

Christians have always performed “acts of mercy,” activities that are an intersection between theology and social justice. The purpose behind these acts is to bring the teachings of Jesus into the gritty, everyday world through a real, discernible combination of penance and charity. They are an integral part of living a truly Christian life because they cause us to examine our own actions while proactively working toward the physical and spiritual needs of the world. As St. Vincent de Paul wrote: “Extend your mercy toward others, so that there can be no one in need whom you meet without helping. For what hope is there for us if God should withdraw his Mercy from us?”

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# Two Types of Acts

Acts of mercy fall into two categories: corporal acts and spiritual acts. The corporal acts (from the Latin word meaning “body”) focus on actions that address material needs while the spiritual acts are directed toward spiritual needs. Each set consists of seven acts that are intended to mutually benefit the giver and the recipient as we accompany each other on the path of holiness.

## The **corporal works of mercy** are:

1. feed the hungry
2. give drink to the thirsty
3. shelter the homeless
4. visit the sick
5. visit prisoners
6. bury the dead
7. give alms

## The **spiritual works of mercy** are:

1. counsel the doubtful
2. instruct the ignorant
3. admonish the sinner
4. comfort the sorrowful
5. forgive injuries
6. bear wrongs patiently
7. pray for the living and the dead

## **A Little History**

The corporal acts of mercy come directly from the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:35–36:

*For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.*

The origins of the spiritual works of mercy are less straightforward, although they can be found in Jesus' teachings about forgiveness (Matt 6:14) and gentle correction (Matt 18:15). These acts gradually developed as the Church recognized the need for Christians to assist one another in their spiritual lives as well as their physical existence.

## **CORPORAL ACTS *of* MERCY**

The corporal acts of mercy are directly related to the physical needs of others. They often involve our giving alms, including money, goods, and time. Today's difficult times make performing the corporal acts of mercy more complicated for individuals. Worldwide pandemics, increased violence, and even government regulations regarding

things such as food safety can create challenges that can cause many people to decide “someone else” or even the government can do these things. But for Christians who desire to embody Christ in a broken world, discovering new ways to perform these acts as individuals is not only a good idea; it is essential. But finding new ways means we must think beyond the literal meaning of the words and expand our ideas of what the corporal acts of mercy entail. As you think about these actions, allow yourself to become creative, to allow the Holy Spirit to guide you in considering what you can do, even in challenging times.

### **Wisdom of Pope Francis**

“The Christian life involves the practice of the traditional seven corporal and seven spiritual works of mercy. ‘We usually think of the works of mercy individually and in relation to a specific initiative: hospitals for the sick, soup kitchens for the hungry, shelters for the homeless, schools for those to be educated, the confessional and spiritual direction for those needing counsel and forgiveness....But if we look at the works of mercy as a whole, we see that the object of mercy is human life itself and everything it embraces.’” ■ MESSAGE FOR WORLD DAY

**OF PRAYER FOR THE CARE OF CREATION, SEPTEMBER 9, 2016**

## *1. Feed the Hungry*

Many great saints literally took food and handed it to those in need on the streets. Since poverty and hunger can be harder to see in America, hiding behind social programs and organized efforts, individuals need to think beyond the usual donating to a food drive during the holidays.

### **SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF**

1. What does being hungry really mean?
2. Can someone hunger for something besides food?  
If so, what?
3. What does hunger look like in my community?

### **IDEAS TO GET YOU STARTED**

- Grocery shop for someone who cannot safely get out.
- Buy a gift card when you are at the grocery and ask that the clerk use it to help someone who might be a little short on cash to feed their family.
- Donate financially to a local organization that serves the hungry. Contact your parish or local mayor's office for ideas. Consider making a regular contribution that the organization can count on receiving.

- Buy local produce. You will contribute to supporting local farmers, who must eat too.
- Donate a bag of dog or cat food to your humane society. (Animals need to eat too.)

### **PRAYER**

*Lord, help me to realize that hunger is often hidden beneath a brave smile. Open my eyes to those in my surroundings who need aid, not just at the holidays, but all through the year.*

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## ***2. Give Drink to the Thirsty***

Ready access to clean, drinkable water is the single most important factor in combating disease and death around the world. While most households in America have running water, sadly not all municipal water is safe to drink. Making sure that all people have water is a worldwide priority.

### **SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF**

1. What, besides water, can people thirst for?
2. Do I drink tap water, if it is safe, or do I feel the need to buy bottled water?

3. Where does the water come from in my community?  
Can I help protect that source?

### **IDEAS TO GET YOU STARTED**

- Research and donate to organizations that build wells around the world.
- Drop off bottled water at homeless shelters, especially in the hot months.
- Contact your government representatives and advocate for safe water regulations.
- Conserve water in your own life. Turn off the tap while brushing your teeth. Water lawns at a minimum. Use a dishwasher (it takes less water than washing in the sink). Limit the length of showers.
- Recycle water. Catch rain and use it to water plants when it gets dry.

### **PRAYER**

*Lord, I know what it is like to be thirsty.  
Help me to be aware of the importance of water  
for all life on this planet.*

### *3. Shelter the Homeless*

Homelessness is a growing problem in many communities. Most people don't consider it safe or practical to take the homeless into their own homes and so turn a blind eye to those living on the streets, assuming that government programs will take care of the situation. But government resources are inadequate, and Christians have a duty to address the issue.

#### **SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF**

1. Many homeless around the world are migrants fleeing war, famine, and disasters. How do I feel about immigration? What is my attitude toward migrants?
2. What do I feel when I see a homeless person? What does that say about me?
3. Have I ever talked to a homeless person? Why or why not?

#### **IDEAS TO GET YOU STARTED**

- Research homelessness in your community. Check with your local government officials for a place to donate.