

Overview of the Works of Mercy and Visiting the Sick and Comforting Those Who Suffer

Not many realize that the Catholic Church is the largest charitable institution in the world. This is largely due to the fact that the Corporeal and Spiritual Works of Mercy are often referred to as the "heart of Catholic identity." St. Thomas Aquinas ((1225-1274), a famous philosopher and theologian to whom we credit the foundation of many of our Catholic teachings defines mercy as, "the compassion in our hearts for another person's misery, a compassion which drives us to do what we can to help him."¹ This is what propels us to think and act beyond ourselves and our needs to focus on others. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are the traditional practices within the Catholic Church during Lent. The Works of Mercy exemplify the ways in which we practice various forms of almsgiving. Therefore, over the next several weeks during Lent we will be focusing on the Works of Mercy and challenging everyone to reflect on how you as individuals and families are living out your baptismal call to live a life of service towards others.

There are seven Corporeal Works of Mercy and seven Spiritual Works of Mercy. Corporeal Works of Mercy are defined as the "charitable actions by which we help our neighbors in their bodily needs."² These are to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned, bury the dead, and give alms to the poor. The Spiritual Works of Mercy are defined as those "actions that help our neighbor in their spiritual needs."³ These include counseling the doubtful, instructing the ignorant, admonishing the sinner, comforting the sorrowful, forgiving injuries, bearing wrongs patiently, and praying for the living and the dead. This week we will focus on the Corporeal Work of Visiting the Sick and the Spiritual Work of Comforting Those Who Suffer. Many of us have been sick ourselves or have had loved ones sick. As a child, nothing was more comforting than the touch of our mother's hand on our forehead. As Catholics, we are called to visit the sick and be that comforting hand. As an institution, the Catholic Church was instrumental in building and staffing the first hospitals and care facilities in our country. In fact, "supplying companionship and housekeeping for the sick, elderly, and homebound, and accommodating the needs of the physically and mentally disabled are principle avenues of serving the sick."⁴ Visiting the sick significantly coincides with Comforting the Suffering. The suffering does encompass a much larger range of individuals in addition to the sick. It may be as simple as a wiping the tears of a child who has scraped his knee, to helping someone through a dangerous addiction or being with a loved one or friend after the loss of a spouse/parent/child. Still we are called to be that loving hand of comfort and often times it is just the offering of our presence that is most needed. As a parish we strive to live out these Works of Mercy in many different ways. One ministry in particular we have at St. Pat's which truly lives out Caring for the Sick and Comforting Those Who Suffer is the Ministry of Caring. This ministry is made up of individuals who are EMHC's (Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion) and take communion to those in care facilities (there are 7 in our parish boundaries) and to those who are homebound. The Ministry of Caring also serves at funeral masses assisting the pastor. They reach out to those who are sick and suffering either bodily or in sorrow. The funeral committee also comforts those who suffer by providing family members of the deceased with a luncheon after funerals. We encourage you to think of ways you and your family lives out these Works of Mercy and challenge you this Lent to make a conscious effort to Visit the Sick and Comfort the Suffering. For ideas on ways you can do this, please visit our website www.stpatselkhorn.org/Catholic101.

¹ Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, ST II-II.30.1.

² USCCB, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, pp. 508.

³ *ibid.*, pp. 529.

⁴ *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*