



# Priestly People

WE ALL ARE THE PRIESTLY PEOPLE OF GOD. TOGETHER, WE ARE LEADERS IN RESPONDING TO THE EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF PRIESTS AND BROTHERS.

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When in the evening of life, we are asked if we fed the hungry and gave drink to the thirsty, we will also be asked if we helped persons come out of doubt, if we were committed to receive sinners, admonishing and correcting them, if we were capable of combatting ignorance, especially that concerning the Christian faith and the good life," the Pontiff reflected. "This attention to the works of mercy is important: they are not devotion. It is the concreteness of how Christians must carry forward the spirit of mercy."

Pope Francis

## The Corporal Works of Mercy

### Mercy a "Lifestyle."

In his letter establishing the Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis talks about adopting God's mercy as our "*lifestyle*". The word lifestyle is often used to talk about the way of life of a person in a material sense. We speak of a wealthy lifestyle, or a simple lifestyle. For example, we Servants of the Paraclete as religious by our vow of evangelical poverty are called to live a life in which we all share the same lifestyle – sometimes called the common life, and also to eschew all signs of luxury, and to embrace simplicity. A lifestyle "says" something about the person. It can be a statement. These are just examples. But the suggestion that we adopt mercy as our *lifestyle* is something that I do not recall being said before in these precise terms, and the theme might merit our deeper reflection.

### Origin of the term: "Corporal Works of Mercy."

The Corporal works of mercy as taught in our tradition come mostly from St. Matthew 25. This is the vivid and majestic portrayal of the last judgment with which we are familiar. In the end-times there will be a separation into the "sheep and the goats." The sheep are those blessed of the Father, who enter into eternal life, because they have practiced what we call the *corporal works of mercy*. These are then listed as feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and visiting the imprisoned. Traditionally, we add one more to give seven in all – burying the dead, which comes from the book of Tobit.

### Jesus Identifies with Those in Need.

In the text in St. Matthew's Gospel, you will recall however that Jesus does not simply give a list of virtuous actions. Much more that this he tells us - to use a rather psychological expression - that he *identifies* himself with these people. When we see someone close to us being treated kindly, it means so much, it is very personal. It could be for example, an infirm parent who is treated with a particular kindness: we are so grateful. It touches us personally. If someone dear to us is treated badly or neglected, it hurts us. It is as if it were done to us – maybe even worse. Now here, Our Lord seems to be extending this. It is natural for us to love our family and our friends. It is natural for us to care for those who are like us. But it also comes natural to us however to draw boundaries and to set limits. As the Lord says, "even the pagans do that, do they not?" Those outside our boundaries could be other groups, other religions, other races, other nationalities. They could very easily be our "enemies." Yet, we have to allow these worlds of the Lord to touch us, "*love your enemies.*"

The works of mercy are such an essential, that it will ultimately be the acid test of my relationship with God. If I don't perform these works of mercy in some way or another, Jesus says that at that end of the day, he will say, "I don't know you." Probably this thought is enough to make any of us think that maybe we could be suitable candidates for the Sacrament of Reconciliation in this Jubilee year of Mercy!

### Why Corporal?

The word corporal, of course, comes from a Latin word meaning the body. Two thoughts flow from this. It is our faith that we are a "*body-enlivened-by-a-soul.*" The Church has always rejected the view, common in the early centuries, that we have a "noble spiritual soul" which is trapped and weighed down by a heavy fleshly burdensome body. No: we are a "body-soul." A composite of spirit and matter. The body is significant. It is an essential part of us. We are enlivened.

Secondly, Many of our communications and interactions involve the body in some way. They are physical. Even a hand-written letter, involves - well - the hand: and also the pen, the paper, the ink, the envelope, the mail, the opening, the reading. These are in a sense tools, and being used as extensions of the body. Even e-mail etc., involves some physical activity, and more and more people are attaching photographs to their e-mails. In other words, when we communicate with someone person to person, we can only do it by being "corporal," that is we use the body.

### Mercy.

When we come to the corporal works of *mercy*, we are using a word which is translating a Latin word: *Misericordia*. The first half of this word is associated with pity and mercy, and even with the wretched. The second part of the word comes from the word for "heart." So it has to do with responding to those

suffering and in need, with a heart which allows itself to be touched, and to do something to respond to that need.

The most vivid pictures of desperate need, we are all seeing at the moment are probably those of the Syrian and Iraqi people. There are two and half million of these refugees in Turkey alone. And we all know of the flow into Jordan, Lebanon and Europe, the exploitation and the drowning. We have seen the harrowing images of old and young having to leave their homes and their countries, and even when they reach Europe, often being told to "keep moving to the next country." Yes, there are challenges. There are limits to what one can do. There are limits to how many can be absorbed. But, mercy means, that at a minimum, that I am not allowed to see them as objects or nuisances or things. I have to see them with my heart. I have to see them as human beings. I have to see them through the eyes of mercy. Maybe this is the beginning of some idea of what the Holy Father means when he talks of mercy being our life-style.

### Responding to "this person in front of me."

I remember seeing Mother Teresa interviewed by a journalist who was basically saying, "This poverty is the result of entrenched, unjust social attitudes and incredible inequality. Should the response not be to change the "system" and to work politically to eliminate these evils?" Mother replied, saying that by all means of course, all these efforts must be made, but even if they should be successful, it will not help this particular new-born girl who has been left in a trash-can today, and is precious. It will be too late for this old man dying abandoned on the street, and may never have had the experience of knowing that he is worth something, that he is loved, and that he has been seen, at last, as a person of value. This, I think, is part of mercy as a lifestyle.

A friend here in Italy, who was helping a young physically handicapped foreigner was warned by someone to be careful in the words; "you can't help everyone in need you know." And he replied, "That is absolutely right, but I can do a little for this one person whom the Lord has sent in his Providence." I think we can all hear this. We can easily feel overwhelmed by needs, but we can resolve that if the Lord in his Providence sends someone to us, we can at least contact them heart to heart, seeing them as a person, and needing, like all of us, mercy. That may be more important than any financial aid.

### Heart Speaks to heart.

In the rule of St. Benedict, there is monk in charge of the physical goods of the monastery. He is called the cellarer. If a monk needs supplies or tools, he goes to him. If the cellarer can't give him what he asks for, the Rule tells him he should at least say something kind, for, says St. Benedict, it is written, "*A kind word is better than the best gift.*" (Sir. 18, 17). In other words, see the other as a person, and express your appreciation of his or her humanity in a concrete way. Often our physical needs are like a metaphor for our need for mercy, and of our need to be seen as person. To go back to Mother Teresa, the Missionaries of Charity, in their chapels always have the words "I thirst," in the sanctuary close to the crucifix. Mother Teresa, as a mystic, was able to hear these words of Jesus as it were coming from every poor person; expressing not only corporal needs, but even more importantly, the thirst for mercy, the hunger for love, the shelter of belonging and being accepted, the need to be released from all sort physical and spiritual sicknesses, and spiritual prisons.

### No Sharp Division.

Putting a hungry person in a room with a roof, giving a pile of clothes and putting food and drink through a hatch, would not, I think, be mercy. Although we call them corporal works of mercy, along with the things given, there would have to be a human connection, a movement of the heart, expressed in the goods given, or in the concrete action. This might only be a moment of warm eye-contact and a smile. But if the corporal gesture is going to be truly a work of mercy, there has to be a human touch, a communication, which conveys respect, recognition and common humanity.

Once again, this gets back to the fact that we are body and spirit. In the human being, the body becomes the expression of the person. And when we are talking about the mercy of God, *we are saying that the human being can actually become a channel through which God himself acts.* God can touch us with his mercy through others. God can touch others through us. In other words, the corporal works can take on a sacramental quality. The physical becomes an expression of the touch of God – which is another word for grace. So, the corporal works of mercy and the spiritual works of mercy are not sharply divided. All use the body, and all have a spiritual component. This idea



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Trying to live the works of mercy, relying on our own strength, we soon find that we can quickly become "burned-out" or feel overwhelmed. In the Pope's letter for the Jubilee year of mercy, he reminds us that mercy is a more than human quality. Therefore, it begins in a *personal contact with God*: in a personal experience of Divine Mercy. Pope Francis says, "In order to be capable of mercy, we must first of all dispose ourselves to listen to the word of God. This means rediscovering the value of silence in order to meditate on the Word that comes to us. *In this way, it will be possible to contemplate God's mercy, and adopt it as our lifestyle.*" (#13).

### Compassion Fatigue?

It becomes the sign of God's mercy. These can be occasions of grace. In the corporal works of mercy, the person tradition uses all sorts of ordinary things to express the inexpressible, and all is very deep in the Catholic faith. Our liturgy is very *embodied*, and appeals to the five senses. The sacraments have a corporal and a spiritual aspect. Our

## Signatures?

Fr. Benedict Livingstone SJ.

### Mercy as a Lifestyle.

Door of Mercy **for myself**. I need to receive and experience the peace, joy and serenity which come from this encounter. To live the corporal works of mercy, it is clear that for all of us, *the ability to do so will come from mercy first experienced in our own lives in some way*. The only way to avoid "compassion fatigue" is to realize that mercy is a grace, and being able to carry out the corporal or spiritual works of Mercy consistently, will be a gift of God, but one that God wants to give

It seems that in recent centuries, the Holy Spirit has been gently and insistently leading the Church to underscore mercy, and to give it primacy. Think of the Sacred Heart apparitions. The Lord does not start out with "repent!" He begins with "Behold this heart which has so loved!" Start there! We think too of St. Therese of Lisieux who was inspired by the Holy Spirit to offer herself to the Merciful Love of God. We Recall St. Faustina and remember the Encyclical of Pope St. John-Paul, "Rich in Mercy." We recall the Sunday of Divine Mercy observed now on the octave Day of Easter. Pope Francis too, feels impelled to preach mercy in and out of season, and of course has given us this Jubilee Year of Mercy, to which he has pinned many hopes.

When you think about it, a "lifestyle" tends to flow from values: from what we regard as important. In this Jubilee Year, an abundance of grace is being offered. We can be bathed in the Divine Mercy. We can have our sins forgiven. We can even be healed from the damage that sin has done in us, and the very traces can be erased by the indulgence. We can realize that mercy is a gift beyond other gifts. We will then be able give some return for what we have received, by living the works of mercy. Then, truly mercy can become more and more central to our prayer life and our spirituality. *Mercy can become our lifestyle.*