

Keynote Address to the 2016 Annual General Assembly of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Vancouver BC

During this year when Pope Francis has challenged the world to better understand and more faithfully live the call to mercy, what greater inspiration could a keynote speaker hope for, standing in front of this group of committed servants and agents of the mercy of God?

But I don't want to talk about mercy in the abstract. I'm not going to talk about the theology of mercy or even about mercy in the Scriptures. At the risk of being old-fashioned, I want to talk about the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

I'm listening to hear if anyone groaned. Some of you memorized all 14 works when you were in primary school and you wonder how they can sound the keynote for us this morning.

I suggest that this ancient list is a great place to start thinking of the joy of serving. Because one of the joys of our service is doing it in the Church and with the Church. And one of the joys of any work is knowing it's the right work to do.

The decades during and after the Second Vatican Council encouraged us to new ways of thinking. Great benefits came from this, but we stopped making use of some valuable aspects of our past.

Catholic tradition provides a systematic way of looking at some things – you might almost call it a structure for understanding. In an earlier age, these ways of looking at truth were reduced to lists or phrases that could be memorized. Catholic children of the generation immediately before mine could tell you the three Cardinal Virtues, the four Theological Virtues, the seven Sacraments and – at least by a certain age – the seven Deadly Sins.

There were, of course, drawbacks to such theological arithmetic. But, as you know, it's always fun to rediscover things from the past and to seek their value without being forced to do so by a stern teacher in Catechism class, possibly armed with a ruler. And so, over the years, I've been struck by how helpful and clear some of the old formulas were. Discovering them for myself has allowed me to make use of them in deepening my own practical knowledge of the faith.

And so I have rediscovered the seven Corporal Works of Mercy and seven Spiritual Works of Mercy. I didn't get through seminary without knowing what they were, of course, but no one asked me to memorize them or spend any time thinking about them.

Then, a few years back, I was concelebrating a funeral Mass at Immaculate Conception parish in Delta. Listening to the homily – or should I say *not* listening to the homily – gave me the chance to stare at the back wall on which these fourteen works of mercy were boldly listed on a banner.

There they were:

To feed the hungry;
 To give drink to the thirsty;
 To clothe the naked;
 To house the homeless;
 To visit the sick;
 To ransom the captive;
 To bury the dead.

And

To instruct the ignorant;
 To counsel the doubtful;
 To admonish sinners;
 To bear wrongs patiently;
 To forgive offences willingly;
 To comfort the afflicted;
 To pray for the living and the dead.

There they are: acts of compassion, ministering to the soul, and acts of kindness, ministering to the body.

We've never stopped performing good works in the Church, but the traditional descriptions are making a comeback in the Year of Mercy. Recently, I read a story on the internet about people helping the folks in Fort McMurray deal with the consequences of the devastating fire. Much to my surprise, front and center in the story was Jacquie Nowlan, a woman from Edmonton whom I know very well

In her interview, Jacquie said, "I don't think any who call themselves Christians can be divorced from corporal works of mercy. Certainly as Catholics, we are called to corporal works of mercy, and that's what this is. It's about being called by God to help."

Jacquie's husband was working in Fort McMurray when the wildfire turned on the town. The fact he and everyone else in town were able to get out safely made her very grateful. But she knew she had to do more.

Her pastor happily gave her permission to use the church hall as a collection depot for relief supplies. Working 10 and 12 hours shifts for days, they were able to deliver about 10 pickup truck loads of goods ranging from clothing to food to bottled water for the evacuation effort.

"I have such admiration for first responders in any emergency, and especially for what the first responders were able to do in Fort McMurray," Jacquie says. "But just by being able to contribute, I was a first responder to the Holy Spirit."

She saw what she was doing through the eyes of faith, not philanthropy. “It really is a point of conversion for me,” she says. “After I left my job, I was having a bit of a pity party for myself, but God needed me to be on the ground here to do this. In the Year of Mercy, I was called to an act of mercy for my brothers and sisters. My faith required me to respond.”

This story shows we need to read the signs of the times—to see, judge and act, as is sometimes said: to see the good that needs to be done. So the works of mercy not only tell us the sorts of things that need to be done: they also help us decide what we need to do at the present moment.

A classic text on the spiritual life tells us what should be obvious: we’re called to do what needs to be done. In his book *Spiritual Theology*, Father Jordan Aumann writes that the apostolate “whether considered as the spiritual and corporal works of mercy or evangelization, is the obligation of every baptized Christian.”

Jacquie Nowlan accomplished four of the fourteen works of mercy. She couldn’t possibly have performed the others at the same time.

Happily, being part of the Church allows us to live out our call to service with others and membership in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is a privileged way of doing more together than we could ever do alone.

So what do these fourteen works of mercy say directly to us as Vincentians, gathered here under the banner of “The Joy of Serving”?

Plenty, I think. In the first place, these fourteen good works are the means of our service. And in the second place, they are the motive of our service.

As means, we have here a comprehensive list of the things we do in the Society. It’s a great joy to know we are so completely aligned with best of Catholic thinking on how to love and serve our neighbours.

As for motive: think about what it means to know that mercy is the reason for all these works. It’s so easy to do good things for their own sake. It’s even possible, of course, to do the right things for the wrong reasons. But the bond between mercy and our charitable activities is in front of us all the time if we relate them to the traditional list.

You might even say the Vincentian mission is anchored in mercy.

I heard a story years ago that taught me a lot about knowing why we do the things we do. There was a dairy farmer who had three boys. Every summer he put them all three to work milking cows.

His neighbor had a machine that could do the job much faster, and he asked why the farmer wouldn’t get one. He told him “Having your three boys do the milking is a very inefficient way to raise cattle.”

The wise farmer replied, “Maybe so. But I’m not raising cattle; I’m raising boys.”

We need that kind of thinking to stay focused. The means of our service is the same as many secular charitable organizations—but our motive is mercy.

For quite some years I have been involved with two groups focused on the spiritual works of mercy. One is called Catholic Christian Outreach, a remarkable movement of young people offering the joy of the Gospel on Canadian university campuses from coast to coast.

The other is Renewal Ministries, which proclaims Jesus through Catholic renewal and evangelization, both in North America and in mission work in numerous countries from Africa to Eastern Europe to Asia.

It goes without saying that the lay missionaries and evangelizers in these two remarkable and dynamic organizations have their hands full as they work to spread the Good News in our wounded world. And certainly they don't have to worry that they resemble any charitable secular organizations.

And they don't need to worry about their motives, either. Both CCO and Renewal Ministries are closely yoked to the spiritual works of mercy. Whether we're talking about a CCO missionary running a faith study or talking one-on-one with a troubled student, or Renewal Ministries reaching thousands through television or booklets, these fine people are counseling the doubtful, instructing the ignorant, admonishing sinners, comforting the afflicted, and encouraging forgiveness—each and every day.

The president of Renewal Ministries, Ralph Martin, is probably the most influential Catholic lay evangelist in the English-speaking Church. He's a fine spiritual writer and a prophetic voice in our times. If anyone could go to bed satisfied with his work for the Kingdom, I figured it had to be Ralph.

But I want to read you something he wrote in a recent Renewal Ministries newsletter. Here's what he wrote: "Recently my wife Anne and I joined our local St. Vincent de Paul Society as a way of bringing the corporal works of mercy into our lives in a regular way."

Isn't that something?

Ralph's article in the newsletter offers a clue as to what may have prompted him to join our Society. He started off by quoting Pope Francis, who at the start of the Year of Mercy encouraged all Catholics to consider how we can make the spiritual and corporal works of mercy more a part of our lives.

The Pope calls us to *rediscover* the corporal works of mercy. I think he's inviting us to consciously think about the good things we do, and to ensure we're all involved in both the spiritual and the corporal works.

So, for Ralph Martin, a great spiritual leader, this means a greater awareness of the corporal works, even if they are not going to be his primary calling.

For us, this means we need to pay attention to the spiritual works and not think we can focus exclusively on the material help that Vincentians are so good at lending.

But we are not members of a group like CCO or Renewal Ministries, whose calling and charism is clearly on the spiritual side of the page. Blessed Frédéric was as concerned with the spiritual as he was with the corporal—which is the distinct nature of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, with its emphasis on personal relationships with those whom we serve.

In this, Blessed Frédéric was inspired by the example of St. Vincent, who could not imagine focusing on one area or another. He's as much concerned with seminaries to instruct the ignorant as he is with ministry to the galley slaves. He was admonishing sinners and comforting the afflicted constantly. In terms of personal apostolic efforts, I don't think you can find a better example of someone who pursued with passion all of the works of mercy.

We can't do everything. But each Vincentian can take some time during this Year of Mercy to ask whether he or she could give more prominence to the spiritual works. I suggest that each conference and council have a special meeting to consider ways of enhancing the spiritual works in their ministries.

Often we are called to perform a spiritual work of mercy at the very same time as a corporal work of mercy, particularly in our conversations with the people we may be helping with material needs.

I heard a story of a tired and lonely man who went into a diner. He was physically tired and emotionally drained. So when the waitress asked for his order, he told her "I want only two things: an order of meatloaf and a few kind words. The waitress scribbled down his order and began to walk away.

The man called after her "Hey, how about the kind words?" The waitress replied, "Sir, the kindest words are 'don't order the meatloaf.'"

We can probably find kinder words than those when feeding the needy.

And let's not forget the seventh spiritual work—last on the list but far from least: to pray for the living and the dead. It's tempting to rush through the prayer card at meetings, I know. There's always so much to be done, and we want to get on with "the real work."

I really don't need to tell you that praying for the living and the dead is as important as any service rendered by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Prayer should be, of course, the foundation of all good works. As St. Benedict says in his Rule, every time you begin a good work you must pray fervently to God to bring it to perfection. (cf. RB, Prologue)

But the Year of Mercy reminds us that prayer is a good work in itself. How many people do we serve who have no one to pray for them? The marginalization we see in so many cases includes a spiritual marginalization—there are no friends, family or fellow church members to pray for them.

At Christ the Redeemer Parish, our remarkable parish SVDP conference serves Christ's poor in too many ways to list. But they're not the only workers of mercy: one parish group in particular has shown how much people want us to pray for them.

Our prison ministry began to solicit prayer requests from prisoners. They are submitted without last names, and passed along to those who are willing to pray for the specific intentions. Reading these intentions touched my heart—not only because of what the inmates want us to pray for, but also because of the trust they place in prayer, and in us.

Praying for the living and the dead is something we can do more of by a conscious effort at meetings and at home. But two other spiritual works, bearing wrongs patiently and forgiving offenses are more about cultivating attitudes of the heart.

These attitudes can make our service more joyful in several ways. A parish conference is only rarely made up of saints. Like any organization in the Church, it is subject to misunderstandings, hurt feelings and so on. Pastors can disappoint in a number of ways—at one end of the spectrum by failing to attend meetings. I plead guilty to that, sadly. But I can tell you that the warmth of understanding the president shows in forgiving me my busy-ness is a colossal work of mercy.

At the other end there is the meddling pastor, who attends the meeting and takes it over. He may or may not need forgiveness, but he definitely needs to be endured with patience!

Over the years, although not lately, I have given many talks to Vincentians and made good use of the written sources of the spirituality that Blessed Frédéric left us by word and example. But in preparing this talk, I have convinced myself—and I hope I have convinced you—that at the very center of our life and mission must be this fourteen-point program, which tells us not only what to do, but how to do it.

Tested and proved over the ages, these fourteen good works come from the heart of the Gospel and the heart of the Church. The list can affirm and inspire us, and serve as a fine instrument for the evaluation of our ministries, of our conferences, and of ourselves.

Certainly, no conference, no Vincentian is likely to fall short in the corporal works of mercy. But I hope we can be reminded that the spiritual works of mercy are no less a part of the Vincentian's apostolate. We shouldn't dream of assessing our ministry only in the light of good deeds. That would indeed be foreign to our origins and charism.

Our national mission statement says that Vincentians

- see Christ in anyone who suffers
- come together as a family
- have personal contact with the poor
- help in all possible ways

Is there any doubt that a family must pray? Most Catholics my age remember Father Peyton phrase, "The family that prays together, stays together."

At the same time, if we are going to "help in all possible ways" we can hardly neglect the prayer of intercession.

Let us take very seriously the call to pray for the living and the dead, mindful that, as the Catechism says, intercessory prayer "is cooperation with God's providence, with his plan of love for us." (cf. CCC 2738) We serve Christ's poor no less when we pray for them than when we feed them.

Prayer for fellow Vincentians, living and dead, is a key element of the spirituality of fraternal communion the society has received from Blessed Frédéric. And the fraternal spirit of our conferences should make them places where the doubtful are counselled, the grieving consoled and even sinners called back to the right path.

As I've already said Christians do not do good work, they do God's work. And the closer we stay to the merciful heart of Christ, the more joy there will be in our apostolic work.

Perhaps I should end where I began – with a question from the old catechisms. Do you remember the fruits of charity? The first of them is joy. If our charity is animated by the love of God and a desire to share his mercy we can be guaranteed joy in all we do.

Msgr. Gregory Smith