

MERCIFUL LIKE THE FATHER



Session One: Introduction and “Mercy”

Opening Prayer:

Father, pour out your Spirit upon us, and grant us a new vision of your glory, a new experience of your power, a new faithfulness to your Word, and a new consecration to your service, that your love may grow in us and among us, and your kingdom come; Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

1) Introduction

This time is a time for reflection and prayer – an opportunity which we often don’t get in our busy lives.

It is often helpful to have a framework within which to think and pray, and we have constructed such a framework, based around the Year of Mercy.

It is not compulsory – you can use it or not, as you wish. You can take bits and use them – adapt it to suit yourself. Not everything will suit everybody – we are all at different stages in our journey.

The church likes the number seven. (No idea why!) Accordingly, there are seven Corporal Works of Mercy, and seven Spiritual Works of Mercy. They are:

Corporal Works of Mercy:

1. Feed the hungry
2. Give drink to the thirsty
3. Clothe the naked
4. House the homeless (shelter the stranger)
5. Visit the imprisoned
6. Visit the sick
7. Bury the dead

Spiritual works of mercy:

1. Counsel the doubtful
2. Instruct the ignorant
3. Admonish the sinner
4. Comfort the afflicted
5. Forgive offences
6. Bear wrongs patiently
7. Pray for the living and the dead

Each of these could be the subject for a day’s consideration and to attempt fourteen, seemed a daunting prospect. However, Pope Francis – and Jesus himself – is very keen to tackle and rid society of poverty and these works of mercy counteract four interlinked types of poverty:

1. Physical
2. Cultural
3. Social & Relational
4. Spiritual

What we would like to give you, therefore, as a framework, is first to think about the nature of Mercy – what Pope Francis, and the church, means by “Mercy”; then to consider the four types of poverty in two sessions, and then to sum up with some thoughts from Scripture.

We hope that you will find it stimulating, challenging, and as helpful in moving your faith forward as we have already, in putting it together.

2) The meaning of “Mercy”

Activity: *write down your own definition of ‘Mercy’. (before you read on!)*

Our word “mercy” comes from the Latin (via Old French) “misericordia”. ‘Cor / cordis’ means ‘heart’, and ‘misere’ means ‘necessity /need’ so it has the idea of feeling for (empathy with) those in need.

There is, however, more: Old testament books use two Old Hebrew words: ‘*hesed*’ which means an attitude of deep kindness, grace and love, and ‘*raham*’ which is the love a mother has for her children: - kindness, caring, tenderness, patience, understanding and a willingness to forgive.

A third word ‘*chesed*’ is sometimes used, which means ‘tender compassion / love’ which is the idea that St John has when he says “God is love”.

All these words are normally translated into the Greek as ‘*eleios*’ from which comes ‘*Kyrie Eleison*’ – ‘Lord have mercy’.

So the word ‘mercy’, as in “The Jubilee Year of Mercy” has a much broader and deeper meaning than the one that we normally understand in English.

It’s probably best summed up as “the love a mother has for her children” – which makes sense , not only of the Jubilee Year, but also of many other places it is used in the Bible.

Prayer to be Merciful to Others

This prayer is from the diary of St Maria Faustina Kowalska. It can be used as a morning offering or an evening examination of conscience.

O Most Holy Trinity!

Help me, O Lord, that my eyes may be merciful,
so that I may never suspect or judge from appearances,
but look for what is beautiful in my neighbours’ souls
and come to their rescue.

Help me, that my ears may be merciful,
so that I may give heed to my neighbours’ needs
and not be indifferent to their pains and moanings.

Help me, O Lord, that my tongue may be merciful,
so that I should never speak negatively of my neighbour,
but have a word of comfort and forgiveness for all.

Help me, O Lord, that my hands may be merciful
and filled with good deeds,
so that I may do only good to my neighbours
and take upon myself the more difficult and toilsome tasks.

Help me, that my feet may be merciful,
so that I may hurry to assist my neighbour,
overcoming my own fatigue and weariness.

My true rest is in the service of my neighbour.

Help me, O Lord, that my heart may be merciful
so that I myself may feel all the sufferings of my neighbour.

I will refuse my heart to no one.

I will be sincere even with those who, I know, will abuse my kindness.

May Your mercy, O Lord, rest upon me.

Further Thoughts:

Next to your original definition, write down how your idea of mercy has changed.

Look at these quotes from the Mass. How does the idea that you are asking for God's parental love (rather than just forgiveness) change how you think?

Penitential Rite: Kyrie Eleison (*Lord have mercy*)

Eucharistic Prayer I

To you, therefore, most merciful Father, we make humble prayer
and petition ... that you accept and bless these gifts...

Eucharistic Prayer II

Remember also our brothers and sisters ... and all who have died in
your mercy...

Eucharistic Prayer III

...in your compassion, O merciful Father, gather to yourself all your
children scattered throughout the world.

Eucharistic Prayer IV

Father...you formed man...and when...he lost your friendship...you
came in mercy to the aid of all...

To all of us, your children, grant, O merciful Father, that we may
enter into a heavenly inheritance...

Communion rite:

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.



Session Two: Physical and Cultural Poverty

Physical Poverty

The poverty of:

Hunger, Thirst, Nakedness, Homelessness

Countered by:

Food, drink, shelter, clothes

Feed the Hungry, give drink to the thirsty.

Food and drink are among our most basic needs. In the western world, where shops are piled high with foodstuffs and where, at the twist of a tap, a plentiful supply of water is readily available at any time, it is hard to visualise a situation where every day is virtually a life and death struggle for food and water. As Archbishop Romero powerfully stated: "It is not God's will for some to have everything and others to have nothing"

Nearer home

To practise the first two Corporal Works of Mercy we don't have to go off to far-away lands. Taking a hot dinner to an elderly neighbour, helping in a local soup kitchen, making a contribution to a food bank, asking the local MP to use his influence to ensure that the hungry are fed and the thirsty given drink both at home and abroad, making a donation to Mary's Meals, reading Magnus's book, taking the time and trouble to learn more about the problem of hunger and thirst in various parts of the world - these are some of the ways in which we can respond to our Lord's appeal.

We can support missionary priests and sisters who have first-hand knowledge of people's needs in various parts of the world because they share them. Often they are at the forefront of schemes to alleviate the problems of their people; for example, they have encouraged plans for the sinking of wells - sometimes assisting in the work with their own hands - so that a supply of clean, fresh water is made available to everybody. Again, we can give our support to organisations such as CAFOD, the official aid agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales. It owes its birth not to bishops or priests or politicians but to two lay women from the Catholic Women's League who organised the first Family Fast Day on 11th March 1960. Two years later CAFOD was officially registered and since then its outstanding work for the underprivileged has become known and admired throughout the world and its Family Fast Days have become part of parish life. Fasting, even if it's only a matter of eating or drinking a little less than usual, enables us in some small measure to share the experience of our sisters and brothers in the developing world.

Live simply

Climate change is one of the great threats of our time and, with its legacy of droughts, floods and hurricanes, it is much more damaging to the poor and underprivileged than it is to the wealthy. Many parishes have shown great ingenuity in adopting the three principles of the "LiveSimply" scheme initiated by CAFOD, that is by living in solidarity with people in poverty; by living simply; and by living sustainably with creation. However overwhelmed we may feel in face of the challenge of climate change, we are not helpless: we can all do something to express our care for creation and love for our neighbours, from emailing politicians, to saving energy at home or at church, to spreading the word of what we are doing to others who might join our efforts.

Clothe the Naked, give Shelter to the Homeless.

All human beings deserve a coat for their back and a roof above their heads. Clothes afford protection from the elements and are a sign of respect for human dignity; a home gives identity and security and a sense of belonging. 'Crisis' is the national charity for single homeless people in England. Its chief executive wrote recently: "Homelessness is devastating, leaving people vulnerable and isolated." Evidence that was presented before the Supreme Court in May 2015 indicated that the average life span of homeless men and women is just forty-seven; they are over nine times more likely to commit suicide and thirteen times more likely to be a victim of violence than the rest of the population.

Throughout the ages the Church has cared for those who are without proper clothing and a home. Religious sisters have fed and clothed and provided a home for countless children, and adults, in all parts of the world, and of course are still doing so today

Nearer home

There are many charities that help to provide homes for the homeless; they benefit from financial support and from the assistance of volunteers. Local politicians can be urged to support the building of affordable homes and ensure that refugees are housed decently. The pressure that ordinary people can exert on those who make decisions should not be underestimated. Before May 2015 local councils in England had to decide who, especially among young people, were 'vulnerable' enough for housing help, though how they should make that decision was far from clear. After a long-running legal battle, spearheaded by Crisis and its supporters, who included many MPs, the Supreme Court finally ruled that single

homeless people will no longer have to prove they are particularly vulnerable compared to other homeless people in order to qualify for support. This decision should prove a blessing for many youngsters who sleep rough night after night.

Practical words and actions

In parishes that run a marriage training course there will normally be a professional who can offer practical advice to young couples about how to go about buying their first home. And of course parents, in financial or other practical ways, often help a son or daughter who is about to get married - though they may not recognise that by helping their children to get settled in a home they are also fulfilling one of the Corporal Works of Mercy!

As for clothing the naked, perhaps we are all being invited to look through our wardrobes to see if there are clothes hanging there that we have seldom or never worn. They could be offered to a charity shop and so would not only provide cheaper clothing for those who need it but also support for the particular charity to which the shop is connected

Physical poverty is the most basic poverty. People in this state are not able to achieve anything without first alleviating this poverty – which is often very difficult.

What can we do?

Cultural Poverty

The poverty of:

Doubt (*emotional, intellectual, - of God, of self, of others*), **Ignorance** (*of God/Christ, no educational opportunities, illiteracy, a disability which is ignored (incl dyslexia, dyspraxia, autism etc)*), **Exclusion** (*from God, from self, from society*).

Countered by:

Counsel, instruction, admonition.

The Nature and Goodness of Counselling The Doubtful

1. We always come to truth together. The word "counsel" is connected with "council", a group of people who are engaged in a common enterprise. Counselling the doubtful involves witnessing to personal faith and recalling God's mercies of the past as these have been personally experienced.
2. Doubt is an ordinary aspect of a life of faith, a painful moment which others can help us to move beyond and which affords us an opportunity to surrender more wholeheartedly to God.
3. The members of the Church are in constant need of being evangelised themselves if they are to evangelise others (Blessed Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15).
4. Liturgical celebrations constitute an important moment of counselling the doubtful: through participating in them we remember our identity before God.
5. Counselling the doubtful is a response to a universal human desire, expressed or unexpressed, namely to discover meaning in life through faith in God.

What can you do practically speaking?

1. Go to Mass and consciously open your heart to the Holy Spirit who can remind you of God's mercy celebrated in the Eucharist.
2. Consider finding a spiritual director who can help you to go deeper in your faith.
3. At the parish level, encourage those whose faith may be weak, e.g. establish a faith group for parents of children who are receiving first sacraments.
4. Dialogue about the Christian faith respectfully and purposefully on occasion with non-Christian friends or colleagues as circumstances allow.

The Nature and Goodness of Instruction (Education)

The nature and goodness of this work of mercy

1. Through instruction, I "build up" a person (the Latin word "*instruere*" means "construct") and I make them freer.
2. Instruction involves handing on to the next generation the patrimony of truth of the family of the Church.
3. Teaching is an exercise of self-sacrificial love and hence has a particular vocational quality.
4. In Catholic education all subjects are seen in the light of and are integrated with the faith: hence the teaching of any subject can be an exercise of this spiritual work of mercy.

What can you do practically speaking?

1. Accept the challenge of life-long learning as a Catholic. Seek out resources or groups in the parish or elsewhere (including on-line) for ongoing faith development.
2. If time allows, offer your services to contribute to others' faith development, whether children (in, for example, sacramental preparation) or adults (in, for example, an RCIA group).
3. Consider teaching as a career. There is a shortage of practising Catholic teachers.
4. If you are a priest, devote adequate time to homily preparation during the week, acknowledging that this is a priority, perhaps using resources suggested by the new Homiletic Directory.

Literature

In Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, Thomas Gradgrind, headmaster in Coketown, has a very narrow view of education: "Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else." During the course of the novel he comes to see the inadequacy of his utilitarian approach and to appreciate the need for education to feed the human spirit.

Sacrament

In the Sacrament of Confirmation we receive the Holy Spirit who leads us "to the complete truth" (*In* 16:13) and whose seven gifts to us include wisdom, understanding and knowledge

The Nature and Goodness of Admonishing the Sinner

St Paul counselled caution and respect: "Brothers, if one of you misbehaves, the more spiritual of you who set him right should do so in a spirit of gentleness, not forgetting that you may be tempted yourselves" (*Ga* 6:1).

St Thomas Aquinas developed the tradition with his customary clarity. He noted that admonition is always something that an *individual* does; it is not something which the community engages in. It is done out of love. Hence it is not an act of authority: it has nothing to do with punishment. Given that it is an act of love anybody can and should exercise it. It must be done as privately as possible because "reputation is the greatest of the external goods." There is no point in trying to correct somebody who is not in a frame of mind to receive correction. (*Disputed Questions on the Virtues: On Brotherly Correction*)

The nature and goodness of this work of mercy

1. It is a response of love to the needs of the person who has erred, helping him/her to come to a fuller understanding of his/her situation at the moment when this person is capable of receiving this help and benefiting from it.
2. Effective admonition requires the person who is engaging in it to be humbly aware that he/she shares in a solidarity of sin with the person whom he/she is trying to help. Hence it is likely that the one admonishing now will need in turn to be admonished.
3. Admonition is directed at a particular individual but the whole Church benefits indirectly because sin invariably causes disintegration within the community.

What can you do practically speaking?

- a. Gently alert a friend to behaviour that will be harmful to him/her if you think your friend is able to listen.
- b. Be prepared to benefit from others' admonition of you and to be thankful for their kindness.
- c. Take seriously your responsibility, in charity, for encouraging and ensuring high standards at work.
- d. Work actively for Justice and Peace – Amnesty International, SPUCK, Life, CAFOD, etc.

Literature

In Jane Austen's *Emma*, Mr Knightley cares deeply for the eponymous heroine, notwithstanding her immaturity. Emma publicly ridicules a disadvantaged older single lady in her social set by laughingly pointing out in a clever throwaway remark that she is garrulous. Mr Knightley chooses a moment privately to upbraid Emma who manages, after an interior struggle, to accept his criticism: her subsequent attempts to apologise to the woman forms the key to the whole novel.

Sacrament

We begin the celebration of the Sacrament of the Eucharist by repenting of our sinfulness and receiving absolution. In this way we respond to the prior admonition of the Holy Spirit who demonstrates respect for us, reminds us of our worth and enables to enter more completely into freedom

Prayers in support

Searching for God by St Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Lord, my God, teach my heart this day where and how to see you, where and how to find you. You have made me and remade me, and you have bestowed on me all the good things I possess, and still I do not know you. I have not yet done that for which I was made. Teach me to seek you, for I cannot seek you unless you teach me, or find you unless you show yourself to me. Let me seek you in my desire; let me desire you in my seeking. Let me find you by loving you; let me love you when I find you.

Prayer before study by St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Creator of all things, true Source of light and wisdom, lofty origin of all being, graciously let a ray of Your brilliance penetrate into the darkness of my understanding and take from me the double darkness in which I have been born, an obscurity of both sin and ignorance. Give me sharp sense of understanding, a retentive memory, and the ability to grasp things correctly and fundamentally. Grant me the talent of being exact in my explanations, and ability to express myself with thoroughness and charm. Point out the beginning, direct the progress, and help in completion; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

For fortitude and wisdom

Heavenly Father, who alone can judge sinners, give us the courage through your Holy Spirit, to speak words of truth to a brother or sister who has fallen into a sinful pattern of behaviour and who stands in need of our support. May the same Holy Spirit guide us to choose the right moment to speak, a moment when the other person is ready to benefit. May all we do be done in charity and humility and may we in our turn be always open to correction by others. Through Christ our Lord. Amen

Acknowledgements:

Many of the articles used in this retreat were taken from:

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and “Spiritual Works of Mercy” by Mgr Paul Grogan. (ISBN 978 1 78469 087 8)

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Session Three: Social, Relational and Spiritual Poverty

Social and Relational Poverty



The poverty of:

Imprisonment, sickness, lonely, unhappy or painful death, hate, useless pushing against unrightable wrongs

Countered by:

Visiting and care for the sick and imprisoned, burying the dead, forgiving and patiently bearing wrongs.

Visiting the Sick and Imprisoned

One of the earliest accounts of the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist, dating from about AD 150, records how there was a collection which was handed over to the celebrant, who then "gives aid to... such as are in want by reason of *sickness...*; and to those also that are *in prison...* in fact to all who are in need".¹²

We can readily understand why visiting the sick is numbered among the Corporal Works of Mercy, but may have difficulty in appreciating why prisoners, too, are deserving of our concern. It is not a question of 'going soft' on crime but of making the vital distinction between crime (or the sin) and the criminal (or the sinner). As Jean Vanier explains in the first of his "Five Principles of Humanity": "All humans are sacred, whatever their culture, race, religion, whatever their capacities and incapacities, whatever their strengths and weaknesses may be." It is good to see that in more recent times an increasing number of people - laymen and women, religious sisters and priests - are involved in visiting the sick and the imprisoned.

Good Pope John

When on an October evening in 1958, the portly and lovable Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli - soon to be known throughout the world as 'Good Pope John' - heard the outcome of the papal election, he summed up his feelings in a two-word Latin quotation taken from the book of Job: "Horrefactus sum". He was horrified, or, to put it more colloquially, he was shattered. Yet, only a few hours later, he was suggesting to his secretary that he should visit the large Regina Coeli prison on the outskirts of Rome on the very next day. Gently, it had to be pointed out to him that there were one or two other things that a new Pope might have to do first!

Nearer home

'Visiting' the sick means much more than paying a visit to our dear ones when they are in hospital, though sadly even that duty is sometimes neglected. It may mean driving a frail elderly person to Mass on Sunday; or dropping in on

neighbours who are chronically sick and offering help; or inviting them into our own home for Christmas dinner; or volunteering to help with Meals on Wheels; or making a phone call to a friend who is suffering from depression. In innumerable ways we can fulfil the injunction of visiting the sick. As a rule it will not demand specialised knowledge, but what it always does demand is perseverance and compassion; a genuine human caring presence; a listening ear, a loving heart and a genuine smile.

Paradoxically, some of the most vital and demanding 'visitings' of the sick may take place in our own homes, such as looking after elderly relatives who can no longer care for themselves, or tending a child who is seriously disabled but who is living at home with his or her parents. More and more these days, it seems, men and women have the task of caring for partners who suffer from dementia, who appear to have lost many of the qualities once most admired in them, who constantly repeat themselves, who no longer recognise their own husband or wife. This is the kind of 'visiting' that requires endless patience and whose value depends on such simple 'human' things as the gentleness of a loved one's touch, the care and deep concern vibrant in their voice, the calming influence of their presence. All this "embodied love" is, as Fr Daniel O'Leary has written, "the sacrament of invisible grace... the gospel fully lived".

Write a letter

Even in prison, wonders are sometimes worked by human friendship which gives the prisoners a sense of their worth and value. That is why prison visiting by volunteers is part of life in most penal establishments, and many men and women are involved in this special ministry. In 2000 "Human Writes" came into existence, its purpose to provide pen-pals, from many parts of the world, for prisoners awaiting execution on Death Row. Jon Snow, broadcaster and patron of the organisation, has said that this simple mechanism of letter writing has had "a wonderful record of keeping hope alive" in the grimmest of circumstances.

In the early 1960s two Sisters of Charity and a chaplain entered through the huge entrance gates into Walton Prison. The Sisters, who ran St Vincent's School for the Blind and Partially Sighted, were facing a problem: some of their pupils were well able to take advantage of further education but if they went to 'sighted' colleges they would need Braille text-books; but in fact such books did not exist. What was to be done? The sisters had come to the prison in the hope of persuading a few prisoner volunteers to learn Braille so that they could then transcribe books for the blind children. It was a success story: not only did the youngsters get all the books they needed in Braille -at least two of them went to Oxbridge and one became president of the Union - but the prisoners themselves benefitted enormously: they were proud to have been able to help the children and, as one

of them wrote later in a newspaper article, work for blind children had proved the best rehabilitation he had ever known

Encouraging rehabilitation

One of the most difficult tasks for the ex-prisoner is settling down to normal living on their release. So much depends on how they are received by the community, and also on whether or not they can find work. One employer always has some ex-prisoners in his workforce; he treats them as he treats his other employees and realises that this is his way of responding to this Corporal Work of Mercy

Bury the Dead

On 5th September 1997, within a few days of the tragic death of Princess Diana, another death was announced, which brought sadness to many people, especially the poor, in all parts of the world. It was the death of a small Albanian nun, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who had died at the age of eighty-seven, after spending virtually the whole of her adult life serving the poor, the neglected, the destitute and the dying.

Caring for the uncared for

Before they obtained a more suitable conveyance, it was not unknown for Teresa and her Sisters to be seen trundling a dying person through the streets in a wheelbarrow. There might be nothing they could do to prolong life, but they wanted to do all they could to ease this person's sufferings; to wash them and feed them, if they were able to take food; and above all to enable them to die with dignity, knowing that they were loved and respected. As Mother Teresa explained: "The biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for". Great care was taken to offer the dying the rituals of their own faith, and so for Hindus there was water from the Ganges for their lips; for the Moslems, readings from the Koran; and for the occasional Christian, the last rites.

Her outstanding work earned her awards without number, including the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize which was awarded her in Oslo on 10th December 1979. In her acceptance speech she recalled:

"that man whom we picked up from the drain, half-eaten with worms, and we brought him to the home -[he said,] 'I have lived like an animal, but I am going to die like an angel, loved and cared for' ...it was so wonderful to see the greatness of

that man who could speak like that, who could die like that without blaming anybody, without cursing anybody... Like an angel -this is the greatness of our people”

Nearer home

According to a recent poll, sixty per cent of people hope to die at home; but in fact sixty per cent of us are more likely to die in hospital or in a similar facility. And so there is little chance that we shall be called upon, literally to "bury the dead". Nonetheless, this final Corporal Work of Mercy does make its demands upon us. There is the duty of visiting the dying, especially those who are specially dear to us, simply being with them, perhaps holding their hand, or, since hearing is the lost last of all the senses, speaking a gentle word or a brief prayer in their ear. In my mind's eye I see an elderly man sitting beside the bed of his wife; she is on her final journey in this world, and a long, difficult journey it has been. He sits beside her in silence, his hand holding hers; she can do nothing for herself; she is unable to see and scarcely able to speak. I know that this good man has made these visits over and over again week after week over the course of several years. And I know that what I am seeing is true love, what I am seeing is the final Corporal Work of Mercy in action.

Comfort the bereaved

If we have the spirit of 'burying the dead', then we'll see it as a duty not only to help our relatives and friends in any way we can in the time leading up to their death but also to ensure that they have a fitting burial, and that if they are Christians they have the attention of a priest. But even after the burial we haven't finished 'burying the dead'. There are still the broken hearts of the bereaved to be cared for. If we can strike up a patient friendship with those who have lost a dear one throughout their time of mourning, no matter how long that might take, we will have played an important part in easing their grief. Again, where Christian people are involved, we can often bring them great solace by arranging for Mass to be celebrated for their deceased loved one, or even by writing a letter, or sending a card, of condolence. In some parishes there is a specially trained group of men and women who are ready to minister to people who are going through the mourning process; in other parishes, members of the Legion of Mary or of the SVP or some other church organisation will go and say a Rosary in the home of the dying or of those recently dead. Many people have the lovely practice of praying each day for all the faithful departed

Protect the meaning of life

Abortion and Infanticide have become endemic throughout the world. Very often abortion is the first option considered to a surprise or unwanted pregnancy. It should, at the very least be the last option when everything else has been explored. It's no good shaking our heads and tutting, or even campaigning against abortion without providing the alternatives – which may, indeed, be just moral support, or the help needed may be something much more practical – such as a safe house or childcare.

In our day when 'assisted death' - or more precisely, 'assisted suicide' - is talked about more insistently than ever, we need to consider what we can do to ensure that human life is treated as sacred until it reaches its natural end. Nothing could be more contrary to the merciful work of 'burying the dead' than the work of bringing about their death. We may be able to enlist the support of our MPs on these issues, or become involved more directly by, for example, writing an article on the subject for a local newspaper. More importantly, each of us is inevitably helping to form public opinion; what we convey to others about these vital matters in the course of ordinary conversations is having its effect one way or another.

Care for the dying

One of the most powerful ways of offsetting the calls for assisted dying is by supporting the wonderful work of the hospice movement. Dame Cicely Saunders, nurse, medical social worker, doctor and surgeon, is the founder of the modern hospice movement, which has now spread across the world. Aware of the inadequacy of the care offered to the dying in most hospitals, she set up St Christopher's Hospice in the 1960s. There she pioneered research on pain control as well as on palliative care. She knew that a dying person is more than a patient with symptoms to be controlled: excellent medical care must be accompanied by 'holistic' support that takes account of a patient's practical, emotional, social and spiritual needs. She saw the dying person and the family as the unit of care, and she developed bereavement services to extend support beyond the death of the patient. Cicely Saunders was a devout Anglican and all that she did was underpinned by her strong Christian faith.

Finally, in regard to this work of mercy as in regard to the others, we all have it in our power to pray and by our prayers to win the support of the Lord, who by word and deed first taught us the vital importance of the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy

Bear Wrongs Patiently

This spiritual work of mercy is closely connected to the preceding one. Often our forgiveness of another's sin will not bring a difficult situation to a close. With crystalline realism the Church enjoins us to remain charitable even when there is no immediate end in sight to current vicissitudes

The nature and goodness of this work of mercy

- a. It is oriented to the good of the wrongdoer, allowing this person the opportunity to experience conversion.
- b. The other's objectionable behaviour becomes a means of my sanctification.
- c. It allows me to make amends for unrelated sins: I may be suffering undeservedly in this instance but I have done wrong to others on other occasions.

What can you do practically speaking?

1. Pray for somebody who annoys you.
2. Accept that redress is not always possible and find peace and inner freedom in that thought.
3. Channel energies which might have been expended in resentment into doing something good.
4. Identify within yourself those faults which grieve others and, for the sake of the common good, pray to God that he will release you from them.

Literature

In Chaucer's *The Franklin's Tale*, Dorigen, who is happily married to Arveragus in Brittany, agrees, in his absence in England, to accept, under pressure, Aurelius' suit but only on condition that he can remove all the rocks from the coast of Brittany, something which she is confident is impossible. Aurelius achieves this through magic. Dorigen, appalled, tells Arveragus on his return of what has happened and he tells her she must keep her promise however much it grieves him. Dorigen goes to Aurelius but he, upon learning of Arveragus' noble response, renounces his claims. Arveragus' patience, "an heigh vertu certeyn," affords Aurelius the opportunity to become a better man.

Sacrament

The Sacrament of Matrimony gives couples the graces which they need to bear with one another in the great adventure of their shared life. Those who participate in this "communion of life and love" are called to be mutually forgiving, to seek to become better for the sake of the other spouse and to accept in each other negative characteristics which persist notwithstanding sincere efforts to eliminate them.

Spiritual Poverty

The poverty of:

An affliction (*physical, mental, spiritual*), closeness to God.

Countered by:

Comforting, Prayer for the living and the dead.

Comfort the Afflicted

There is a clear overlap between the third and the fourth spiritual works of mercy. We afflict ourselves because of our sinful behaviour and another person's admonition can bring us comfort in the midst of the pain of personal conversion. At the same time, many of our afflictions are not the results of our wrong acts: they simply reflect the fact that we are living in a fallen world. They include invisible but very significant problems such as loneliness, untold anxieties and a sense of alienation

The nature and goodness of this work of mercy

- a) It rescues people from the sense of isolation, which can often be a consequence of suffering.
- b) It reminds people of their innate worth.
- c) It helps people to become stronger in addressing underlying problems.

What can you do practically speaking?

- a) Take the first move in reaching out to somebody who is interiorly suffering in a friendly, non-judgemental way.
- b) Strive to be a person who is approachable. Seek to "be present" to those whom you meet. Then they will feel confident in sharing their problems with you when the time comes.
- c) Be ready to encourage people who have particular needs to connect with appropriate professionals.
- d) At the parish level, review whether the emotional and spiritual needs of recently bereaved people are being adequately met

Literature

In Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* Leontes in a fit of irrational jealousy imagines his wife, Hermione, is committing adultery with his best friend, Polixenes. He comes to his senses and repents, but not before Hermione's good friend, Paulina, reports that she has died. Paulina supports the king in his grief and after years have passed invites him to view a statue of Hermione. A miraculous close hints at the supreme comfort of the resurrection

Sacrament

In the Sacrament of the Sick, the priest calls down the Holy Spirit, the Consoler, to heal a person who is poorly, so that he/she may be cured of his/her ailment or receive strength through grace to confront future challenges.

Pray for the Living and the Dead

Intercessory prayer is the most helpful activity that we can engage in for others. Pope Emeritus Benedict noted: "We can be sure that there is no such thing as a superfluous or useless prayer. No prayer is lost" (*General Audience*, 12th September 2012). Our prayer is efficacious because we unite it with that of Jesus who never ceases to intercede for us with the Father (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2741)

The nature and goodness of this work of mercy

1. It is an act both of complete selflessness and of utter faith.
2. It is the most helpful act that we can engage in for others.
3. It builds up our communion with our brothers and sisters ' in the Church on earth and with our deceased loved ones.

What can you do practically speaking?

- a) Create a list of people who are in need and pray for them by name each day.
Review the list each month
- b) When in conversation somebody mentions that he/she is struggling with a challenge assure that person that you will pray for him/her.
- c) Offer a Mass intention for a deceased loved one.
- d) Engage in small acts of self-sacrifice and offer these for deceased loved ones; alternatively go on a day pilgrimage to a local shrine and apply the graces of the indulgence that you receive to them.

Literature

In Dante's *Purgatorio*, the poet has to ascend a mountain, at each level of which he is freed from an attachment to one of the seven deadly sins. The people whom he meets during his ascent implore him to pray for them so that they may be admitted to heaven. In reaching the top he experiences complete purification and stands on the border of heaven. The last lines are: "remade, as new trees are renewed when they bring forth new boughs, I was pure and prepared to climb unto the stars." Perhaps no other piece of literature better describes the benefit our prayers can confer on those who have died.

Sacrament

The Sacrament of Holy Orders gives the priest who is ordained the responsibility of praying for the living and the dead through the celebration of Mass and the recitation of the Divine Office. The solemn undertaking of the priest encourages all members of the Church to engage in intercessory prayer

Prayers in support

Suffering with Jesus by Francois Fenelon

O crucified Jesus, in giving me your cross give me too your spirit of love and self-abandonment; grant that I may think less of my suffering than of the happiness of suffering with you. What do I suffer that you have not suffered? Or rather what do I suffer at all, if I dare to compare myself with you? O Lord, grant that I may love you and then I shall no longer fear the cross.

Opening of Psalm 102

Lord, listen to my prayer
and let my cry for help reach you.
Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress.
Turn your ear towards me
and answer me quickly when I call

Thanks be to you, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits which you have given me and for all the pains and insults which you have borne for me. O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother, may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly. Amen

(Prayer of St Richard of Chichester)

De profundis

1. Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord,
Lord, hear my voice!
O let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my pleading.
2. If you, O Lord, should mark our
guilt
Lord, who would survive?
But with you is found forgiveness:
for this we revere you.
3. My soul is waiting for the Lord, I
count on his word.
My soul is longing for the Lord
more than watchman for daybreak.
Let the watchman count on daybreak
and Israel on the Lord.
4. Because with the Lord there is mercy
and fullness of redemption,
Israel indeed he will redeem From all
its iniquity.

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and “Spiritual Works of Mercy” by Mgr Paul Grogan. (ISBN 978 1 78469 087 8)

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Session Four: Conclusion and Scripture



Conclusion

From the Beatitudes to the last Supper, Jesus challenges us. These challenges, however, are often two-sided:

– action and hope:

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy”

Already, with the old, narrow understanding of mercy, this Beatitude was full of hope, but with ‘mercy’ being more widely translated as ‘compassionate love’ how much richer and more meaningful it is!

St James, in the second chapter of his letter, sets out that faith without deeds to go with it is worthless:

“How does it help, my brothers, when someone who has never done a single good act claims to have faith? Will that faith bring salvation?

If one of the brothers or one of the sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on, and one of you says to him, ‘I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty,’ without giving him these bare necessities of life, then what good is that? In the same way faith: if good deeds do not go with it, it is quite dead.

You believe in the one God - that is creditable enough, but even the demons have the same belief, and they tremble with fear. It is by deeds, and not only by believing, that someone is justified.

As a body without a spirit is dead, so is faith without deeds.”

And St Paul, in his famous passage about love makes the same point, since ‘mercy’ can be construed as ‘practical love’:

“Though I command languages both human and angelic - if I speak without love, I am no more than a gong booming or a cymbal clashing.

And though I have the power of prophecy, to penetrate all mysteries and knowledge, and though I have all the faith necessary to move mountains - if I am without love, I am nothing.” (“love” here could equally be translated as “compassion” or “mercy”)

Jesus himself, however, in Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 25, is uncompromising:

“But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. Before him all the nations will be gathered, and he will separate them one from another, as

a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will tell those on his right hand, 'Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you; or thirsty, and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger, and take you in; or naked, and clothe you? When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?'

"The King will answer them, 'Most certainly I tell you, because you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' Then he will say also to those on the left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you didn't give me food to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and you didn't take me in; naked, and you didn't clothe me; sick, and in prison, and you didn't visit me.'

"Then they will also answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and didn't help you?'

"Then he will answer them, saying, 'Most certainly I tell you, because you didn't do it to one of the least of these, you didn't do it to me.' These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

I tend to think that when I've done my good deed for the day, that's it – I can sit back and relax – at least until tomorrow! Jesus' challenge does not seem like that – his challenge is 24/7. It's no wonder people give up and opt for the easier life!

Some thoughts:

- The sheep get the better deal in the end. How do we know if we've qualified?
- Is it possible to take up his challenge? How? Why should we?
- Nobody has enough time. Someone once said that you find the time for what is important to you:
- A week has 168 hours in it. (7 x 24!)
 - Write down how you spend your week, and allocate an average amount of time to each activity. Don't count 'sleep time' or 'eat alone time'. How much of the rest is 'sheep time'? (Do count 'make an effort to eat with someone else' time.) How did you do?

Think about the “Lord’s Prayer”:

- The word Jesus used for “Father” was Abba – in his language, the word children used for their fathers. In our language this might be “Daddy”, or “Dad”. How does this tie up with Pope Francis’s use of the word “Mercy”?
- Does it change the way you say this prayer?
- Later on we say: “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth, as it is in Heaven.”
 - Who is responsible now for God’s kingdom on Earth?
 - How do / will you respond to this responsibility?
 - *Write down your thoughts.*
- Further on we say: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”
 - This seems quite a scary thing to say. How does it tie up with “Mercy”?
 - How do you do? Can you do better? How?
 - *Write down your thoughts.*

Come as you are. That’s how I want you.

Come as you are, Feel quite at home

close to my heart, loved and forgiven.

Come as you are – why stand alone?

No need to fear, love sets no limits.

No need to fear, love never ends.

Don’t run away shamed and disheartened

rest in my love, trust me again

I came to call sinners, not just the virtuous.

I came to bring peace, not to condemn.

Each time you fail to live by my promise –
why should you think I’d love you the less?

Come as you are. That’s how I love you;
come as you are, trust me again

Nothing can change the love that I bear you.

And all will be well, just come as you are.

We are called to love as Christ loved – ***that’s the challenge!***

Closing Prayers:

Lord Jesus, I give you my hands to do your work, I give you my feet to go your way. I give you my tongue to speak your words. I give you my mind that you may think in me. I give you my spirit that you may pray in me. Above all I give you my heart that you may love in me your Father, and all mankind. I give you my whole self that you may grow in me, so that it is you, Lord Jesus, who live and work and pray in me.

Hail Holy Queen....

Our Father...

Mercy in Action - (an extra note!)

I do not think there is a Gospel phrase which has made a deeper impression on me ...than this one: "Insofar as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me". One has only to think that these words were spoken by the uncreated Truth, who also said, "this is my body... this is my blood")

The kindly American

In spring 1986 two grey-haired men met and greeted each other warmly. Their last meeting had been forty years earlier. Then they had met as enemies. Then their meeting had been in a dark cave in Okinawa. Now they met in the bright lights of Tokyo's International Airport. And this time they met as friends. One was Japanese, Ishibashi, the other an American, a former sergeant, Ponich.

In 1946 in the mouth of a cave in Okinawa, Ponich was holding a young Japanese boy in his arms; the five-year-old youngster had been shot through both legs. When Ishibashi and his colleague, both of them snipers, suddenly leaped out of the dark recesses of the cave where they'd been hiding and confronted the American with guns raised and about to fire, the situation seemed hopeless. But Ponich gently laid the boy on the ground, took out his first-aid kit, and began to clean the wounds. As he humbly explained later, he could think of no better way of preparing for death than by an act of mercy.

But his act of mercy begot another. The snipers, amazed at what they'd seen, slowly lowered their rifles. Ponich took up the child in his arms, bowed in gratitude to the two Japanese, and carried the boy to a field hospital. Four decades later he wrote to a Tokyo newspaper, belatedly thanking the Japanese people because two of their soldiers had once spared his life. Ishibashi read the letter and contacted the newspaper, and so the meeting with Ponich was arranged.'

The kindly American "could think of no better way of preparing for death than by an act of mercy". At any time, mercy is the form that love takes in the face of human distress. And so God, who *is* love, is also mercy. Mercy is, if we can put it this way, in his DNA! The Polish nun Sr Faustina, whom Pope St John Paul II called "the great apostle of Divine Mercy in our time", wrote in her diary that God's mercy is "the greatest and highest of the divine attributes" and is "divine perfection pure and simple". Those bold words only re-echo all that the Bible has to tell us.

"God of mercy and compassion"

In the Old Testament God is revealed to Moses as "merciful and gracious ...abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"

(Ex 34:6). The Hebrew words used to describe the bond between God and his people suggest that God's mercy is one of loving faithfulness: it is like the love of a mother for the child of her womb, it is utterly dependable. Chapter 11 of Hosea, one of the highpoints of Old Testament theology, pictures God as a doting parent, whose

patience has been tried to the limit by rebellious children; the temptation to punish may be strong, but infinite compassion prevails, because, says the Lord through his prophet: "I am God and not mortal"; human mercy at its best is but the palest shadow of the divine mercy. The psalmist proclaims over and over again that "his love [a word which also means `mercy'] has no end" (*Ps 136*). God is always ready to hear the cry of the poor and come to relieve them in their distress. God is their rock, their shield, their fortress. As the Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel would have said: Israel's God is not characterised by apathy, but by its opposite, *pathos* (passion) - by passionate concern for humanity, by intimate involvement in the life story of God's people. The Exodus, the deliverance of Israel from slavery, is God's loving, merciful response to his people in their time of dire distress. It is the paradigm and pattern of human need and divine deliverance: in that sense, it stands as a summary of the whole Bible. Inevitably, it calls for a response from God's people: they too must be merciful, especially to the poor, to the marginalised, to widows and orphans who are otherwise without support.

"The face of the Father's mercy"

In the opening words of the official Bull that announced the Holy Year of Mercy, Pope Francis reminded us that "Jesus is the face of the Father's mercy"; he is the revelation of what our God is really like; in him "the loving-kindness (the tender mercy) of the heart of our God...visits us" in person (*Lk 1:78*). And so the gospels offer overwhelming evidence of Jesus's compassionate response to human suffering and need: he heals the sick, cleanses lepers, casts out devils, feeds the hungry, and touches the 'unclean' and allows them to touch him; he is moved to tears at the death of his friend; he even raises the dead to life. Just as one of the words used for mercy in the Old Testament is linked with the maternal womb, so one in the New Testament links it with a person's innermost being; in each case there seems to be an attempt to express the inexpressible, the limitless depth of compassion with which God is moved by human need: the divine compassion is almost something physical.

"I have set you an example"

Jesus not only shows forth the mercy of God, he also urges his followers to do the same: "Show mercy," he says, "just as your Father shows mercy" (*Lk 6:36*). On the night before he died he performed the lowly service which was normally left to a slave: he knelt and washed the dust-covered feet of his disciples. Then he told them: "...you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (*Jn 13:14-15*). We must not be like the wicked servant in the parable who, having been freed of an enormous debt by his generous master, then failed to show compassion to a fellow servant who owed him a paltry sum (*Lk 7:41-42*). Similarly, the message of the famous parable of the Good Samaritan

is that we are called upon to be good neighbours, compassionate neighbours, by coming to the aid of whoever stands in need of our help (*Lk 10:30-35*).

Above all, in his majestic description of the Last Judgement Jesus makes it clear that our eternal fate is bound up with how we have helped, or failed to help, those in need. The 'needs' in question are all of a bodily, corporal, nature: food and drink for the hungry and the thirsty; clothes and a home for those who are without them; visiting of those who are sick and those who are in prison; and burying of the dead. Jesus came not to save souls but to save people, and people are bodies as well as souls. And so while there are "Spiritual Works of Mercy" (see the companion CTS booklet of that title) there are also Corporal Works of Mercy, which are our particular concern here.

The sheep and the goats

Jesus says: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (*Mt 25:31-46*).

St James, that most down-to-earth of men, sums it all up in a sentence: "there will be judgment without mercy for those who have not been merciful themselves; but the merciful need have no fear of judgment" (*James 2:13*).

*"Whatever you did to the least
of my brethren..."*

On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus made two extraordinary statements. First, he told his disciples: "as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you" (*Jn 15:9*); and then, "as I have loved you, so you also must love one another" (*Jn 15:12*). It is as if God's compassionate love is being compared to a huge waterfall, descending from its source in the Father, becoming incarnate in the Son, and finally waiting upon us to allow it to reach out to our brothers and sisters everywhere. The Church is infinitely more than "a kind of social or charitable agency; as the Body of Christ, it is the sacrament of the continuing effective presence of Christ in the world"; as members of the Body, each one of us has a personal responsibility to share in the mission of the Lord of Mercy. Blessed Mother Teresa was expressing the same thought when she said that "welfare is for a purpose - an admirable and a necessary one - whereas Christian love is for a person. The one is about numbers, the other about a man who was also God".

The Seven Corporal Works of Mercy

Of course the list of seven Corporal Works of Mercy is not meant to be exhaustive: today there are many other activities that would fit into the same category, such as caring for the earth or fighting against abortion or taking action against global warming or working for nuclear disarmament or putting an end to the scourge of human trafficking. Of the seven 'official' Corporal Works of Mercy, six come straight from our Lord's Last Judgement scene. The final one seems to have been added later. It reflects the horror that Jews felt when anyone was left unburied: it's a horror shared almost universally today. Tobit, the author of the biblical book that bears his name, records how in times of persecution he would bury the dead in secret at the risk of his life: "I performed many acts of charity to my kindred...if I saw the dead body of any of my people thrown out behind the wall of Nineveh, I would bury it. I also buried any whom King Sennacherib put to death...in his anger he put to death many Israelites; but I would secretly remove the bodies and bury them...Then one of the Ninevites went and informed the king about me, that I was burying them; so I hid myself...Then all my property was confiscated; nothing was left to me...except my wife... and my son..." (*Tb 1:16-20*).