

The Spiritual Works of Mercy

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Recently, a friend and fellow student, whom I will call Ciara, was having a quite emotional day. Her son was recovering from an addiction. Before beginning on his path to recovery, he led a difficult and significant struggle in which he lost his faith, his freedom, and his connections to friends because of a reliance on particular substances. He had, basically, turned into someone others were not willing to be around. His mother, on the other hand, could not give up on her son; Ciara said that only through unconditional love could she have the patience, determination, and strength to help him turn to recovery. Not only did Ciara display mercy, but she helped him find mercy toward himself.

Pope Francis, in his declaration on the Year of Mercy (*Miserecordiae Vultus* or *The Face of Mercy*), invites us to focus on the spiritual works of mercy. He states:

It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the *corporal and spiritual works of mercy*. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples. . . . And let us not forget the *spiritual works of mercy*: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offenses, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead. (15)

Consistently, Pope Francis has emphasized that disciples' hearts need to be filled with mercy. These hearts not only need to show mercy, but must be open to receiving mercy from God and others. Ciara embodied the spiritual works of mercy. Her son's recovery included her praying with him, inviting him to discover again his dependence on God's mercy. She comforted him in the pain that comes with going through recovery, of regaining some freedom from dependence on substances. She forgave his past behavior toward her, his brothers, and father. She patiently lived out many of the spiritual works of mercy. Perhaps the most difficult part of this period was witnessing her son's inability to show mercy toward himself, after gains in his recovery. Through prayer, his mother's witness, as well as time, he began to forgive himself. Why is living in and from the spiritual works of mercy necessary for disciples?



The corporal works of mercy we perform often inspire others to do likewise.

Such a way of living, Pope Francis states, recognizes Christ present in the suffering:

We cannot escape the Lord's words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged: . . . we will be asked if we have helped others to escape the doubt that causes them to fall into despair and which is often a source of loneliness; . . . if we have been close to the lonely and afflicted; if we have forgiven those who have offended us and have rejected all forms of anger and hate that lead to violence; if we have had the kind of patience God shows, who is so patient with us; and if we have commended our brothers and sisters to the Lord in prayer. In each of these "little ones," Christ himself is present. His flesh becomes visible in the flesh of the tortured, the crushed, the scourged, the malnourished, and the exiled . . . to be acknowledged, touched, and cared for by us. Let us not forget the words of Saint John of the Cross: "as we prepare to leave this life, we will be judged on the basis of love." (15)

These challenging words reminds us that mercy is living from God's gift of love by loving God and one another, particularly those who need God's love shone through our hearts. Love does not need to be as demanding and extraordinary as Ciara's, but it needs to be lived out daily.