

5th Sunday (C)

7th February 2016

‘Spiritual works of Mercy’

Is 6: the call of Isaiah in the Temple: *I am a man of unclean lips* Ps 137: *On the day I called, you answered, you increased the strength of my soul* 1Cor 15: *I hardly deserve the name ‘apostle’* Lk 5: *‘Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man’*

This last Sunday before Lent, I want to devote to a reflection on the ‘spiritual works of mercy,’ following on from the past two Sundays in which we have tried to grasp some of the meaning of this ‘Holy Year of Mercy.’ As well as receiving mercy — God’s forgiveness — most especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession), we also need to be people who always exercise mercy, living it out in the day-to-day. Last week we considered those merciful actions by which we give bodily, physical, help to those around us — the ‘corporal works of mercy.’ This week we are going to consider those no-less-important actions by which we support others in heart and soul — the Church calls these the ‘spiritual works of mercy.’ Let me list them for you as the Church usually lays them down: (i) to counsel the doubtful; (ii) to instruct the ignorant; (iii) to admonish the sinner; (iv) to comfort the afflicted; (v) to forgive offences; (vi) to bear wrongs

patiently; and (vii) to pray for the living and the dead. Now, some of these might come more easily than others — some we might feel more comfortable in performing than others; but the Church lays them all down for us as ways in which we help our neighbour to faith and to salvation.

1. **Counsel the Doubtful.** There are many ways in which we can give encouragement to those who are lacking in faith. Doubt will always in some way be a part of faith; and no doubt there will always be some times when we feel weaker in our faith than at other times. That’s when we really are in need of each other: when one is weak, another is strong, and vice versa. That’s why we are a people of faith together, the Church, so that we can help each other along the pilgrimage of life, picking each other up and helping each other along. There’s nothing more painful than a time when we feel a loss of faith; but, please God, at such times there’ll always be someone there to ‘counsel the doubtful,’ to speak to us of their own experience of God, prayer, and faith, and to give us encouragement to pursue our Christian journey with hope. The example of the saints is always there, too, for us: those heroes of faith whose lives were far from easy, but who placed their trust in the Lord and won through to heaven.

2. **To Instruct the Ignorant.** As Baptized Catholics we have a mission to spread a good knowledge of the faith. The better we know our own faith, the better we are able to defend it, as a sensible and reasoned approach to human life. Obviously, the most important people to instruct first are our own children. We have a duty before God to hand on the faith in its fullness to our children, that they can learn to live a Catholic life in happy friendship with Jesus. But beyond our own children, we will want to be a beacon of light also to other family members, to friends and colleagues. We mustn't be those who simply shrug off an improved understanding of the faith, and don't give effort to learning more about our faith. As adults we need to keep learning from Our Lord, so as to be better evangelizers.
3. **Admonish the sinner.** This will always be a harder task, as we never wish to be judging harshly, or without mercy, the actions of another. But there are of course times when we see another acting wrongly — in contradiction to the faith — and we are moved by the Spirit, and out of love for them, to correct them. This we must always do, as St Paul says, “speaking the truth in love.” Obviously, first and foremost, it is our children that we must correct, so that they learn what

is right and wrong, based on the teaching of the Lord, and His Church. There are times when we need to correct our friends, and others, but done always with humility, acknowledging that each of us is a sinner; none of us is perfect. We shouldn't be silent, however, when instead the Lord would wish us to speak out. It's a work of mercy to help others to avoid sin and live a good life.

4. **Comfort the Afflicted.** There are countless opportunities in daily life for us to comfort the afflicted. So many chances to be with the suffering and lonely; the bereaved and depressed; the unemployed and the sick ... each and every one of them needs our love and attention; no-one is unworthy of human love, affection, time and attention. An important part of this is to be seen to be approachable; not seen as 'too busy' for others, or too much in a rush.
5. **Forgive offences.** Life is not made any easy easier if we hold on to grudges and refuse to forgive. He Lord teaches us time and time again to forgive those who wrong us, and He gave us an outstanding example of that: even on the Cross He spoke words of forgiveness, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” And in the graces given us in the Sacraments, we receive the help necessary to be people who

are forgiving, or otherwise we simply end up in a life that is full of mounting tensions. To be a Christian is to be a person who forgives offences; we cannot be otherwise and say that we actually follow Christ, can we? We can give new and deeper life to a friendship when we forgive someone for a wrong they did us. Sometimes this will come only gradually, but never give up on that holy task of forgiving another.

6. **Bear wrongs patiently.** Sometimes others will continue to do us wrong, or continually to take advantage of us or take us for granted. This is hard to bear; but our faith has a realism about human life, and sadly accepts that this can happen. This work of mercy — bearing wrongs patiently — is another that is manifested in Christ's own earthly life. Think of all the rude things said to Him, or His brutally being treated by the authorities and soldiers. It's a holy action to pray sincerely for those who annoy us or who frustrate us; we can't always bring these situations to an easy resolution, and we need the Lord's help to achieve a peace in these circumstances.
7. **Pray for the loving and the dead.** The final one of the spiritual works of mercy is a lifelong and daily task, to be constant at our prayer, both for the living and for the dead.

Participation in Holy Mass is always a reminder of this, anyway, as the needs of the living, and the repose of the dead, are constantly woven in to the Church's liturgy. But we should make our daily prayer also a 'sacrifice of praise' for all the needs around us. There is no prayer that is superfluous, or meaningless in God's sight. Whenever we turn to Him, interceding for our fellow men and women, He hears us and sees our loving desire that they be given blessings of peace in their life and in their death. Let's be determined to have a lively prayer life, a commitment to lifting up our hearts to the Lord, and carrying with us, to His throne, the afflicted and needy souls around us.

These 'spiritual works of mercy' are lifelines for those with whom we travel on this pilgrimage of life. Let's not be caught up solely with the body; life is a journey of the soul, please God, to heaven, and we can do great things for others, helping them to heaven, if we live these works of mercy well. God will truly reward us — and we shall have great happiness and fulfilment indeed — if we have brought other people to heavenly happiness by the way we have lived.