

Reflections on the Spiritual  
and Corporal Works of Mercy

# BE MERCIFUL



BILL HUEBSCH

**TWENTY  
THIRD** *23rd*  
PUBLICATIONS  
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Scripture is taken from  
the New Revised Standard Version.

I am indebted to Cardinal Walter Kasper  
for his exhaustive treatment of this topic in *Mercy:  
The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian  
Life* (Paulist Press, 2014).

### **TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS**

1 Montauk Avenue, Suite 200, New London, CT 06320  
(860) 437-3012 • (800) 321-0411 • [www.23rdpublications.com](http://www.23rdpublications.com)

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ISBN: 978-1-62785-117-6

Printed in the U.S.A.

# HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

## — SIX SMALL-GROUP SESSIONS —

**Gather** ■ Welcome everyone to your group. Offer a special welcome to participants from other faith traditions who may join you. Ask participants to introduce themselves, if needed. If you are using the PowerPoint presentation that accompanies this booklet, position the screen so all can see it, and start with the first slide. Follow the notes provided for each slide to augment the material that is in this booklet.

As your class or group session gets underway, always begin with the Sign of the Cross.

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**Read** ■ Moving around the circle in your group, read aloud the paragraphs of each work of mercy. Rotate readers with each paragraph. Group members should note items in the material that strike them as especially important.

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**Discuss and pray** ■ When you come to the group process notes, pause to continue around the circle, discussing or praying as the notes direct. Use our suggestions as a starting point and add your own questions, prayers, or action plans.

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### **Six small-group or personal sessions**

**SESSION ONE:** *Understanding mercy*

**SESSION TWO:** *Teach the uneducated and assure the doubtful*

**SESSION THREE:** *Caution sinners, bear wrongs, and forgive*

**SESSION FOUR:** *Comfort the sorrowful and pray unceasingly*

**SESSION FIVE:** *Give food, drink, and clothing*

**SESSION SIX:** *Care for the homeless, the sick, the prisoner, and the dead*

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**Finish** ■ As you come to the end of your process in each meeting, invite participants to identify the one or two large ideas to which they feel called to respond. Each participant may hear the text differently; there are no “correct” answers.

Conclude your session with a brief prayer and hospitality.

## SESSION ONE

# Understanding mercy

It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples.

▪ **POPE FRANCIS:** *The Face of Mercy* (no. 15), 2015

In calling us to reflect on the long-standing works of mercy, Pope Francis stands in the very center of the Christian tradition. We Christians have long sought to understand what it means to be persons of mercy both personally and institutionally. Our history is littered with both spectacular successes in this pursuit as well as with dismal and terrible failures.

We Catholics built thousands of hospitals and schools throughout the world, providing relief, care, and education to the masses. Our agencies, such as Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, Dorothy Day Centers, Catholic Charities, St. Vincent de Paul Societies, and many others, serve millions annually with medicine, food, the fight for justice, and the comforting presence of an ally. We serve the homeless, the sick, the grieving, and the imprisoned. In the city where I live, Catholic agencies were among the very first to provide hospice beds for men dying of AIDS in the height of the epidemic. Likewise, those suffering doubt or needing

spiritual guidance often receive it from us through our retreat centers and agencies. Many religious orders were founded on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, some even taking the name “Mercy” in their titles.

And yet we have also withheld mercy. We burned at the stake thousands judged harshly as heretics. We treated non-Catholics as less than ourselves, even suggesting they could not go to heaven. We failed to stand up for the poor; our clergy lived as wealthy princes in the church, clad in silk and gold while the poor lay begging at our gates. We used doctrinal purity and law to drive away our own sisters and brothers when they were most in need of our mercy because of the loss of love and the resulting divorce. When gay and lesbian people came to us, we often turned them away. Catholics shunned members of their own families for marrying the wrong person; no mercy for them. We allowed ourselves to become part of the status quo in the West, earning more money and wielding more power, but we did not always use that power to end poverty, fight discrimination, end the death penalty, defend prisoners, reduce environmental degradation, or support immigrants and refugees.

This mixed history is typical of us humans. We’ve always been a resistant lot when it comes to following the teachings of Jesus. From the disciple Peter onward, we have not understood him. Or, having understood finally, we have denied him. We deny him now when we see him in the poor and suffering of the world, when we see him struggling to carry enough water for a single day’s existence, or when we see him suffering spiritually or materially in so many other ways—in our homes, neighborhoods, towns, and parishes.

### **Group or personal process**

**REFLECT** *Think back over the past week or two. Where have you seen people in need: people hungry, suffering doubt, dealing with illness, or feeling lonely? How did you help them or fail to do so? How does your experience of seeing so many people in need shape your response to them?*

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**ACTION** *Choose one person or group and decide at least one way you can offer them mercy in the coming week.*

Pope Francis has his finger on this human impulse to look the other way when we see suffering. He seems to know that we need to be called and recalled to active love in the form of these works of mercy and charity.

He is calling us, both institutionally and personally, to a life more fully centered on mercy. We are being reminded that Jesus is hungry and he lives in our towns. He suffers doubt and he lives in our households. He is rejected and hated and he is our brother or sister. Jesus is on death row, he is homeless, he is sick and dying, and we're called to tend to him in these people. Mother Teresa was once asked where she got the strength to care for the dying, starving, sick, and homeless people whom she encountered every day. "I begin each day," she said, "by going to Mass and receiving Jesus in Holy Communion, hidden under the form of bread. Then I go out into the streets and find the same Jesus hidden in the dying destitute people, in the lepers, in the abandoned babies, in the AIDS people, and in the homeless and the hungry. It is the same Jesus."

Mercy thus flows from the Eucharist for us Catholics. It orients us to the good of others; in it, we reflect and imitate Christ. The God of Jesus is the God of tender mercy, embracing the lost son, assisting the man left to die along the road, and feeding the hungry.

The New Testament introduces us to several lists of Christian virtues that concretely interpret the command found in Luke 6:36 to "be merciful." See 1 Peter 3:8 for example, where we are instructed in this way: "Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind." One can hear the call to be merciful in this text, and one can also imagine how the early community sought to follow the example of Jesus. In the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches us that such merciful people will be blessed.

### **FAITH WITHOUT WORKS OF MERCY IS DEAD**

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?

So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. • **JAMES 2:14-17**

Other examples abound in the New Testament. See Romans 12:8, 2 Corinthians 7:15, and Philippians 1:8. In Philippians 2:4–5, the community is encouraged to imitate Christ in an ancient hymn that instructs us, in part, with these words: “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” See also Colossians 3:12, where we are encouraged to clothe ourselves “with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”

In Hebrews 13:3, one of the works of mercy is articulated very literally: “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.”

Perhaps the most famous list of the works of mercy is found in Matthew chapter 25:31–46, which is Jesus’ own major speech about how we will finally be judged.

Based on this scriptural background, the Christian tradition has long listed the so-called corporal and spiritual works of mercy. They instruct us to develop a lifestyle of gracious charity toward our neighbors. These works of mercy are “where the rubber hits the road” in the Christian faith. In other words, this is where faith gets serious and is put to the test. Regardless of how loudly and often you profess the Creed, follow the rules, or master the doctrine and dogma, the bottom line is that if you haven’t brought comfort and mercy to the poor and vulnerable, if you haven’t tended the sick and welcomed the rejected, then the gospel has not yet come to life in your heart.

The gospel comes to life when we put our hands, feet, and hearts to work. That’s why we call these the *works* of mercy. They aren’t merely a theology or an answer to a catechism question. This is how we’ll be judged. “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,” Jesus tell us in Matthew 25:40, “you did it to me.”

It is important to note that these works of mercy do not flow from the Ten Commandments or any sort of law. As we said above, the works of mercy flow from love; from receiving, being, and becoming the body of Christ in each Eucharist; and from the gospels and the teachings of Jesus. Those judged harshly in Matthew 25 are the ones who, even if they followed the law, failed to live with charity toward their neighbor.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has this to say about the works of mercy: *The **works of mercy** are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his [or her] spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God.* (no. 2447)

These works of mercy are near and dear to the heart of God, as we can tell from their prominence in the Scriptures. That line of Scripture we just read—“Just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me”—reminds us that God resides among us. How we treat each other is how we are treating God, as Mother Teresa reminded us. God is not absent from the life and soul of the persons around us; God is present. Our acts of mercy are to our neighbor and at the same time to Christ.

An early Christian saint earned his place in history by having this revealed to him in a dramatic way. St. Christopher is said to have carried a child to safety across a river. Upon arriving on the far bank, the child revealed himself to Christopher as Christ himself. In every hungry person we feed, in every homeless person to whom we lend a helping hand, in every immigrant we welcome, and in every person we teach, forgive, or care for, we find Christ revealing himself *to us*.

### **Group or personal process**

**REFLECT** *Given this discussion about works of mercy being central to our faith, how do you describe what it means to be a follower of Jesus? Specifically, what would you say is required of Christians if we are to be considered faithful disciples?*

# Teach the uneducated and assure the doubtful

## **Teach the uneducated**

This work of mercy was traditionally called “instruct the ignorant,” but a better way to describe it in contemporary terms might lead us to see ourselves as each other’s “teachers of life.” A teacher of life goes beyond the facts in a lesson—the doctrine or law—to help the learner grasp the deeper realities and significance of the lesson. Teaching the uneducated also includes the basics of reading, writing, literature, math, and science, but even here, the goal is to let the education we provide lead to a better life.

The church has long been invested in this work of mercy. Building and running schools throughout the world has been a mission of the church for centuries. And certainly this community-based work on our part is essential. Jesus was, after all, a great teacher himself.

But the first teacher of children is actually not the school or the religious education program or even the parish priest. The first teacher is mom and dad. When you who are parents take the time to sit with your kids and read, talk, or learn together, you are practicing this work of mercy.

Such parental teaching extends well beyond religious instruction into all of life: how to relate with others, how to handle money, how to be generous, kind, and loving toward neighbors, how to have a healthy sexuality, how to be morally upright, and how to listen to one’s conscience in decision making. These “lessons of life” are not taught like lessons on spelling or arithmetic are. These life lessons are taught by example and osmosis. So when parents live an authentic and convincing Christian life in all these

dimensions—and teach their children to follow—they are also practicing this work of mercy.

And beyond the household, mercy moves us to pay attention to others, such as nephews and nieces living in homes where good example is not being given. Or it moves us to reach out through organized programs such as Big Brother/Big Sister to help those who don't have parents to provide guidance. It may move us to get involved with youth ministry or with Scouting programs, 4-H clubs, or sports aimed at those most in need. And for some, it moves us to serve as a foster home, or possibly to adopt an otherwise homeless child.

And beyond even this, there is the great need for education in poor neighborhoods or nations throughout the world. Education is the key to human dignity and the ability to provide a dignified life for one's family. Mercy moves us to get involved with one of the many programs serving the poor in nations around the world, including our own, by sponsoring a child, family, or whole village. We practice this work of mercy when we look beyond ourselves and our needs and help others gain a foothold on the pathway to economic independence and self-sustenance.

But we also practice this work of mercy with each other in the coming and going of everyday life. We teach each other when we live our lives with integrity and authenticity “in front of one another.” When we see injustice, selfishness, mean behavior, or dishonest activity, we teach those around us by our response to it. People see us turn the other cheek, do the honest thing, or treat people with respect; and by watching us, they learn how to do that themselves.

### **Group or personal process**

**REFLECT** *Who have your teachers been? Whom do you teach? What do you teach them?*

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**ACTION** *Find an agency that provides education to people somewhere who otherwise have no access to it. Support this group financially and personally.*

## Assure the doubtful

Assuring the doubtful helps build their confidence; confidence leads people to act and believe with conviction. Mercy moves you to assure others that the universe is unfolding as it should because the Holy Spirit leads and guides us.

Here is a work of mercy that has two sides to it. On the one hand, we practice this work of mercy when we offer assurance to those around us about life decisions, faith, and other matters. Certainly, moms and dads, you do this for your own kids. Likewise, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, grandparents: you can also offer such assurance to each other. Beyond the family, you can also offer such assurance to friends and fellow travelers on the journey of life.

On the other hand, mercy also moves us to seek out such assurance from friends, spiritual directors, or confessors. We also practice this work of mercy when we open ourselves to being guided and affirmed, to receiving the assurance of others.

Saint Ignatius has something important to teach us here. He counseled the early Jesuits to test their hearts about important decisions, to discern carefully. If they found doubt lingering about a matter, they were advised to wait until the clouds cleared a bit and they felt a stronger sense of certainty. Often guilt or doubt provides us with a message to which we should pay close attention. In this process, we need to check in with trusted guides. We can't go it alone in the spiritual life, and this work of mercy reminds us of that.

This work of mercy moves us to help our fellow travelers on the journey of faith keep themselves *oriented toward holiness*. We have each been given a summons to love; it is our call to holiness. This call is universal, meaning it is offered to everyone. Learning to hear this summons and understand it is the key to being less doubtful. You see, this call to love does not come as an advertisement does; it's not flashy, not on television. It doesn't come from a booming voice in the heavens; doves rarely descend on us.

The summons to love is delivered more humbly. It is embedded in a hundred situations of daily life that present themselves to us day in and day out: a sick child, financial hard times, bad weather for the crops, news

of war and disaster from around the world, knowledge of grinding poverty in other nations or even close to home, a friend who calls “just to talk” but whose life is falling apart, neighbors down the street, a sense of well-being and happiness, the beauty of the gardens, the need of your community for leaders, the slow poisoning of our land and water, habits we may have formed around addictive behavior, awakening to a vocation to religious life—all of these (and many other situations in life) have embedded within them the call to die to ourselves in order to respond with self-giving love.

When we speak of assuring or counseling the doubtful, we mean helping people be assured that what they are seeing in their daily lives does indeed have embedded within it this call to holiness. Yes, within the situation of a sick child, for example, we are called to be self-giving and loving. We often cannot hear this call until we talk it over with a spouse, friend, or pastor. We become deaf to how God calls us unless we allow ourselves to be so assured and counseled.

Saint John of the Cross once said, “He who has himself as spiritual director has an idiot as his spiritual directee!” In other words, we all have blind spots that can only be enlightened by the help and guidance of others.

### **Group or personal process**

**REFLECT** *In what situations of my life is the call to holiness embedded? Who has assured me of this when I was doubtful? Whom have I assured?*

## SESSION THREE

# Caution sinners, bear wrongs, and forgive

### **Caution the sinner**

Pope Francis helps us understand this spiritual work of mercy. In remarks at the Angelus on March 17, 2013, he said this: “Jesus’ attitude is striking: we do not hear the words of scorn, we do not hear words of condemnation, but only words of love, of mercy, which are an invitation to conversation. ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.’”

God’s face is the face of a merciful Father who is always patient. As we learn to practice this work of mercy, remember that God is endlessly patient with us. That is his mercy. He always has patience with us; he understands us and waits for us. God does not tire of forgiving us if we are able to return to him with a contrite heart.

With this as our starting point, then, we can see how mercy moves us to learn how to admonish or caution others as Christians by looking inward to see our own faults and by opening ourselves to being cautioned by others. It moves us to be willing to speak up for justice, self-giving love, and charity when we see injustice, selfishness, and hate. This allows us to caution those who persist in darkness. When we do speak up, we must always do so only with charity in our hearts, remembering that we are also sinners. Our warnings to others must be filled with humility, admitting our own tendency to such sinfulness, and offering not judgment but God’s endless mercy.

Pope Francis has explained it this way: “People who judge others are wrong, mistaken, and defeated because they assume God’s place; but God

is the one and only judge. God often ‘takes his time’ when rendering judgment and does not operate according to human ways or conceptions. Jesus spoke of picking a splinter in a neighbor’s eye while failing to tend to the plank in our own. He who does this is so obsessed with the person he wants to judge ... that the splinter will not let him sleep! He who judges becomes defeated, ends badly, because the same measure will be used to judge him. Jesus, before the Father, never accuses; it is the opposite, he defends!” (From Pope Francis’ daily homily on June 23, 2014).

One of the best ways to caution sinners, therefore, is to simply live convincingly ourselves. When situations arise at work, school, home, or the parish in which it is possible to act selfishly, mercy moves us to simply take the loving way out. People who see us dying to ourselves in such situations are being cautioned without us lecturing them. We teach people to live by the self-giving love of Jesus in his paschal mystery when we demonstrate its validity in practice.

### **Group or personal process**

**REFLECT** *Describe a situation in which you were in the position to humbly caution others by your own actions or words.*

### **Bear wrongs patiently and forgive offences willingly**

We turn now to the fourth and fifth of the spiritual works of mercy, to be patient with those who annoy us and to forgive each other generously. In these we find the key to our spiritual life. On the very cross that served as his death chamber, Jesus turned to his killers to forgive them; he offered mercy to one of the men dying with him, and he lovingly invited his mother, Mary, and John to become vessels of mercy and comfort for each other and the whole church. And let us think of Peter: he denied Jesus three times precisely when he should have been his strongest defender. And yet, when he met Jesus at that fish fry on the beach in the Gospel of John, did Jesus hold this against him? Jesus gazed at him, wordlessly saying, *Peter, don't be afraid of your weakness; trust in me.* Peter finally seemed to understand, and his experience of the tenderness and mercy of Jesus changed his life.

So with us. When we imitate Jesus in this work of mercy and forgive others, offering them that second or third chance, then we are freed like Peter was freed. As we practice this work of mercy, do not scold or withhold forgiveness from others.

Parents, you play a special role in this with your children, of course. You teach them to forgive by forgiving them. And spouses, your happiness and love flow from how quickly and repeatedly you forgive one another. Spouses live in very close quarters with each other, compromising their own tastes and giving up their own space; this can be difficult and cause conflict. When it does, leap to forgiveness.

Beyond our own households, mercy moves us to be persons of forgiveness in our social circle. When others behave in ways that annoy us, we forgive them rather than gossip about them to others. Judge less; forgive more. That's the code of this work of mercy.

As we grow in our skills at forgiveness, we will learn to accept that people will hurt us all through life. The key is this: forgive immediately! You don't need to bring in a negotiating team from the UN. Simple words of forgiveness are the best. When you feel hurt, then pray for that person and forgive immediately. And if you have caused the hurt, ask for forgiveness.

Beyond the family or household, we practice this work of mercy in our public lives when we are moved to be patient with that lady in the checkout lane who just took her time like no one else was shopping that day. (You've been the one behind her in line, haven't you?) Mercy moves us to try to understand her situation in life, her circumstances. She may live alone, and this encounter with the clerk may be her only personal encounter for the day. If it takes but a minute or two longer than usual, what's the real harm in that? This work of mercy opens our hearts at such moments to be compassionate toward the ones who offend us.

We all have people in our lives about whom we "roll our eyes" when we hear them talk or watch them operate. That eye roll might be expressing our contempt for them, but this work of mercy moves us to another place. It calls us to take a step back, treat them with love, and be patient. This is especially true when they have hurt or offended us; then the call to forbearance is all the greater. Forgive and forget!

## **Group or personal process**

**REFLECT** *When have you practiced this work of mercy? Are there people with whom you find it “just impossible” to be patient and kind?*

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**REFLECT** *Whom have you forgiven? Who has forgiven you? Where has forgiveness been withheld in your life, either by you or others?*

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**ACTION** *Think about people whom you keep at arm’s length because they have hurt or offended you. Write them a note to reestablish a connection. No need to discuss the offenses in your note; simply say you are thinking of them and wish them well.*

## SESSION FOUR

# Comfort the sorrowful and pray unceasingly

### **Comfort the sorrowful**

In our lives, sadness and sorrow, difficulty and affliction, will all come our way; it's part of being human. Eventually we will all die. While this sounds dark and hopeless, this work of mercy allows us to make it into something much more divine! As we console one another and stand firm with each other in times of trouble, we show others that suffering is not an end in itself. In fact, such suffering holds the potential to be a moment of grace. So while we don't believe that God afflicts us with suffering, we do believe that by consoling one another, God can draw good out of it.

Mercy moves us to pay attention to those around us. Who is suffering now? Who needs our word of comfort or consolation? Who is anxious and fearful? Moms and dads, you have a special role to play with your children in this regard; but children, you should also tend to your parents with the same level of life-giving consolation. Beyond those who live in your household, you can also pay attention to neighbors and friends. Don't be afraid to go to them; the words you need to comfort them will be given to you at the right moment by the Holy Spirit.

The secret to this work of mercy is to give of our time. Time can be the most valuable gift we have, and often it is a gift we may give reluctantly. We may feel we have so many things to do: errands, TV programs, e-mail, Facebook, laundry, or shopping. Giving our time to someone who needs our presence can feel like a huge demand, and yet giving our time in this way is how we practice this work of mercy.

Mercy moves us to reach out to people who are in need of comfort. It moves our hearts. When there is a catastrophe of any kind—earthquake, storm, floods, or fire—we are moved to help ease the sorrow and sadness. But mercy goes beyond this, to those whose lives are simply “not working.” Mercy moves us away from judgment and toward sympathy and compassion. It does not question what went wrong but simply and lovingly reaches out to help.

This powerful work of mercy takes its lead from Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth. He wrote: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ” (2 Corinthians 1:3–5).

God is the Father of all mercy, the God of all consolation. What a wonderful comfort for us in our times of sorrow. God consoles us. The amazing aspect of this work of mercy is that God reaches out first to us through each other. When we take the risk to comfort those in sorrow, it is God touching their hearts through our actions and words. As Paul wrote, we are consoled so that we may be able to console others.

In our Catholic tradition, we have long spoken of Mary as “Our Lady of Sorrows” because she bore the life, suffering, and death of her son with such faith. At the end of the story, of course, Mary is fully comforted by the presence of her risen Son, Jesus the Lord, now the Christ of all the ages, victor over sorrow and death. The suffering they both endured was the result of violent and evil forces; the suffering itself was not good. But from it came outstanding blessings and joy.

So too, as we comfort the sorrowful, we can assure them that as this time of their life passes, grace will deliver into their hands great blessings.

### **Group or personal process**

**REFLECT** *What sufferings have you borne in your life? What blessings have you seen come from suffering? As you share about this with others, take the*

*time to consider how God brought life from death, love out of hate, and light out of darkness.*

## **Pray for the living and the dead**

This work of mercy leads us to understand God's wonderful desire for us: that we return to him with our whole heart, as the prodigal son did to his own human father. When we pray for others, we want to spend as much time listening as we do talking. Prayer leads somewhere; it leads us to get moving; it moves us to get up and do what needs to be done for others. Prayer is not the isolated activity of a Christian in his or her chapel. This is even more true if the prayer is in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Such prayer leads us to tend to and care for the body of Christ with tremendous mercy! So in prayer, when it is a true work of mercy, we must listen carefully in order to hear God calling us.

Prayer is all about deepening relationships. For most people, prayer of this sort is more meditative than demanding. It doesn't take a lot of words. It requires a quiet heart and the ability to recall those around us, both living and dead, and to hold them simply before the Lord. We simply bring to mind the people whom we encounter: friends, family, neighbors, coworkers, even strangers we encounter while traveling, shopping, or walking. We likewise bring to mind those who have died. We reflect on them in the presence of God and simply wait for God's word to come to us. It does come. In God's word, we find the relationship that exists between us and others, both the living and the dead. And in this process, we are moved to action! The insights and intuitions that come to us in this prayer are powerful.

We believe that we can help those who have died. Works of mercy are acts of charity, after all. Likewise, those who have died help us through their prayers. This isn't some sort of superficial form of contact with the dead, like we'd find in séances or voodoo, but a prayerful presence to each other, an ongoing connection. We practice this work of mercy when we pray in this way for the living and the dead.

Let's be clear and remind ourselves that all prayer is directed to God,

not to the deceased friend or relative, even if they are now officially canonized. But we believe that we pray *together with* Mary, the saints, and our deceased friends. In this prayer, we share with God our deepest hopes and fears, our happiness and sadness, and the things that frighten or frustrate us in our daily life.

A key element of this work of mercy is that it leads us to a new relationship with God. Remember the Pharisee and the tax collector, a parable that Jesus tells in Luke 18:9–14. The Pharisee was “in charge” of his own prayer: boasting about his good works and thanking God for making him such a wonderful person. Jesus called this for what it was: prayer that exalts the one who prays. But the tax collector in this story took a different point of view, and he is our teacher now. He stood humbly before God and said, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

### **Group or personal process**

**REFLECT** *Pause and call to mind the people who are in your personal communion of saints. Create a short litany of them. How do you pray with them?*

## SESSION FIVE

# Give food, drink, and clothing

### **Feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty**

We turn now to the first of the bodily or corporal works of mercy: to feed those who are hungry. And we will immediately add the second, which is related to the first: to give drink to the thirsty.

Moms and dads have the daily work of feeding their always-hungry children. This is a blessed work and a calling. We should consider it part of practicing this work of mercy. When parents give their hearts to their children, the work of their hands follows. This is also how children learn to be generous toward others. This work of mercy calls us to add love to what we do at home. Think of yourself as offering your kids and their friends God's own love. Keep uppermost in your mind the idea that, through the work of your hands and feet right there in your home, God's love is being communicated and telegraphed to all in your care. Make mealtime an important event in your home, a daily work of charitable love.

Beyond that, mercy moves us to keep an eye on those who circle around our households and families—friends, relatives, and neighbors. We can extend our love to these others by welcoming them into our homes and offering them hospitality. Such hospitality has always been the mark of a Christian. By lending our ear, offering a bite to eat, or simply opening the door, we may change a life.

Moving beyond even our friends and neighbors now, let's consider those who have so much less than we do. We've all seen the homeless, the mentally ill who live in public places, and families struggling for a meal.

This work of mercy calls us to think of them daily and make choices that are based on the welfare of these poor ones, and not only on our own welfare.

Mercy moves us to think about what we waste each day, about the food we simply throw away. Think about how often we eat too much, or eat expensive foods when we could eat more simply. Think about how often we eat at restaurants where half-filled plates of our meals are simply carried away by the waiter and dumped into the garbage.

The purpose of being mindful of such things is not so much to cause us to feel guilty—although such guilt can lead us to change our life—but to keep us mindful at the same time of the suffering and poor who live around us. We often see them but ignore them.

In the Gospel of Luke, there is a disturbing and haunting story that illustrates this. It's found in Luke 16:19–31. There was, it seems, this rich guy who lived extremely comfortably, dressed in beautiful clothing and jewelry, and living the high life. Like many of us do occasionally, he ate very well, even *lavishly*, but he did it every day. Outside his house—in fact, at his very gate—lay a poor fellow named Lazarus. Lazarus was down on his luck, unable to work, covered with sores, and starving. He longed to satisfy his hunger with what the rich man threw out every day. Sound familiar?

This work of mercy moves us not only to be mindful of the poor around us, but also to be *active* in serving them. The rich fellow in this story certainly knew Lazarus was there, but he didn't lift a finger to help. If we know about the poor, then we serve them because when we do, we are thereby serving Christ. Remember, this is our test as Christians. Feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty are the first two of the corporal works of mercy; they hold pride of place because this is our daily opportunity to serve.

Anyway, back to Luke 16. In this story, Lazarus died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. Coincidentally, the rich guy also died and was buried, but he went to a place of torment and suffering. As the story goes, the rich man looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. From his place of torment, he called out, Father Abraham,

have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames. But Abraham said, Sorry; remember that during your lifetime you received your good things. Meanwhile, Lazarus suffered and begged but you never lifted a finger to help him. Now he is in comfort and you have created your own hell.

This is a haunting story. As Pope Francis wrote in *The Joy of the Gospel*, when we consume lavishly, eating and drinking without regard for those who hunger and thirst, we are eating their food, not our own (no. 189).

There are many other ways to put these two works of mercy into action: As a family or group of friends, make sandwiches and pass them out to the homeless as a way of tending to the body of Christ. Keep granola bars handy in your car and give them to hungry people begging at intersections. (Don't worry if these people are dishonestly asking for help; just help. It's more important to be merciful than to be right.) Work on a campaign to get local restaurants to donate leftover food. Have a short list of local services for the homeless and hungry to hand out when you encounter needy people. Work at a food bank as a volunteer. Donate to or work at a soup kitchen. Work in your parish to prepare and take meals to people who are unable to cook. Look through your cupboard and donate food that is going to waste. Buy extra food items when you shop for groceries, and give them to food drives. Keep water bottles in your car to hand to homeless people, especially during warm weather. Support water projects that are going on throughout the world. Insist that your congressperson support clean water bills.

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink...” (MATTHEW 25:34–36)

## **Group or personal process**

**REFLECT** *Giving away our money is very difficult for us. What is your response to this call? What prevents you from simplifying and reducing, in order than others may also share in the earth's bounty? Or if you have taken this step, share what it has been like for you to live on less.*

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**ACTION** *Get involved somewhere! Find an agency working to end starvation or to improve clean water availability, and commit yourself to join in the efforts.*

## **Assist those who need clothing**

We turn now to the next work of mercy, to assist those who need clothing. It is helpful to reword this for today's culture, since no one today lives without some kind of clothing. We might say that this work of mercy is to help everyone clothe themselves in such a way that they can live with dignity. This is especially true for the poor.

It's hard to imagine what it's like to be truly poor. Many of us have plenty of clothing and we live in comfortable homes, even if very humble. The poor of the world do not live in houses but in huts made of corn stalks, tree branches, or grass. They have no running water and must carry water, often for many miles. Meanwhile, we all flush our toilets with clean, potable water—that is, with water that, in much of the world, would be used for drinking and is scarce.

The poor often have only minimal clothing; they often have one pair of shoes and a thin closet of spare clothing. So this work of mercy calls us to a special task: mercy moves us to clean out our closets, count our shoes, and give half to the poor. We should not allow our unused clothing to pile up; rather, this work of mercy moves us to donate it so that others who need coats, blankets, shoes, suits, and other items can easily find them. And our giving must be pure, without having the idea in the back of our minds that we can now replace these items with new ones. Mercy moves us to make this a true sacrifice and to live more simply ourselves.

When we give our extra clothing, let us take care to give it with kindness. Let everything be clean, decent, and useful. And above all, let our

gifts be accompanied by the thought that we are accomplishing this work of mercy, which will be rewarded by God in heaven, where he will clothe us with glory. St. Vincent de Paul Societies operate as a means of practicing this work of mercy.

When John the Baptist was asked what people should do to prepare to meet Jesus, his answer was quick and simple: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise” (Luke 3:11). Be generous with what you have, whether it is money, clothing, or food. That is the lesson of this work of mercy.

Beyond our own closets and homes, however, is a vast world of need. Many people cannot dress well enough to interview for and get good jobs, much less attend these jobs every day dressed appropriately. This kind of poverty grinds one down, but we can help. Throughout our society are charitable agencies such as Dress for Success whose purpose is to help low-income people find the professional clothing and confidence they need to interview well, land jobs, and succeed at their work. If such an agency doesn't operate near you, maybe your parish can be the catalyst to start one.

### **Group or personal process**

**REFLECT** *Why do you think some people have so much wealth and some people are so very poor? Where do you see yourself fitting into that picture?*

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**ACTION** *Clean out your closets by donating clothing to charity shops, and don't replace what you give away!*

## SESSION SIX

# Care for the homeless, the sick, the prisoner, and the dead

### **Shelter the homeless**

We turn now to the question of helping people find homes.

Moms and dads are busy practicing this work of mercy every day! Paying for, caring for, and cleaning the home you share with others is part of your practice of charity toward them.

Beyond our own homes, of course, there are many who don't have a home, and this work of mercy is addressed to them. Think of the immigrants who cross our national borders, asking to find a home here. How often do we simply turn a blind eye to them? This work of mercy forcefully calls us to take them in and to support reasonable and fair public policies and laws regarding immigration. We Christians cannot be silent! We cannot pretend that these homeless men, women, and children are not in our midst, many of them hiding from public view for fear of deportation. Public policy should be generous and should favor the most vulnerable. This includes people of all skin colors, creeds, and levels of wealth or poverty.

This work of mercy also moves us to support refugees throughout the world, especially those displaced by war and famine. And in poor nations where inadequate economic development has occurred, this work of mercy moves us to support programs to help build homes. Likewise, we are also called by this work of mercy to tend to those who have simply run away from terrible situations in their homes, including violence and abuse.

These homeless ones are often young, and often they fall into drugs, prostitution, or crime to support themselves. This work of mercy, to shelter the homeless, reminds us that these runaways are often our sisters and brothers, our sons and daughters.

Many older people feel they are truly without a home any longer because they have had to give up their home and move into an institution. Most nursing facilities never become true homes, and life in them can be lonely and difficult. What's more, these virtually homeless older people live very near us all, in institutions tucked into many of our neighborhoods and parishes. And for those older people who live in their own homes, this work of mercy calls on us to support them. It moves us to visit them, bring them meals, help them with housework, repair what needs to be fixed, and help them know they're still a vital part of our community. To shelter the homeless also means keeping people from losing their homes, especially due to unfair lending practices, job loss, or chronic illness.

In each of these situations of the homeless, it's very difficult for any one person to find a way to practice this work of mercy, but we can all donate to organizations that are already active in this work, such as Catholic Relief Services. Every city has programs to rescue homeless youth, feed homeless people, or provide a pathway out of homelessness. Worldwide, we can join forces with existing groups such as Common Hope, where children and whole families are rescued from poverty by providing them a means to earn health care, a home, and an education. Habitat for Humanity provides clean homes for those willing to earn them. This work of mercy calls us into action!

### **Group or personal process**

**REFLECT** *If you were suddenly made homeless, where would you go first? How would you get help?*

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**ACTION** *Find the people in your community working to ease or end homelessness, and get involved. Meet the homeless and get to know them.*

## **Visit and comfort the sick**

We turn now to a work of mercy that is one that you have been or will be in need of yourself, to visit and tend to the sick. This was a central part of Jesus' ministry, and it has always been a formal, public ministry of the church through hospitals, nursing homes, and parish pastoral care programs.

Tending the sick is something that dads and moms do very often in the care of their children. Such care is a generous act of love on the part of the parents. Each time you change a diaper, hold a child when he or she is fearful, or put a bandage on a bruised knee, you are tending the sick and practicing this work of mercy.

Visiting the sick is also something that children often do as their parents age or as chronic illness comes into a family; spouses do this as they tend their loved one in old age or dementia. Tending to the needs of older parents can also be demanding, but it is a work of mercy whose results last our entire lifetime. Such work demands that we be patient with their oddities and old-age foibles. It requires that we work at their pace and in their times of need. This work of mercy forms us as self-giving, self-emptying people who imitate Christ.

Beyond our own families, of course, are the people living down the block or over on the next farm who are suffering from illness, chronic diseases, and dementia. Such "neighboring," as it is called, often leads us to comfort people at times of loss, assist them if they are alone, or even make them part of the people in our life with whom we regularly check in. Mercy moves us to help organize our parishes to tend to these folks as well, whether or not they belong to our parishes or have any religious beliefs at all. If they live near us, then we should consider ourselves sent to be their angel in time of need. That's what this work of mercy calls us to do. Likewise, those whom we know to be caretakers of the sick and infirm also need mercy from us.

It may be difficult for some of us to visit the sick in this way because we often fear that we won't know what to say, and that can make us very uncomfortable. Because of this, some of us may even believe that visiting the sick is someone else's gift. But we need not fear that we won't find

the correct words at the proper moment. When we practice this work of mercy, we need to trust that Christ is with us. He will put the words on our lips at the right moment. He will put the tenderness in our hands. As with all the works of mercy, when we visit the sick, we do so as the hands and feet of Jesus.

### **Group or personal process**

**REFLECT** *How comfortable are you in visiting the sick?*

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**ACTION** *Take small steps to start paying more attention to the people in your community who are sick, especially those who are alone. Even if all you can do is just send a note or card, get started now.*

### **Visit those in prison**

We turn now to a work of mercy that many of us may have already decided is one that we will never be called to practice, visiting the prisoner. But let's examine this from the point of view of being imprisoned or held captive beyond (but including) the penal system of our nations.

First of all, if visiting a jail or prison in your community is truly not possible—and it will be impossible or impractical for most people—let's consider instead supporting those who do. Prison ministries are constantly in need of financial and material support. They are often not on the parish radar screen, so they get picked up by others in the pastoral care arena—but often without adequate budgets.

Another way to practice this work of mercy is to support and love the families who have members in jail or prison. Often these families are “in the closet” and living with quite a bit of shame. Mercy moves us to reach out to them and include them. In many parishes, offering public support to such families can be very healing because they are so often the forgotten ones.

Beyond our own community and its jails and prisons are people being held for political, religious, or social views in prisons and jails throughout the world. Here we may practice this work of mercy by joining and supporting associations of others who fight for justice in parts of the world

you cannot easily visit personally. Catholic Relief Services has this as part of its mission, for example.

Showing mercy to the captive was an important part of Jesus' mission. In his inaugural speech at the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus quoted Isaiah when he read,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (LUKE 4:16-19).

“Release to the captives...” What does this mean? Who is held captive? Here we think about those people who are homebound but not sick. They're caring for a spouse or parent who has dementia or another debilitating disease. Often the one they care for cannot be left alone, so they become captives of their own homes.

Others may be held captive by addiction, depression, or other diseases that bind them up and keep them from being truly free.

Finally, we practice this work of mercy when we treat in humane and dignified ways people justifiably held in jail or prison. We might need to lock certain people up and “throw away the key,” but we do not thereby throw away the person. We practice mercy by supporting prison reform and working toward an end to the death penalty.

### **Group or personal process**

**REFLECT** *Why do you think Jesus had such a special place in his heart for prisoners? How can you cultivate the same compassion and mercy?*

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**ACTION** *Find local prisons and jails. Become aware of people being held as political or religious captives throughout the world.*

## **Bury the dead**

We turn now to the final corporal work of mercy, to bury the dead and help people grieve the loss of loved ones.

When we're present at a funeral and share the sorrow of the one who lost a friend or family member, we are practicing this work of mercy. When we bring food to the home of the grieving family to help in their time of need, we are practicing this work of mercy. Mercy may move us to keep a calendar of "death dates" for your family and friends and send a note on the anniversary of death, or help an older family member or friend visit the cemetery. We remember the dead as part of the communion of saints.

Moms and dads, when you tell your children the stories of family members and keep alive their memory, this is the work of mercy you are practicing. Mercy may also move us to volunteer in hospice ministries, visit the dying with the Eucharist, and tend to the ones who remain behind. In all these ways this work of mercy is a lovely, final tribute to a life of mercy.

### **Group or personal process**

**REFLECT** *Why is it important to tend to the care of the dead?*

## — CONCLUSION —

Jesus showed us how to be people of mercy. He taught about and practiced these works as our teacher and example. One of the most touching moments of his teaching was in the upper room when Thomas failed to believe, even though the others told him that they had seen the Lord. The story is in the Gospel of John, chapter 20. Pope Francis reflected on this in a homily in 2013. In closing this reflection, let's take this with us.

“And how does Jesus react” to Thomas’s doubts? Pope Francis asked. “With patience,” he answered. “Jesus does not abandon Thomas in his stubborn unbelief...he does not close the door; he waits. And Thomas acknowledges his own poverty, his little faith. ‘My Lord and my God!’ With this simple yet faith-filled invocation, he responds to Jesus’ patience. He lets himself be enveloped by Divine Mercy; he sees it before his eyes, in the wounds of Christ’s hands and feet and in his open side, and he discovers trust.”

My Lord and my God, indeed!