horrible that their perpetrators must be completely and irrevocably quarantined, put behind bars for a long time or even for life, for the protection of society and to deter other criminals from daring to commit such evil acts in the future. With some violent criminals, society has little choice but to “lock them up and throw away the key”.

Throw away the key, indeed — but not the *person*. Punishment deters and quarantines and gives the criminal the opportunity to do penance, but friendship and prayer have the capacity to reform and to heal. A true work of mercy is done by Christians who befriend those in correctional institutions in the name of Jesus Christ, thereby affirming their human dignity as persons made in God's image.

### *Visiting the Sick*

Visiting the sick has to do with all the services rendered to the sick and the dying till the person breathes his or her last. It also extends to the aged in old people's home. It is not just a corporal work of mercy. It is an integral apostolate of the Church given by Jesus Christ himself when he tied healing to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God (cf. Mat 10:7-8). He himself healed the sick and asked the disciples being sent out on a mission to do the same. The priest's word of greeting at a sick call includes an admonition from the Letter of St. James 5:14-15, *Is anyone among you sick? Let him call the elders of the Church to pray for him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. Even if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.* This passage tells us the indispensable position the sick occupied among the early Christians. The same position still remains today. The sick are still members of our Church even when they cannot attend our assembly. It is then left for the assembly to visit the sick. Every activity of the baptized carried out in faith carries this ecclesial effect. Thus, a prayer programme organised at the sick bed of one of us by a group of lay people has already pitched the tent of the Church there. This is also the same, when an individual carries out the same function.

The Church must carry out this healing apostolate all the time. In his book *From Crisis to Kairos*, Orobator, a Nigerian Jesuit gives, among others, three images of the Church in terms of healing apostolate. They are thus, a welcoming community, a community of hope, and a reconciling community. Rinaldo Ronzani shares the same view with Orobator on the Church as a welcoming community. He notes that, “the negative effects of illness place us in



situation of liminality as we are cut off from the community, our relationships are disrupted... Inner isolation and loneliness seem to take over as we are unable to continue to live our life as before”. People with deadly diseases are often discriminated because of fear and prejudice and it is this stigma that kills most of the time. It is thus the duty of the welcoming Church to reassure them that the mother Church carries them in her bosom. The ecclesial identity of presence therefore should be felt where the sick are. Laying on of hands and anointing are also healing. The sick feel the healing touch of God of grace in their broken body. Also, the Church as a community of hope should know that some illnesses go with depression. Therefore, the patients and family members need a message of hope. We have to console them and let them know that God has not abandoned them. Finally, as a community of reconciliation, the Church makes sure that the patient reconciles with God for his past mistakes, reconciles with those who must have been responsible for his illness and as well reconciles with himself. Without this integral reconciliation, holistic healing of mind and body will not take place.

Our attitude towards the sick should be that of love and respect. No matter the quality of life, no matter how broken the body is due to illness, the inherent dignity of the patient as one created in the image and likeness of God is always there. The body of the sick is the body of Jesus. As the bread is broken for the world, so is the body of the sick broken by illness. Jesus Christ suffers in the sick. When we attend to them, we attend to Jesus Christ. This is a gospel truth.

Care for the sick – Visit family members and friends who are ill. Pray for the sick individually by name. Make meals for people who are facing difficult situations, perhaps due to the care of a sick loved one.

Of course, there are some people who are “sick” not from physical illness but from social isolation. One thinks especially of the elderly in our communities who, whether at home or in long-term care facilities, live in geographical isolation from their loved ones. “Visiting the sick” in our world can mean reaching out to the friendless in our local nursing homes: those who are “sick at heart” from being lonely and forgotten and who are regularly deprived of the basic human need called “friendship”. This corporal work of mercy is relatively easy to do. It takes no extensive background reading in economics and no training in political activism to accomplish. The socially isolated elderly are usually not far away. They often live just around the corner from us, or they are members of our own parish. Simply volunteer with the Meals-on-Wheels program and you will find them. Parish priests can tell parishioners who to visit in the parish.

Visiting the housebound elderly and the chronically and terminally ill is no easy task. Trying to do it on a regular basis can take us right out of our “comfort zones” because it confronts us with real human lives for which, in earthly terms, there seems to be so little hope. Such people often live in squalor and with the constant stench of sickness or the wince of chronic pain. But our mere presence, as someone willing to be a friend and a listening ear, can mean much more to them than we can imagine, and along the way they will be giving a precious gift to us as well: the gift of growth in the virtue of compassion.



### *Burying the Dead*

“To bury the dead” is usually listed as the last of the Corporal Works of Mercy. There are two reasons for this. The first is obvious: the final act of respect we can show to anyone is by burying his mortal remains. All the other corporal works of mercy are shown to the living. The second reason is that this is the only Corporal Work of Mercy not mentioned by our Lord in His parable of the Judgement (cf. Mt. 25:34-40). Rather, the Church added this work of mercy out of the respect owed to the human body as “God's temple” (1 Cor. 3:16) and out of consideration for the bereaved.

No doubt most of us make sure that our relatives and friends have a proper funeral service. But we also need to be aware of the needs of those who are grieving: struggling to “bury their dead” emotionally. Grieving can be a long and arduous process; shedding tears at a funeral rarely completes it. We need to help one another to truly bury our lost loved ones by letting go of them, entrusting them to the hands of our merciful Creator and Saviour. That takes friendship — a patient friendship that keeps on visiting the bereaved, keeps on helping them dry their tears, even when the grieving process takes many months or even years. This is a precious work of mercy: to help one another emotionally “bury the dead”, entrusting them finally to the merciful Heart of the Redeemer.

As often as possible, we should attend wakes and funerals, pray the Divine Mercy Chaplet and Rosary with and for people who are near death, visit cemeteries and offer prayers and Masses for those who have died.

### **The Spiritual Works of Mercy**

In addition to the corporal works of mercy described in the preceding section, we are also obliged to perform Spiritual Works of Mercy. These include the following:

- To admonish the sinner (correct those who need correction) – Speak up, with charity, against sinful and unjust practices. Love the sinner, but hate the sin.
- To instruct the ignorant (teach the faith to others) – Hand on the faith to children and grandchildren as well as the youth through instruction and witness. Volunteer to teach those preparing for Baptism and Confirmation at your parish. Encourage others to listen to Catholic programming on radio and television and to read Catholic publications.
- To counsel the doubtful (give advice to those who need it) – Have a heart for those who are struggling, confused or depressed. Help those looking for jobs and facing big decisions.
- To comfort the sorrowful (give comfort to those who suffer) – Call or visit friends in difficult situations or who may be lonely. Write an encouraging note to someone in need of support.
- To bear wrongs patiently (be patient with others) – Practice loving patience with family members, co-workers and others.
- To forgive all injuries (to forgive others who hurt you.) – Pray for all those who have hurt you. Invite estranged family members to gatherings. Don't speak ill of others.

- To pray for the living and the dead (to pray for everyone who needs our prayers) – Keep a list of people who need prayers close at hand. Have Masses celebrated for those in need or departed friends and family. Obtain an indulgence this year for family members or friends who have died.

According to Pope Francis, a jubilee year that does not open people's wallets to share what they have with others is not a true jubilee. “This Pope isn't inventing that”, he insisted. “It's in the Bible”. At his weekly general audience Ash Wednesday (2016) in St Peter's Square, Pope Francis spoke about the description of a jubilee year in the Book of Leviticus. The religious feast also had serious social implications, he said, because it proclaimed a forgiveness of debts, the freedom of indentured servants and special generosity toward the poor and the stranger. “It was a kind of ‘general amnesty’, which permitted everyone to return to their original situation with the cancellation of every debt, restitution of land and the possibility of enjoying once again the freedom proper to members of the people of God”, he said. For God's chosen people, who are called to holiness, the Pope said, the jubilee prescriptions help “to combat poverty and inequality, guaranteeing a dignified life for all and a fair distribution of the land on which to live and draw sustenance”.

During the Catholic Church's jubilee year, each Christian should think about what they have, he said, and “if they have too many things”, they should “give some to someone who has nothing; 10 percent or 50 percent. The Holy Spirit will inspire you”. Pope Francis told the crowd gathered in St Peter's Square that “a jubilee is for conversion so that our hearts become bigger, more generous, more (like) a child of God, with more love”. “I'll tell you something”, he said, “if this jubilee doesn't reach our pockets, it's not a real jubilee. Do you understand? This is in the Bible... this Pope isn't inventing that. It's in the Bible”. “The biblical message is very clear: courageously open yourselves to sharing; this is mercy”, the Pope said. “If we want mercy from God, let us begin by being merciful ourselves”.

A biblical jubilee is about sharing and solidarity, Pope Francis said. “The biblical jubilee was a ‘jubilee of mercy’ because it was lived with a sincere search of the good of one's needy brothers and sisters”. The laws governing God's people in the Bible, he said, also had other means for encouraging people to help others experience God's mercy. One of those things was the command to tithe a tenth of one's earnings to the temple and to widows and orphans or to give a portion of the first fruits of one's harvest. In addition, he said, the Bible had harsh words for those who charged high interest rates when loaning to the poor. In many countries, he added, usury is still a huge problem and families lose everything and end up on the streets. “Please, let us pray that in this jubilee the Lord would remove from all our hearts this desire to have more”, he said.

Blessed Sr. Lucia, one of the seers of Our Lady of Fatima observed in her book titled “*Calls from the Message of Fatima*” that “We have no charity if we cannot sacrifice ourselves for the benefit of our neighbours who are poor and need our help, our assistance in their difficulty, our alms and our comfort”.

## **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it can be seen that mercy is love that seeks to forgive, console, assist, and care for others in time of need. Mercy is an act of love done without expecting anything in

return; it is done for love itself. Our Lord gave of Himself on Holy Thursday when He instituted the Most Blessed Sacrament; the Eucharist perpetuates these acts of self-giving daily on altars throughout the world. Jesus made it clear in Sacred Scripture that love of God and neighbour is the greatest commandment.

As Christians, we are called to be merciful to others in the same way God the Father is merciful to us. In a word, we are to love our neighbour as God has loved us.

Our Lord explained to St. Faustina that faith alone would not suffice. “There must also be acts of mercy”, He told her. “Even the strongest faith will be of no use without works” (Diary 742).

“I am giving you three ways of exercising mercy toward your neighbour”, says Our Lord: the first—by deed, the second—by word, the third—by prayer. In these three degrees is contained the fullness of mercy, and it is an unquestionable proof of love for Me. By this means a soul glorifies and pays reverence to My mercy. (Diary 742).

These, then, must become our fundamental ways of expressing trust in the mercy of God. By deeds of mercy, we show others how to be merciful; by our words of encouragement and advice, in preaching, teaching, and writing, we let others know of God's mercy; by prayer, we implore mercy for sinners and glorify the mercy of the Lord.

God is pleased by every act of mercy, because in the brother or sister that we assist, we recognize the face of God which no one can see (cf. Jn 1:18). As stated by Pope Francis in his homily during the Canonisation of Mother Theresa of Calcutta, “Each time we bend down to the needs of our brothers and sisters, we give Jesus something to eat and drink; we clothe, we help, and we visit the Son of God (cf. Mt 25:40)”.

Consecrated persons are called to be a concrete and prophetic sign of God's closeness to His people. All forms of consecrated life, each according to its characteristics, are called to be in a permanent state of mission, sharing “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1). Jesus sends all consecrated men and women, in the name of the merciful God, with the same mission that he has received. They are therefore sent as a world that encourages, a hand that lifts up, a compassionate embrace for all those who suffer, a defense of all those whose lives are threatened.

The Consecrated Life, like the Good Samaritan, goes out to the highways and byways and takes upon itself the sufferings of his brothers and sisters. It makes itself present to immigrants and refugees, in marginal barrios and in abandoned places, curing and teaching, accompanying processes of reconciliation and defending rights and dignity. In this paper, I have tried to show how these can be done to the glory of God and for our eternal salvation.

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