

Serene Attentiveness: the Spiritual Works of Mercy

The spiritual works of mercy seek to provide for the many different ways the human heart experiences hunger and thirst, nakedness and helplessness, sickness and imprisonment: types of spiritual poverty we all suffer from.

02/01/2017

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The Church has the wisdom of a good mother who knows what her children need to grow healthy and strong in body and spirit. With the works of mercy she invites us to keep rediscovering that our fellow men and women need care in both body and soul, and that God has made each of us responsible for them. “The object of mercy is all of human life: as ‘flesh’ it hungers and thirsts, it needs to be given shelter and clothing, and also to receive a proper burial—something none of us, however rich, can do for ourselves . . . And our life, as ‘spirit,’ needs education, correction, encouragement and consolation. We need others to counsel us, to forgive us, to put up with us and to pray for us.”^[1]

We are now going to consider the spiritual works of mercy, which seek to provide for the many different ways the human heart experiences

hunger and thirst, nakedness and helplessness, sickness and imprisonment: types of spiritual poverty we all suffer from and that we can also perceive, unless we are asleep, in those around us.[2] Despite the weight we carry on our own shoulders, God expects our hearts to be moved just as his own is, and that we not be insensitive to other people's needs. "In the midst of so much selfishness, so much coldness —everyone out for what they can get —I call to mind those little wooden donkeys. They were trotting on a desk-top, strong and sturdy. One had lost a leg, but it carried on forward, supported by the others."[3]

Everyday mercy

St. Josemaria once spoke about his happy experience of Christian generosity, which had been confirmed over the years: "I know thousands of cases of students . . .

who have refused to build their own little private worlds. They are giving themselves to others through their professional work which they try to do with human perfection, through educational projects, and through social and welfare activities, in a spirit of youth and cheerfulness.”[4] Wherever there are Christians who see themselves as “branded by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing, we begin to see nurses with soul, teachers with soul, politicians with soul, people who have chosen deep down to be with others and for others. But once we separate our work from our private lives, everything turns grey and we will always be seeking recognition or asserting our needs.”[5] “We, all of us men and women, are likewise all children of God, and we cannot think that life consists in building up a brilliant ‘curriculum vitae’ or an outstanding career.”[6] It is only

natural to dream about the horizons opening up to us in our work. But if we don't want these dreams to be a mere illusion, *vanity of vanities*,^[7] they must be inspired by a passion to enlighten people's minds, soothe tensions, and comfort hearts.

In one way or another every one of us influences society and public opinion, not just writers, teachers or media professionals. Each of us in our own way can do much to “instruct the ignorant,” “counsel the doubtful,” and “admonish sinners.” We can assist those who are unwitting victims of superficiality or ideology; those who thirst for knowledge, who long to drink from the fountains of human and divine wisdom; those who do not know Christ, who “have not seen the beauty of his face, nor realize how wonderful his teaching is.”^[8] This includes our effort to reflect deeply on the Faith, so as to help others

perceive the splendor of truth; our readiness to complicate our lives by organizing means of formation in the most diverse situations; our desire to shape our own profession or job in a Christian way, purifying it of abuses and opening up horizons; the interest teachers take in helping their pupils grow; the way we offer our own experience to help those just starting out in their career; our readiness to help or advise colleagues in difficulties; the support we give to young people who are not sure if they can form a family because of their precarious job situation; the unselfishness and courage involved in “correcting those who stray.”

All these and other attitudes that go much further than the bare minimum demanded by ethics, are examples of the *everyday mercy* that God asks of ordinary Christians. Although it is always good to support special projects where we can, the

usual place for us to exercise mercy is within our daily work, out of a desire to be helpful. What more can I do? Who else can I involve? All this is mercy in action, with no timetable, and no calculations. As Pope Francis said, we need “a dynamic mercy, not as a noun with a fixed and closed meaning, nor as an adjective that provides a bit of color to life, but rather as a verb: ‘to show mercy’ and ‘to receive mercy’ [*misericordiar* and *ser misericordiados*].”[9]

Covering over other people’s weaknesses

This twofold verb—“to show mercy” and “to receive mercy”—reflects the beatitude that best expresses this jubilee year: *blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*[10] Mercy will find a home in these people because on giving it they will receive it from on high. As Shakespeare said so eloquently:

The quality of mercy is not strained,

*It droppeth as the gentle rain from
heaven*

*Upon the place beneath: it is twice
blessed;*

*It blesseth him that gives and him that
takes...[11]*

To the merciful, then, our Lord promises not just forgiveness and understanding at the end of their lives, but also a generous measure of gifts—the *hundredfold*[12]—in this life. Those who are merciful perceive more intensely how God forgives and understands them, and so they in their turn rejoice to forgive and understand others, even though it hurts. They also experience the joy of seeing how others, through them, are “infected” with God’s mercy. *For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*[13] When we drown evil

in an abundance of good; when we don't let other people's hardheartedness harden our own hearts, and we don't meet coldness with coldness; when we refrain from making those around us suffer for our difficulties; when we try to overcome our touchiness and self-love, then we are waging "God's battles . . . We have no choice but to take this beautiful war of peace seriously, if we really want to achieve interior peace, and God's serenity for the Church and for souls."[14]

Another of the spiritual works of mercy is "bearing other people's defects patiently." This requires more than just not showing the other person up, not pointing a finger at them. Showing mercy means covering over others' weaknesses, as the good sons of Noah did,[15] even though we notice the "smell" of their defects in doing so. Mercy from a distance is not mercy. The "smell of

the sheep”[16] (since all of us in the Church are both *sheep and shepherd*[17]) is usually not pleasant; but exposing ourselves to it is a sacrifice that, if done without fuss, without being noticed, has an aroma very pleasing to God—the *bonus odor Christi*.[18] *When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men, but by your Father who is in secret.*

[19]

Mercy reverses the common tendency to be demanding on others and easy on ourselves. We then often discover that what we considered a defect was simply a label we had put on the other person, maybe because of an isolated incident or a first impression: a “rash judgement.” This stopped us from seeing them as they are because we could only see a negative aspect, with one feature swollen out of proportion by our own self-love. God’s mercy helps us

to avoid forming such severe judgements and, if we have—perhaps subconsciously—done so, to change them. Tertullian's wise saying is very apt here: “*desinunt odisse qui desinunt ignorare*—when people cease to be ignorant, they cease to hate.”[20]

The challenge of *everyday mercy*, then, is to get to know the people around us better and to avoid putting labels on them: parents, children, brothers and sisters, neighbors, colleagues... Moreover, when we understand someone, when we don't give up on them, we help them to grow. By contrast, if we are obsessed with others' defects, our attitude produces tension and coldness, which will not help to bring out the best in them. All our relationships with other people, especially within the family, must be “a ‘shepherding’ in mercy. Each of us, by our love and

care, leaves a mark on the life of others.”[21]

Mercy is also needed to react without resentment when other people treat us badly or unfairly. It is not easy to love when receiving hard knocks or indifference, but *if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?*[22] A Christian atmosphere is characterized not only by mutual understanding, but also by a readiness to seek mutual forgiveness when we make a mistake or others treat us badly. A sincere willingness to “forgive offences” is the only way to break down the circles of misunderstanding that can develop around us, and that are almost always a result of mutual ignorance about one another. This is not being idealistic or naive, refusing to see any meanness or cynicism in the world. Rather it is *the strength of*

God,[23] a gentle breeze capable of toppling the strongest structures.

Sent to console

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.[24] Christians suffer just like anyone else, and sometimes more so, because of the incomprehension or difficulties created by their fidelity to God.[25] At the same time their sufferings are lighter because they are consoled by their Father. “This is your security, a haven where you can drop anchor no matter what is happening on the surface of the sea of life. And you will find joy, strength, optimism: victory!”[26] The consolation given by God enables us to console others;

he has sent us into the world to give consolation, “because our infinite sadness can only be cured by infinite love.”[27]

To be able to “console those who are sad” we have to learn to read other people’s needs. Some are sad because they are experiencing “the bitterness that comes from loneliness or indifference.”[28] Others, because they are under a lot of pressure and need to rest. If so, we can try to accompany them, and sometimes actually teach them how to rest, because they have never learned that skill. A good child of God tries to copy the discreet work of the true Consoler, the Holy Spirit, “in toil comfort sweet, pleasant coolness in the heat, solace in the midst of woe.”[29] We try to look after other people in such a way they don’t notice we are assisting them, and never give the impression that we are granting them “an audience,” or

that we are “managing” them. “We are speaking about an attitude to life, one that approaches life with serene attentiveness capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next, that accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the full.”[30] A child of God goes through life with the profound conviction that “each person is worthy of our self-giving.”[31] A smile, our willingness to be helpful, true interest in other people, including those we may not even know, can change their day and sometimes their lives.

With everyone, people we know and those we don’t, our mercy finds a channel, “a broad smooth-flowing stream”[32] in our prayer. “Since Abraham, intercession—asking on behalf of another—has been characteristic of a heart attuned to God’s mercy,”[33] and so the Church encourages us to “pray for the living

and the dead.” One of our joys in heaven will be to discover the good done to so many people by a brief prayer offered in the midst of heavy traffic or on public transport, sometimes perhaps as a merciful response to less-than-polite behavior; or the hope that God has inspired, through our intercession, in someone who was suffering for some reason; or the comfort received by the living and the dead through our remembering them at Mass, inserted in Jesus’ prayer to the Father, in the Holy Spirit.

We are finishing our brief consideration of the works of mercy, which in reality “are endless, but each bears the stamp of a particular face, a personal history. They are much more than the lists of the seven corporal works and seven spiritual works of mercy. Those lists are like the raw material—the material of life itself—that, worked and shaped by

the hands of mercy, turns into an individual artistic creation. Each work multiplies like the bread in the baskets. Each one gives abundant growth like the mustard seed.”^[34]

[1] Pope Francis, third meditation for the Jubilee of Priests, 2 June 2016.

[2] The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* lists them as: to counsel the doubtful, to instruct the ignorant, to admonish sinners, to comfort the afflicted, to forgive offences, to bear wrongs patiently, and to pray for the living and the dead (Appendix B: Formulas of Catholic Doctrine).

[3] St. Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 563.

[4] St. Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 75.

[5] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 273.

[6] St. Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 76.

[7] *Eccles* 1:2.

[8] St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 179.

[9] Pope Francis, first meditation for the Jubilee of Priests, 2 June 2016.

[10] *Mt* 5:7.

[11] *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, scene 1. Quoted by Pope Francis in his Message for the 50th World Communications Day, 24 January 2016.

[12] *Mt* 19:29.

[13] *1 Cor* 1:25.

[14] St. Josemaria, notes taken in a meditation, February 1972, quoted in

the Spanish historical-critical edition of *Christ is Passing By*, 2013, no. 8d.

[15] Cf. *Gen* 9:22-23.

[16] Pope Francis, Homily, 28 March 2013.

[17] Cf. Javier Echevarri, Letter, 1 August 2007.

[18] Cf. *2 Cor* 2:15.

[19] *Mt* 6:17-18.

[20] Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* 1, 1. St. Augustine also discusses this, *In Evangelium Ioannis Tractatus*, nos. 89-90.

[21] Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 19 March 2016, no. 322.

[22] *Mt* 5:47.

[23] *1 Cor* 1:18.

[24] *2 Cor* 1:3-4.

[25] The Psalms frequently echo this difficulty of the believer. Cf. e.g. Ps 42 (41):10-12; 44(43):10-26; 73(72).

[26] St. Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, seventh station, no. 2.

[27] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 265.

[28] St. Josemaria, Speech at the inauguration of the Centro ELIS, 21 November 1965.

[29] Sequence of the Mass for Pentecost, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*.

[30] Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 24 May 2015, no. 226.

[31] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 274.

[32] St. Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 306.

[33] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2635.

[34] Pope Francis, third meditation for the Jubilee of Priests, 2 June 2016. Cf. *Mt* 13:31-32 and 14:19-20.

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