6.2

WORKS OF MERCY

Optional *Lectio Divina* Prayer

1. Read Matthew 25:31–46.
2. Meditate on the words.
3. Speak to Christ about this passage.
4. Rest and listen in God's presence.
5. Discuss together.

There's no skyline in Calcutta, India.

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In contrast to India's beautiful countryside, a polluted haze blurs the cityscape. Poor people line every curb of the sprawling metropolis. Make no mistake: Calcutta is not a comfortable place. Nevertheless, it is the city Mother Teresa called home.

Why spend a lifetime in Calcutta? Mother Teresa could have lived anywhere, so why choose to stay in this city?

It was fascination with this choice that motivated a young man named Bill to spend his summer serving with Mother Teresa's sisters, the Missionaries of Charity. Bill was not a practicing Christian but was moved to work at Mother Teresa's famous "Home for the Dying," a primitive hospice designed to give the poor in Calcutta a place to die with dignity.

Bill's job was unique. The sisters needed a volunteer to leave each morning and find those who were dying and had no one to care for them. As a strong, twenty-one-year-old male, Bill seemed like a perfect candidate. Each morning he would leave the hospice center in search of the many dying individuals who were rejected by their own family and friends, literally thrown away and left to die alone on the city streets. He quickly discovered that his search was most fruitful near Calcutta's busy train stations. In the surrounding villages, the unwanted would be put on a train with a one-way ticket to Calcutta, where they would be thrown out and left to die on their own near the tracks instead of being cared for by their children, siblings, family, or friends.

Searching for bodies next to the screeching locomotives, Bill would find the dying huddled along the platforms. He would then carry them back to the sisters. Some lived. Most died in a matter of weeks. Others didn't make it even that long. And some were dead by the time Bill found their corpses in the gutters.

Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.

— Matthew 25:40

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Why would Mother Teresa choose to remain in this city, where the streets resembled a poor man's coffin? After working for a month, Bill was even more confounded than when he began. "Calcutta's gutters are no home," he thought to himself. "They're graveyards!" Bill did not understand Mother's decision until one afternoon a fellow volunteer recounted an old story:

> One day Mother told us of a man who lay dying in a gutter, half-eaten by worms, rotting. She carried him herself to the home for the sick and dying. She laid him in a bed, washed his entire body using a basin and cloth, picked the maggots out of his open wounds and dressed them with ointment, laid him in fresh sheets, and gave him a drink of cold water. He was given what he had not known until then: a clean place to lie, unconditional love, and dignity. "I have lived like an animal all my life," the man told her, "but I will die like an angel."[1]

Why would Mother Teresa do all this for a dying man she just met? Because he is Jesus to her. As Mother Teresa herself once explained, "I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself, this is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This one has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him. I serve because I love Jesus."[2]

With this background, everything suddenly clicked for Bill. He had come to Calcutta wanting to do some "good service," approaching

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the poor as a project to be completed. For him, each poor person was a task to be checked off his list. Mother Teresa approached things differently. Her ministry was much more than a social program; it was a place of encounter. Why did Mother stay in Calcutta? Because this is where she was called to encounter Jesus: in the unwanted, rejected, abandoned poor. For her, Jesus lived in the gutters. When she looked at a poor, dying man, the Lord of the Universe looked back.

DISCUSS

How does Mother Teresa's example change how you understand serving the poor?

THE POOR, OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS

The Catholic Church has been called "the world's biggest charity" with more than 140,000 schools, 10,000 orphanages, 5,000 hospitals, and some 16,000 other health clinics around the globe.[3] But what's behind this tradition? Is helping the poor simply "the right thing to do" or a way to be a nice person, or is there a deeper meaning to the Church's practice of helping those in need?

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells a parable that unveils the deeper reason for our care for the poor. He tells a parable on the Last Judgment in which all people will be separated into two groups at the end of time.

One group inherits the kingdom because they helped Jesus when he was in need; the other group does not. With some confusion, the righteous ask, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?" (Mt 25:37–39).

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The biggest disease in the West today is the feeling of being unwanted, unloved and uncared for.

— St. Mother Teresa

Our Lord answers them, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40). In contrast, the parable notes that those who did not help the poor will not inherit the kingdom.

In this passage, Jesus forces us to rethink how we view the poor. When we serve the poor, we grow deeper in our divine intimacy with our Lord because when we encounter them, we encounter Jesus himself. Jesus invites us to "recognize his own presence in the poor who are his brethren" (CCC 2449). Pope Francis has said, "We must learn how to be with the poor, to share with those who lack basic necessities, to touch the flesh of Christ! The Christian is not one who speaks about the poor, no! He is one who encounters them, who looks them in the eye, who touches them."[4]

DISCUSS

If you were to face Jesus today, what do you think he would say to you based on how you have treated the poor?

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: WORKS OF MERCY LIVED OUT

The world faces many forms of poverty, both material and spiritual. Pope Benedict XVI once said, "The deepest poverty is the inability of joy, the tediousness of a life considered absurd and contradictory. This poverty is widespread today, in very different forms in the materially rich as well as the poor countries."[5] The poor, therefore, includes both the person who is hungry and homeless and the person who is well off financially but whose life is plagued by loneliness, emptiness, and meaninglessness.

We don't have to go all the way to Calcutta, India, to find the poor and suffering. They are all around us: in our city, at our parish, in our workplace, on our campus, in our families. For those who

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have eyes to see, there are not only many people suffering from physical ailments and material poverty, but also many who feel unwanted, unloved, and unknown, and still many others who suffer from loneliness, fear, anxiety, and various forms of emotional and psychological wounds and illnesses. Will we make it a priority to care for them?

As in the early Church, one of the greatest signs of being a faithful Christian today is caring for the poor. In other words, if you want to know if you are a faithful disciple of Jesus, you must not only pray, frequent the sacraments, follow the teachings of the Church, and live a moral life. All that, of course, is essential. But you also must care for the poor, love those who are suffering, and work toward eliminating poverty in all its forms. In a self-centered, individualistic age which prompts us to be focused on our own comfort, interests, and pleasure, Christians who get out of themselves and serve the poor, the addicted, the elderly, the immigrant, the lonely, and the unborn are, according to Pope Francis, "a prophetic, counter-cultural resistance" to the self-centered lifestyles promoted in secular culture today.[6]

And when we do care for the poor, we not only make a difference out in the world, but something also profoundly changes within us. We begin to participate more deeply in Christ's own love, compassion, generosity, and kindness. We begin to take on the heart of Christ. How can we serve the poor around us? How can we show them mercy? The Church has traditionally recommended what it calls the seven corporal and seven spiritual works of mercy:

- ***Corporal Works of Mercy***

  Feeding the hungry
  Giving drink to the thirsty
  Clothing the naked
  Offering hospitality to the homeless
  Visiting the imprisoned
  Caring for the sick
  Burying the dead

- ***Spiritual Works of Mercy***

  Instructing the ignorant
  Counseling the doubtful
  Admonishing the sinner
  Bearing wrongs patiently
  Forgiving offenses willingly
  Comforting the afflicted
  Praying for the living and the dead

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DISCUSS

Where do you observe poverty in your life right now? After reading the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, how might God be calling you to share his mercy with the world?

TAKE ACTION

As you contemplate how you can incorporate the works of mercy into your life, ask yourself, "What can I do to begin to serve the poor around me?" Then, make a commitment to do something. You may not be able to solve every example of poverty you encounter, but God is inviting you to do something. For more ideas, see the list at the end of this article. You might also consider going on a FOCUS mission trip.

Additionally, come up with creative ways for making the works of mercy part of your efforts toward evangelization. Whom could you bring with you to serve the poor, and how might that experience help them come to know Jesus Christ in a deeper way?

KEY CONCEPTS

We are all called to love Jesus in the poor and suffering: "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40, NAB).

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Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy: Christian disciples should care for those suffering in material poverty (the poor, the sick, etc.) and those afflicted by various spiritual forms of poverty (such as loneliness, emotional hurts, not knowing Christ, etc.).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

From the FOCUS Blog on focusequip.org: "50 Corporal Works of Mercy Ideas for Your Summer Bucket List" by Lisa Cotter

Saints and Social Justice by Brandon Vogt

No Greater Love by Mother Teresa, Ch. 4: "On Poverty & the Poor"

Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition by Gary Anderson

Notes

[1] Barbara J. Elliot, "When Mother Teresa Came to Washington," *The Imaginative Conservative*, accessed March 27, 2019, https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2016/09/mother-teresa-came-washington-barbara-j-elliott.html.

[2] Justina Miller, "Mother Teresa: each one of them is Jesus in disguise," *Pureflix*, accessed March 27, 2019, https://insider.pureflix.com/news/mother-teresa-each-one-of-them-is-jesus-in-disguise.

[3] David Paton, "The World's Biggest Charity," *Catholic Herald,* accessed March 27, 2019, https://catholicherald.co.uk/issues/february-17th-2017/a-worldwide-force-for-good/.

[4] Francis, "Meeting with the Poor Assisted by Caritas, Address of Pope Francis," accessed March 30, 2020, Vatican.va.

[5] Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Address of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger on the Jubilee of Catechists and Religion Teachers (December 10, 2000)," accessed April 2, 2020, https://d2y1pz2y630308.cloudfront.net/5032/documents/2014/0/ADDRESS%20TO%20CATECHISTS%20AND%20RELIGION%20TEACHERS.pdf

[6] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, accessed April 2, 2020, Vatican.va, 193.

[7] Lisa Cotter, "50 Corporal Works of Mercy Ideas for Your Summer Bucket List," *FOCUS Blog*, July 3, 2017, https://focusoncampus.org/content/50-corporal-works-of-mercy-ideas-for-your-summer-bucket-list.