

You Did It To Me

An article on the corporal works of mercy, written for the Jubilee of Mercy in the Church. "As Saint Josemaría wrote, 'the sick are He,' a daring expression that reflects our Lord's demanding words: 'Truly I say to you ... you did it to me.'"

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Our God did not limit himself to saying that he loves us. He is the one who formed us from the clay of the earth.^[1] "It was God's hands that fashioned us: God the artist."^[2] He

created us in his image and likeness, and even became “one of us.”[3] The Word was made flesh; he worked with his hands, carried on his shoulders the weight of the wretchedness of all the centuries, and chose to keep the wounds of his passion forever as a permanent sign of his steadfast love. Therefore we Christians not only call ourselves God’s children, but we truly are such.

[4] For God and his children, love “can never be just an abstraction. By its very nature, it indicates something concrete: intentions, attitudes and behaviors that are shown in daily living.”[5]

Saint Josemaría alerted us to the danger of seeing Christianity “as a collection of devout practices, failing to realize the relation between them and the circumstances of ordinary life, including the urgency to meet the needs of other people and remedy injustices. I would say that

anyone who has that attitude has not yet understood the meaning of the Incarnation. The Son of God has taken the body and soul and voice of a man; he has shared our fate, even to the extent of experiencing the excruciating anguish of death.”[6]

Called to mercy

In the scene of the Last Judgment that Jesus sets forth in Matthew’s Gospel, both the just and the unjust are puzzled and ask our Lord when it was that they saw him hungry, naked or ill, and either helped him or refused to do so.[7] And our Lord replies, *Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.*[8] This is not just a nice phrase, as though our Lord were merely encouraging us to remember him and imitate his way of showing mercy. Jesus announces solemnly, *Truly, I say to you ... you did it to me.* He “has united Himself in

some fashion with every man,”[9] because he takes love to its ultimate conclusion: *Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*[10] Being a Christian means entering into God’s unconditional love, yielding our lives to “the infinite love of God.”[11]

In the scene of the Last Judgment, our Lord speaks of hunger, thirst, being a stranger, nakedness, sickness, and imprisonment.[12] The works of mercy are already present here in outline. The Fathers of the Church made frequent reference to them, and began the now-familiar division into corporal and spiritual works of mercy, without attempting to enumerate every form of human need exhaustively. As time went by, the duty of burying the dead was added to the corporal works, accompanied by the spiritual work of praying for the living and the dead.

In this article and the next, we will review these works in which Christian wisdom has summed up our calling to mercy. For indeed it is nothing less than a vocation—and a universal one at that—when our Lord tells his disciples down through the ages: *Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*[13] The works of mercy help us visualize this call in concrete terms. “It would be beautiful if you could memorize them so it is easier to do them!” the Pope suggested recently.[14]

Person-to-person solidarity

If we take a look around us while reviewing the corporal works of mercy, we might initially think that in many parts of the world opportunities to practice them are not that common. Centuries ago, human life was far more exposed to the forces of nature, human caprice, and bodily weakness. Today, in

contrast, there are many countries where there is rarely any need to bury the dead or shelter the homeless (except in the case of an emergency or natural disaster) because government organizations often provide these services.

Nonetheless, in many places, each of these works of mercy is still an urgent priority. Even in the most developed countries, alongside the safety net provided by social services, one can find many situations of great material poverty: the so-called “fourth world.”[15]

We are all called to become aware of these painful realities and to consider how we can help remedy them. “We have to open our eyes; we have to look around us and recognize how God is calling us through the people at our side. We cannot turn our backs on others, ignoring them because we are caught up in our own little world. That wasn’t how Jesus

lived. The Gospel often speaks of his mercy, his ability to feel the sorrow and share the needs of others.”[16]

The first step in the corporal works of mercy is solidarity with those who suffer, even if we do not know them. “We are concerned not only about the problems of each person; we also feel full solidarity with our fellow citizens in the calamities and misfortunes suffered by the whole of society, which affect us in the same way.”[17] At first sight, this sentiment could appear praiseworthy but ultimately not very useful. And yet solidarity is the soil in which mercy can grow and strengthen. The word “solidarity,” derived from the Latin word *solidum*, denotes the conviction of belonging to a whole, such that we experience the ups and downs in the lives of other people as our own. Although the word is meaningful on the merely human level, it acquires its full force in the life of a Christian.

You are not your own,^[18] Paul tells the Corinthians, a statement that could strike people today as a threat to their autonomy. Yet it simply conveys the thought expressed by recent Popes that humanity, and in a particular way the Church, is a “great family.”^[19]

Let brotherly love continue ...

Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them; and those who are ill-treated, since you also are in the body.^[20] Though it is not humanly possible to keep abreast of everyone’s pains and sorrows, nor to find a solution for every material need, we Christians cannot just wash our hands of these concerns, since we love with God’s heart: *God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.*^[21] When at Holy Mass we ask God the Father that “nourished by the Body and Blood of your Son, and filled with his Holy Spirit, [we] may become one body,

one spirit in Christ,”[22] we contemplate the fullness of what already is a silently-growing reality, “like a forest, where sound trees provide solidarity, communion, trust, support, security, happy sobriety, friendship.”[23]

True Christian solidarity takes shape above all in prayer. Most of the time, we will not see the fruit of these prayers of ours, expressed also in sacrifices and the offering of our work, but we are convinced that “all of these encircle our world like a vital force.”[24] For the same reason, the Roman Missal contains a large number of Masses for various needs, corresponding to the intentions of all the works of mercy. The Prayer of the Faithful, at the end of the Liturgy of the Word, awakens our *anxiety for all the churches*[25] and for all men and women, so that we are able to say with Saint Paul: *Who is weak, and I*

am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?[26]

Solidarity also unfolds in “simple daily gestures that break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness,” challenging “a world of exacerbated consumption” that is at the same time “a world which mistreats life in all its forms.”[27] In olden days, it was a custom in many families to kiss a piece of bread that fell on the floor, in recognition of the work that went into obtaining this food, and as thanksgiving for having something nourishing to eat.

“Feeding the hungry” can be concretized in eating what is set before us, in avoiding little caprices at meals, in making creative use of leftovers. “Giving drink to the thirsty” might lead us to be more careful not to waste water, which is in scarce supply in so many places. [28] “Clothing the naked” could involve a greater effort to care for

our clothes and to make them last, to hand clothes on from one sibling to another, to forgo some of the latest trends in fashion, etc. These small or not-so-small renunciations can provide us with alms to bring joy to the needy, as Saint Josemaría taught the Saint Raphael boys; or to contribute to funds for humanitarian relief. Some months back, the Holy Father stressed: “If the Jubilee does not touch the pocket, it is not a true jubilee.”[29]

Hospitality: not turning our back on the weak

Parents, beginning with their own example, can do a lot to help their children live like this, by “teaching them not to be selfish and to spend some of their time generously in the service of other less fortunate people, doing jobs suited to their age, in which they can show in a practical way a human and supernatural

concern for their fellow men.”[30] Since charity is ordered (it would be false for someone to show great concern for those who live far away and ignore those close at hand), the struggle to overcome selfishness usually begins at home. All of us, both young and less young, need to learn to open our eyes to the small daily needs of those with whom we live. In particular, we are called upon to accompany family members and friends in times of illness, without considering their sufferings simply as disturbances in our routine that call for technical solutions alone.

“Do not cast me off in the time of old age, forsake me not when my strength is spent (Ps 71:9). This is the plea of the elderly, who fear being forgotten and rejected.”[31] Many scientific advances are now available that improve the condition of the sick, but none of these can replace the human accompaniment provided by those

who see the sick and elderly not as a nuisance but as “Christ passing by,” Christ who needs us to care for him. As Saint Josemaría wrote, “the sick are He,”^[32] a daring expression that reflects our Lord’s demanding words: *Truly I say to you ... you did it to me.* ^[33]

When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?^[34] At times it is a challenge to see God in those who suffer, because they are moody, demanding or self-referential. Nevertheless, the sick have even a greater right to our love precisely on account of their weakness. A divine glow illuminates the features of the sick person, who resembles the suffering Christ, with *no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.*^[35]

Thus care for the sick, the elderly, and the dying requires a good deal of

patience and generosity with our time, especially when their illness lasts for an extended period. The Good Samaritan “also had his own commitments and things to do.”[36] Those who refuse to hide behind the coldness of solutions that ultimately amount to “throwing away” people who humanly speaking can no longer contribute much, but instead, like the Good Samaritan, undertake the essential task of care, can hear our Lord telling them: *If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.*[37] For those who have cared for the weak, God reserves a tender welcome: *Come, O blessed of my Father.*[38]

“The true measure of humanity,” Benedict XVI said, “is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer. This holds true both for the individual and for society. A society unable to accept its suffering members and

incapable of helping to share their suffering and to bear it inwardly through ‘com-passion’ is a cruel and inhuman society.”[39] Therefore the sick give us back our humanity, which at times vanishes in the frenetic rhythm of daily endeavors. They remind us that things are less important than people, utility is less important than life.

Some people, either because God has called them or simply through personal choice, end up devoting a large portion of their time to caring for those who suffer, without expecting anyone to take notice of their efforts. Even though they do not feature in tourist guides, they truly are part of mankind’s “heritage,” since they teach us that we are in the world to care for others.[40] This is the perennial meaning of hospitality and welcome.

We are rarely called upon to physically bury the dead, but we can accompany the dying and their families in their final days and hours. Thus attending a funeral is always something more than just fulfilling a social obligation. If we consider the deepest meaning of these gestures, we come to see them as the expression of a true humanity open to eternity. “Here too, mercy gives peace to those who pass away and those who remain, allowing them to feel that God is greater than death, and that by abiding in Him even the last parting is a ‘see you again.’”[41]

Creativity: working with what's at hand

Refugees emigrating from war-torn regions, the unemployed, “those bound by new forms of slavery in modern society”[42] such as addictions to drugs or gambling, or

hedonism... We see so many material needs around us, and could easily be overwhelmed thinking about what to do or where to begin. Yet experience shows that many small initiatives aimed at alleviating a nearby need, beginning with whomever we can and with what we have at hand (often with more creativity and good humor than time, money or public assistance), can accomplish a lot of good. For generosity that does not look for recompense generates a thankful response that in turn gives rise to new initiatives. Mercy gives rise to mercy[43] and is contagious. Thus the Gospel parable of the mustard seed is fulfilled: *It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.*[44]

The needs of each place and the possibilities of each person are quite

varied. The best approach is to begin working with what we have at hand. Over time, and often in less time than we thought, doors that seemed to be permanently shut begin to open. And we begin to reach prisoners behind bars and prisoners of so many addictions, who have been abandoned by a world that has discarded them when they seemed broken.

For example, some people who did not think they have time for these works of mercy owing to a demanding work schedule may find a way to redirect part of their efforts towards helping others escape from a life of aimlessness. Synergies arise: one person has little time to dedicate to this effort, but provides expertise and networking. Another, with less organizational ability, can offer longer hours of work. Retired people may find a whole new panorama opening up, like a second youth, in

which they can pass on their abundant life experience.

“Independently of one’s educational level or wealth, all people have something to contribute to the building of a fair and fraternal civilization. In a practical way, I believe that everyone can learn a lot from the example of generosity and solidarity of the simplest people; that generous wisdom of knowing how ‘to make the food go further,’ which our world needs so much.”[45]

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Evoking his earliest years as a priest, Saint Josemaria recalled how he went to the poor districts on the outskirts of Madrid “to wipe away tears, to help whoever was in need, to bring a little warmth to the children, the old people and the sick; and to receive a lot of love in return and... once in a while, a pelting with rocks.”[46] And he was already

dreaming of the initiatives that, along with so many others promoted by Christians and other people of good will, are today a reality in many places of the world, and that need to keep growing *quasi fluvium pacis*, like a river of peace.^[47] “Today, for me, this is a dream, a blessed dream, that I relive in so many outskirts of great cities, where we treat people with affection, looking at them straight in the eye, because we are all equal.”^[48]

[1] Cf. *Gen* 2:7; *Wis* 7:1.

[2] Pope Francis, Daily Meditation, 12 November 2013.

[3] Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (7 December 1965), 22.

[4] Cf. *1 Jn* 3:1.

[5] Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae Vultus* (11 April 2015), 9.

[6] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 98.

[7] Cf. *Mt* 25:36, 44.

[8] *Mt* 25:40.

[9] Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

[10] *Jn* 15:13.

[11] Pope Francis, Apost. Ex. *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 7; cf. Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Redemptor Hominis* (4 March 1979), 9.

[12] Cf. *Mt* 25:35-36.

[13] *Lk* 6:36.

[14] Pope Francis, Angelus message, 13 March 2016.

[15] The phrase “fourth world” commonly refers to indigenous or tribal peoples, who are often stateless. Here it is used more broadly to include any group socially excluded from global society, especially marginalized groups living in a “first world” country in “third world” material conditions.

[16] *Christ is Passing By*, 146

[17] Saint Josemaría, *Letter, February 14, 1950*, 20; quoted in E. Burkhardt & J. López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría*, vol. 2, Rialp, Madrid, 2011, p. 314.

[18] *1 Cor 6:19.*

[19] Cf. for example, Blessed Paul VI, Message to the General Assembly of the United Nations, 24 May 1978; Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Dives in Misericordia* (30 November 1980), 4 & 12 ; Benedict XVI, Message for the 41st

World Day of Peace, 8 December 2007.

[20] *Heb* 13:1-3.

[21] *1 Jn* 3:20.

[22] *Roman Missal*, Third Eucharist Prayer.

[23] Pope Francis, Speech to National Numerous Family Association, 28 December 2014.

[24] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 279.

[25] *2 Cor* 11:28.

[26] *2 Cor* 11:29.

[27] Pope Francis; Enc. *Laudato si'* (24 May 2015), 230.

[28] Cf. *ibid.*, 27-31.

[29] Pope Francis, Audience, 10 February 2016.

[30] Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, 111.

[31] Pope Francis, Apost. Ex. *Amoris Laetitia* (19 March 2016), 191.

[32] *The Way*, 419.

[33] *Mt 25:40*.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] *Is 53:2*.

[36] Pope Francis, Audience, 27 April 2016.

[37] *Jn 13:17*.

[38] *Mt 25:34*.

[39] Benedict XVI, Enc. *Spe Salvi* (30 November 2007), 38.

[40] Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 209.

[41] Pope Francis, Audience, 10 September 2014.

[42] Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, 16.

[43] Cf. *Mt* 5:7

[44] *Mt* 13:32.

[45] Pope Francis, Video message to the People of Rio de Janeiro, 1 January 2015.

[46] Quoted in Michele Dolz, *Saint Josemaría Escrivá*, Scepter Press, 2002, p. 19.

[47] *Is* 66:12 (Vulgate).

[48] Saint Josemaría, Notes from a family get-together, 1 October 1967, quoted in Salvador Bernal, *Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: A Profile of the Founder of Opus Dei*, Scepter, 1977, p. 180.

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