

The Practice of The Works of Mercy as Signs of Hope and Gratitude

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative power of the Works of Mercy. These Works of Mercy are selfless acts rooted in compassion and empathy, in bringing hope and gratitude to a world filled with darkness and despair. This work touched some of the biblical foundation and references of the both corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Through the practice of Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy, individuals are able to demonstrate love for God and neighbour in a significant manner. This will lead to fostering a sense of community living, genuine compassion, and unwavering love for one and all. The article in a diminutive detail, demonstrates the impact of Works of Mercy on both the giver and receiver. On the side of giver, it depicts the attitude of love and gratitude whereas, on the side of the receiver, it brings about relieves, hope and joy. It went further to demonstrate how genuine works of mercy encourage

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empathy, breaks down barriers of isolation and individualism, and transforms lives for a better and harmonious society. By the implementation of these selfless acts, individuals can easily become beacons of hope and gratitude without restrictions, making a positive impact on the world. The article concludes by emphasizing the importance of putting Works of Mercy into practice, becoming givers of hope and gratitude to a world in need.

Introduction

In a world filled with darkness and despair, the practice of the works of mercy shines like a beacon of hope and gratitude. They are selfless acts, rooted in compassion and empathy. They have the power to transform lives and bring light to those who are mostly in need of it. In his apostolic exhortation (*Evangelii Gaudium*) Pope Francis opines that, “The works of mercy are the most concrete and tangible ways to express our love for others.”² They are that tangible way we show solidarity to our fellow men. And without solidarity, suicide will be on acceleration in our society on daily basis. Statistics has it that before a suicide there is that hopelessness, despair or despondent which are the results of individualism, selfishness and insensitivity to people’s plights. To this effect, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council affirmed,

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of

² Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*), 2013, no. 231

people united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father's kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity. That is why they cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.³

Hence to care, and to show mercy is panacea to despair and suicide. Our Lord Jesus Christ therefore told Maria Faustina that, Divine Mercy is the last hope of man⁴ and for salvation. This is a call to us to lift people from their hopelessness, their despair and give them hope. That simple act is love. This love is accessed through our practices of works of mercy.

This article however is a voyage of appraising hope and gratitude as a by-product of works of mercy. To continue this expedition, we shall look at the term mercy for a better understanding of the topic.

Mercy

The term Mercy is of Latin origin, which is *misericordia*. It is combination of two words: *misereri*, “to have pity on” or “compassion for” and *cor*, “heart” (genitive case - *cordis*: “of the heart”). Mercy, therefore, carries the idea of having compassion on someone with all one’s heart. The latter phrase expresses the idea: From the very inmost depth (or core) of one’s being.⁵

³ Second Vatican Council. *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), 1965, no. 1

⁴ Cf. Maria Faustina Kowalska. *Diary: Divine Mercy in my Soul*, Ent. 1228

⁵Cf. Seraphim Michalenko. *The Meaning of Mercy*.
<https://www.thedivinemercy.org/articles/meaning-mercy>
0#:~:text=The%20Latin%20word,of%20one%27s%20being.%22. accessed 3/9/2024

Mercy is a fundamental concept in Christianity, particularly in the Catholic Church. It refers to God's benevolence, forgiveness, and compassion towards humanity. It is godly to be merciful because, mercy is an attribute of God, "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love (Psalm 103:8)." This highlights God's merciful nature. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us to be merciful; in his words, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7).

According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, mercy is a virtue that inclines us to relieve the misery of others.⁶ This form of relief is often holistic but not automatic. It brings back and strengthens sense of purpose and belonging, to the beneficiary. Also, in an encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, Pope John Paul II emphasizes the importance of mercy in our lives, when he states, "Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life."⁷ This aligns with this idea that, "Mercy is the flower that blooms in the garden of hope".⁸ And this mercy is shown in few things we do: works of mercy.

The Works of Mercy

Works of mercy are basically divided into two - the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. They are sets of practices that have been parts of Christian tradition for centuries. They have strong biblical foundation. They are divided into two categories as earlier stated:

⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), II-II, q. 30, a. 1

⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1980), no. 14

⁸ Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska. *Diary: Divine Mercy in My Soul*, trans. Joseph A. Pyzdek (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 2005), entry 1577

corporal and spiritual works of mercy. The corporal works of mercy take care of the physical needs of others, and the spiritual works of mercy, nurture the spiritual well-being of others.⁹ Let us therefore proceed to list these works of mercy and their biblical references.

The Corporal Works

The corporal works of mercy, which takes care of the physical needs of others, are:

- Feeding the hungry (Matthew 25:35)
- Giving drink to the thirsty (Matthew 25:35)
- Clothing the naked (Matthew 25:36)
- Sheltering the homeless (Matthew 25:35)
- Visiting the sick (Matthew 25:36)
- Visiting the imprisoned (Matthew 25:36)
- Burying the dead (Tobit 1:18-20)

Spiritual Works of Mercy

The spiritual works of mercy, which nurture the spiritual well-being of others, include:

- Counselling the doubtful (Romans 14:1)
- Teaching the ignorant (1 Peter 3:15)
- Admonishing the sinner (Matthew 18:15)
- Comforting the sorrowful (Romans 12:15)
- Bearing wrong patiently (cf. Matthew 5:38-42)
- Forgiving injuries (Matthew 6:14-15)
- Praying for the living and the dead (2 Thessalonians 1:11)

⁹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vatican, 1997), no. 2447

Works of Mercy as Signs of Hope

Hope is a fundamental aspect of the human experience, enabling us to persevere in the face of adversity. The practice of works of mercy embodies this hope, demonstrating that we value and cherish human life and thus create a harmonious environment. As St. Augustine said, “Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are anger and courage. Anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way are.”¹⁰

The corporal and spiritual works of mercy are tangible and intangible expressions of hope, providing comfort and support to those in need. The practice of the works of mercy is a powerful sign of hope in a world that often seem to avoid basic considerations. By caring for the physical and spiritual needs of others, we demonstrate that we value and cherish them; and that we believe in the inherent dignity and worth of every one of them. Care is one of the most needs of man. Hence, Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, “The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread.”¹¹ Let us therefore relieve people of this very hunger by our daily practices of the works of mercy. These works of mercy remind us that, we are not alone in our struggles (Matthew 25:35-36). This is hope.

¹⁰ Augustine of Hippo. (416-417 CE). Homily on the Gospel of John, Tractate 50, Section 6 (John 15:18-21). In J. W. Rettig (Trans.), Tractates on the Gospel of John (Vol. 12, pp. 277-278). Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press.

¹¹ Mother Teresa. *A Simple Path*. Compiled by Lucinda Vardey. (London: Rider Books, 1993), p. 134

Works of Mercy a Signs of Gratitude

The practice of works of mercy is also an expression of gratitude for the blessings we have received from God. As St. Ignatius of Loyola noted, “Gratitude is the memory of the heart.”¹² Remembering all or some of the benevolences one received from God, by giving to others. We acknowledge the gifts we have been given. And express our thankfulness for whatever we are and have, by extending hands of love/mercy to others. This stance of gratitude encourages a sense of humility and recognition of our place in the world. It helps us to stay grounded and focused on what truly matters.¹³

The corporal and spiritual works of mercy are tangible expressions of gratitude, demonstrating our appreciation for the gifts we have received. Through them, we acknowledge the blessings we have received and express our thankfulness for the abundance in our lives (cf. Matthew 25:35-36).

This sense of gratitude, motivated by the practice of works of mercy helps one to recognize the interconnectedness between our lives and the blessings we have received. It is therefore obvious that “The works of mercy are the best way to show our love for God and for our neighbour.”¹⁴

Works of mercy is a powerful sign of gratitude, expression and acknowledgment of the blessings we have received from God and humanity_ thankfully for the abundance in our lives. By embracing

¹² Ignatius of Loyola. (1548). *Spiritual Exercises*. Annotation 20. In G. Ganss (Trans.), *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*. (Chicago: Loyola University Press). pp. 42-43

¹³ Cf. St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 1548

¹⁴ Pope Francis. *Misericordiae Vultus* (The Face of Mercy): Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 15

these selfless acts, we grow deeper in us the sense of gratitude and appreciation for the gifts we have received. This is why “The smallest act of kindness is worth more than the grandest intention.”¹⁵ This is a call for one to value gratitude in the domain of relationship no matter the level.

The Impact of the Works of Mercy

This ancient practice; works of mercy has a profound impact on both the giver and the receiver. It fosters a sense of consideration, community living and connection. Consideration in that it helps the giver to giving attention to the good this act will do to the receiver and society at large. Fostering a sense of Community living in that, it promotes togetherness among the people. Connection because, it does not only bring people together physically, it makes them to be of one mind and one heart (cf. Acts 4:32). When all these are fostered, we will be able to break down barriers of selfishness, lonesomeness and “might makes right” in our society.

Impact on the Receiver: - The works of mercy provide comfort, support, and hope to those in need, transforming their lives in meaningful ways. Feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and visiting the sick demonstrate that we value and cherish human life; and that we believe in the inherent dignity and worth of every human person (Matthew 25:35-36).

Impact on the Giver: - The practice of works of mercy has profound impact on the giver, cultivating a sense of empathy, compassion, and love. By engaging in these selfless acts, we become more aware of the needs of others and more sensitive to their

¹⁵ St. Teresa of Calcutta, *A Simple Path*, 1993

struggles. We become like our heavenly Father (cf. Luke 6:36). And St. Augustine said as I quoted earlier, “The measure of our love for God is the measure of our love for our neighbour.”¹⁶ This resonates with what Apostle John wrote in his first letter, “if anyone says, ‘I love God; and hates his brother, he is a liar...’” (cf. 1 John 4:20-21).

The works of mercy generally have profound impacts on both the giver and the receiver, fostering a sense of community, compassion, and love. By embracing these selfless acts, we can transform lives, cultivate empathy and compassion, and become more aware of the needs of others.

Conclusion

The practice of the works of mercy is a powerful way to live out our faith and values as Christians and fellow human beings. And thus we make a positive impact on the world around us. By caring for others and demonstrating hope and gratitude, we bring light and joy to those who need it most, and create a ripple effect of kindness and compassion that can spread far and wide. And as I have pointed out before in the writing of Pope Francis, “The works of mercy are the best way to show our love for God and for our neighbour.”¹⁷

We have those who talk about deeds of mercy, those who talk about those who carry out works of mercy and those who performs works of mercy. It is often easy to identify these categories of people in every society. In all these three categories be you, ‘those who performs the works of mercy.’ Thus be, you a giver of hope to the

¹⁶ St. Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Tractate 17, Section 8 (John 7:16-18)

¹⁷ Pope Francis. *Misericordiae Vultus*, no. 15

darkened and despaired humanity/world and gratitude to God the giver of all that is good. Stay blessed.

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