

Reflections on the Jubilee Year of Mercy

I believe very much in Providence and as such, it seems to me very providential that the Pope initiated the current year of mercy. The media is constantly telling us about violence and social unrest, a myriad of human problems that seem to defy solution. In such a world it is imperative that Christians put their own house in order and to do so the concept of mercy is of prime importance.

The Oxford dictionary indicates that mercy *is forbearance and compassion shown by one person to another who has no claim to receive kindness*. The definition goes on to say, *disposition to forgive*. As you know the French term for mercy is *miséricorde*. A secondary meaning of the word *miséricorde* is to denote the piece of wood affixed to the bottom of a seat in a Choir stall, which allowed Cancellors to have some support while standing.

The biblical notion of the Jubilee Year is rich in meaning; it underlines especially rest and renewal. Fields were left fallow and debts were forgiven. The Jubilee Year of mercy is a good time for an organization like the St Vincent de Paul Society to revisit fundamental texts that guide our work, especially the traditional corporal as well as spiritual works of mercy

Before we look at these two lists, I suggest that we re-acquaint ourselves with the six verbs of love as coined by Rev Father François Varillon, SJ: Mercy implies love-inspired action and these verbs are essential.

The first is **to offer**; this suggests a generous disposition, trying to see the good even if hidden. It also suggests understanding so that one can predict the required needs.

The second is **to ask**. Mercy sometimes means helping someone to properly help themselves. They have potential but require a firm word to ask them to do more. Being able to ask in a Christian way is a talent to develop.

The third verb of love is **to give**; sharing, especially our time, is often the great gift one can give to the poor and lonely. The inter-relationship of the verbs is evident. The generous disposition alluded to above is also suggested here.

The fourth verb is deeply related to the previous, to give. It is **to forgive**. At play here are wisdom and understanding, both Charisms of the Holy Spirit. In the process of mercy forgiveness is often the first step.

The fifth verb is **to welcome**. This implies breaking down barriers of misunderstanding and alienation. Mercy requires a welcoming atmosphere; indeed, to appreciate mercy we must feel welcomed.

The sixth verb is often a surprise. It is **to refuse**. When we spent a great deal of time encouraging someone to believe in themselves we are indeed using this verb. With love we

are refusing to let them give up on themselves. This verb is also the root of the expression, tough love, which also has its place in the kingdom of mercy.

The Corporal Works of Mercy are fairly well known. They echo what we looked at earlier in the Lectio Divina. Providing for hunger and thirst and solving homelessness, visiting sick and those in prison are all elements of the St Vincent de Paul; Society job description. Also, there may be some Conferences in developing countries, who also do the seventh work, burying the dead

The Spiritual Works of Mercy are of special interest in this day of retreat. They underlined the spiritual aspect that is essential for the integrity of the work of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

What is meant by the first, **to counsel the doubtful**? By doing our St Vincent de Paul Society work in a Christian joyful manner we are witnessing to the reality of the Faith that inspires us and thereby we are dissipating doubt. Charity gives credibility to the Church and by being apostles of Charity we do much to counsel the doubtful.

The second, **to instruct the ignorant** reminds us of the duty for all believers to do what St Paul says, to be at all times able to justify our belief. We should be ready to answer questions about our Faith. If we need more information we should strive to obtain it. In an indirect way this work underlines the importance of the Spiritual Adviser for the work of every Conference

What about the third, **to admonish the sinner**? I believe this speaks to our work in systematic Change. We must have the courage to tackle injustice and work diligently for a more just society for all. Cruelty and Greed are dragons we must have the courage to slay.

Comfort the afflicted, forgive offenses and bear wrongs patiently are matters that go together. They are a body of talents that we must cultivate so that our actions on these fronts become fundamental and natural as we proceed with our St Vincent de Paul Society work. Our sanctification will thereby grow.

This leads me to raise a final idea that I believe is what mercy should lead to, and that, is an harmonious existence. Harmony is what characterises a good family, a good parish, a good enterprise. Harmonious relationships are joy producing.

The last of the seven spiritual works of mercy is **to pray for the living and the dead**. It is a good place to conclude our reflection. A prayerful life is one where we sense the ongoing presence of God and where our tasks become a partnership with the Divine. As such our lives become mercy producing.

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