

How can I make a
difference?

A spirit of
Mercy



Reflections on
the Corporal
Works of Mercy

FOR INDIVIDUAL & GROUP REFLECTION



To feed the hungry

The practice of the works of mercy is a sure sign of the real presence of the Spirit of the risen Jesus in a disciple's life. Hence, the beautiful tradition of the seven acts of mercy, corporal and then spiritual. Think of the wonderful painting, *The Seven Acts of Mercy*, by Caravaggio (circa 1607). It is housed in the Church of Pio Monte della Misericordia in Naples. Originally, it was meant to be seven separate panels round the church. However, Caravaggio produced arguably his greatest masterpiece by combining all seven mercies in one composite. The angel at the centre of Caravaggio's altarpiece transmits the grace that inspires humanity to be merciful.

One 'angel' of grace for our times was Dorothy Day. She embodied living out the corporal works of mercy, especially 'feeding the hungry'. What was the core of her charity?

In Day's own words: "We feed the hungry, yes. We try to shelter the homeless and give them clothes, but there is strong faith at work; we pray. If an outsider who comes to visit us doesn't pay attention to our praying and what that means, then he'll miss the whole point."

At the heart of what Dorothy Day did were the 'works of mercy'. For her, these were not simply obligations Our Lord imposed on his followers. As she said on one occasion to famous Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles: "We are here to celebrate him through these works of mercy."

That is why Day would insist: "Those who cannot see the face of Christ in the poor are atheists indeed." This means she believed that Christ has left himself with us both in the Eucharist and in those in need. "What you did to the least person, you did to me."

'Feeding the hungry' did not mean emphasis on a crass materialism. Day's early followers tell the story of a donor coming into the offices of the Catholic Worker and giving Day a diamond ring. Day thanked her for it and put it in her pocket. Later, a rather demented lady came in – one of the more irritating regulars at the house. Day took the diamond ring out of her pocket and gave it to the woman.

Someone on the staff said to Day: "Wouldn't it have been better if we took the ring to the diamond exchange, sold it, and paid that woman's rent for a year?" Day replied that the woman had her dignity and could do what she liked with the ring. She could sell it for rent money or take a trip to the Bahamas. Or she could enjoy wearing a diamond ring on her hand like the woman who gave it away.

"Do you suppose," Day asked, "that God created diamonds only for the rich?"

Day fed the hungry because she lived the 'little way'. The phrase was one she borrowed from St Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower. Change starts not in the future but in the present, not in the parish Church or in the Council Offices but where I stand. Change begins in the ordinary actions of life, how I live minute to minute, what I do with my life, what I notice, what I respond to, the care and attention with which I listen, the way in which I respond. As Day once put it: "Paperwork, cleaning the house, dealing with the innumerable visitors who come all through the day, answering the phone, keeping patience and acting intelligently, which is to find some meaning in all that happens – these things, too, are the works of mercy, and often seem like a very little way."



To give drink to the thirsty

I THIRST. (JN 19:28)

Science tells us that water is the stuff of life; it is vital for all living organisms and about 60 per cent of the average adult's body weight is water – at birth, this may be as high as 75 per cent.

No wonder then that our faith sees 'water' as a divine symbol of God's life in us and urges us to 'give water' physically and spiritually to others. As G.K. Chesterton once remarked: "All water is holy water!"

There is a profound link between a spiritual thirst, prayer and encountering Christ today. Mother Teresa put it well when, after four hours at prayer, she once said to a gathering of people:

"Jesus wants me to tell you again how much is the love he has for each one of you – beyond all what you can imagine. Not only that he loves you; even more – he longs for you. He misses you when you don't come close. He thirsts for you. He loves you always, even when you don't feel worthy. Why does Jesus say 'I thirst'? What does it mean? Something so hard to explain in words. 'I thirst' is something much deeper than just Jesus saying 'I love you'. Until you know deep inside that Jesus thirsts for you, you can't begin to know who he wants to be for you. Or who he wants you to be for him." (Letter to the Missionaries of Charity, Easter, 1993.)

All of us search in our own ways and at our own pace for the great beauty of God made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. We 'thirst' for his presence. The writer Frederick Buechner describes a moment where his 'thirst' for God was made real. He was at Sea World in Florida (*of all places*) on a beautiful day as six killer whales were released into the tank:

"What with the dazzle of the sky and sun, the beautiful young people on the platform, the soft southern air, and the crowds all around us watching the performance with a delight matched only by what seemed the delight of the performing whales, it was as if the whole of creation – men and women and beasts and sun and water and earth and sky and, for all I know, God himself – was caught up in one great, jubilant dance of unimaginable beauty. And then, right in the midst of it, I was astonished to find that my eyes were filled with tears ... I believe there is no mystery about why we shed tears ... We shed tears because we were given a glimpse of the way life was created to be and is not" (*The Longing for Home*, pp 126-127).

There is also no mystery to the imperative of the Gospel that we respond to those who are thirsting at all levels. Certainly, we are now, rightly, very conscious that we need to care for our planet. Many lack the basic access to water needed for dignity, and organisations like Trocaire need our support as they assist these suffering people.

In our land of drought and flood no one can seriously practise the works of mercy unless he or she cares for the earth and the poor – as God's good creation.

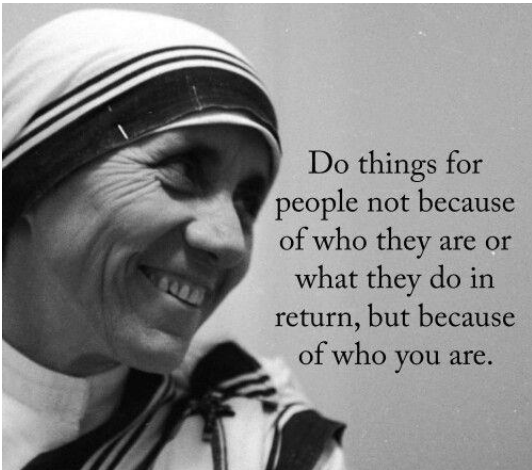
And in our inner lives – where we are alone before the living God – our 'thirst' for God needs to be addressed. Maybe we are 'thirsting' but for the wrong things!

Mary Oliver's poem, *Thirst*, provides one way forward. It suggests we all need a long 'conversation in our hearts' on how we find the living water as we age and dry up! Let her prayer and wisdom be ours. ▀

THIRST

Another morning and I wake with thirst for the goodness I do not have.
I walk out to the pond and all the way God has given us such beautiful lessons.
Oh Lord, I was never a quick scholar but sulked and hunched over my books past the hour and the bell; grant me, in your mercy, a little more time.
Love for the earth and love for you are having such a long conversation in my heart.
Who knows what will finally happen or where I will be sent, yet already I have given a great many things away, expecting to be told to pack nothing, except the prayers which, with this thirst, I am slowly learning.

— Mary Oliver



think about it

1. Mother Teresa, reflecting on the love of Jesus for each of us stated, "...he longs for you. He misses you when you don't come close. He 'thirsts' for you." Sit with these words in silence and notice how they speak to your heart today. Do they give comfort or leave you cold? Pray your response.
2. In his recent encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis calls each of us to renew our commitment to care for the earth, our common home. Identify ways you already practise mindful conservationism in your day to day routine. Are there ways you could extend your efforts personally, communally or globally?
3. St Augustine said, "*Our hearts are restless Lord until they rest in thee.*" Where are the longings of your heart leading you? Do they provide life-giving water from the inner wellspring that is God? How might you enter into a 'long conversation' with a loving 'Abba' who thirsts for your company?

Series of horizontal dashed lines for writing.



To shelter the homeless

After a long journey there is often a real sense of relief in simply getting 'home' – finally! Indeed, we all need to find a 'home' in our lives. Not just a physical building, but a place where we feel safe and secure. In his book, *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life*, Thomas Moore suggests that if we were to 'read' our own house, "at some point you would find yourself standing before the tools of housework: vacuum cleaner, broom, dustmop, soaps, sponges, dishpan, hammer, screwdriver. These things are very simple, and yet they are fundamental to the feelings we have of being at home".

Being at 'home' is vital for our psyches. Of course, we are talking about dwelling places of inclusion not exclusion, not 'fortresses' built to keep people out.

No wonder that Christians have always sought to include people 'in' – to shelter the homeless and give hospitality and a 'home' to strangers and refugees. For in welcoming the stranger and the homeless, in 'sheltering' them, we want to also share with them the joy and peace of being at 'home' with us as friends of Christ Jesus our brother; a brother who himself knew the pain and frustration of being homeless. Recall Jesus' words: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58).



Commenting on this passage, Fr Gerald O'Collins SJ notes: "Foxes can be safe because they live in burrows down in the earth; birds can be safe and sound in their nests, high up in trees; but Jesus did not have that kind of safety and security. He had no home he could call his own, no fixed dwelling where he could lay his head on a pillow and go to sleep at night. He lived his life out in the open, sometimes alone and sometimes sleeping rough at night."

And the 'homeless' Jesus is still knocking at the door of our hearts asking for shelter. Some answer that call. One need look no further than the remarkable work of Jean Vanier and his L'Arche communities to see an example of how much people – especially people who have been rejected – desperately need the healing power of hospitality. So many of our Archdiocesan agencies and works, from the CrossCare, the Capucian Day Centre, The Peter McVerry Trust, to the St Vincent de Paul Society, to the many groups that often work tirelessly but go un-thanked, seek to provide 'shelter' in a loving environment. ▪



to visit the sick

Some people are terrified of hospitals. Others simply fear pain and the prospect of their own diminishment. We just do not want to think about it. None of us – unless we are masochists – welcomes suffering and death. Jesus himself was afraid of death in the Agony in the Garden. He was not 'going through the motions'. If the Lord can be afraid, then it is OK for us, too.

This acceptance of creaturehood, the coming to peace with our human finiteness and vulnerability, is an important journey that we must all undertake. But it is a task we cannot do alone. We need support.

Christ calls us to 'visit the sick' and care for them as an essential part of our Christian mission of love and compassion. Hence the crucial role the Church played in establishing hospitals and the critical role it still plays in health care in most countries. Thank God for our hospitals where the medical profession generally selflessly ministers Christ's healing power and love to so many. Thank God for the over worked and somewhat underappreciated Doctors, Nurses and Care staff who have indeed chosen a vocation rather than a job.

But we cannot leave all the support needed to these wonderful professionals. There is something about personal contact with sick people that we need to be fully alive in the Spirit.



Daniel Berrigan SJ once wrote a tender and poignant account of such personal service – working as an orderly in St Rose's Cancer Hospital in New York (*We Die Before We Live; Talking with the Very Ill*, Seabury, NY, 1980).

St Rose's exists solely for the poor who cannot afford cancer treatment. It takes no state money, instead surviving on providence alone. Fr Berrigan contrasts the quality of human care offered in this extraordinary Catholic hospital with the soulless bureaucracy of some other institutions.

In characteristically lyrical terms he meditates: "To grasp something of this, one has to go beyond therapeutic convention. Even if the staff saw the hospital as a kind of mini-Titanic heading towards catastrophe (and they do not), it still must be reported that there are no 'social facilitators' aboard. People are employed or volunteer, not to daub a presentable cosmetic on the hard face of death, or to whoop things up despite all. We are there to help make life bearable, to make some sense of it, make it attractive as long as it lasts – together. There is respect for privacy, respect for moods and imbalances, a spoiling attention to diet. There is an unobtrusive religious feel about the place, which now and again surfaces in sacrament or prayer or plain talk about death; but only on the initiative of the patients. No one is force fed, whether on religion, psychosemantics or – antics. Little account is taken, except where suffering or depression require, as to being in our purported stages of dying."

What matters for Fr Berrigan and for all who minister to the sick then is presence. Often we cannot take away the pain. Words fail us. But our humanity under the power of the Holy Spirit quietly tells us inside simply to be there for others.



To visit prisoners

BE MINDFUL OF PRISONERS, AS IF SHARING THEIR IMPRISONMENT.
(LETTER TO THE HEBREWS)

That most loveable of popes, St Pope John XXIII, the Pope of the Council, very quickly showed the priorities of his Petrine ministry by being 'mindful of prisoners'.

His action spoke volumes about his pastoral approach to faith and life. After celebrating his first Papal Christmas Mass in 1958 at St Peter's, St Pope John XXIII went, without any prior notification, to Rome's children's hospital, Gésu Bambino, to visit the children there. The very next day, 26 December, he again left Vatican City to visit the inmates of Regina Coeli prison. When he arrived, he explained: "You could not come to see me so I have come to see you." (Moving YouTube footage of that visit can be found at <http://bit.ly/eL8prj>).

This remarkable event is today also recorded in bronze on the central doors of St Peter's Basilica in the extraordinary work of Giacomo Manzú. There, in the middle of the left panel, is St Pope John XXIII, stretching his hands through prison bars, grasping the prisoners' hands while calling them his brothers.

What better place for 'Peter' to be than with the suffering and despised! Prisoners are very often the 'poorest of the poor' – victims themselves who inflict violence on others, usually responding to violence arising from their own tragic family circumstances; caught up in what Dom Helder Camara named the tragic 'spiral of violence'.

And our society's main 'solution' is imprisonment! Maybe necessary, but far too often simply used to avoid our Christian responsibilities to provide opportunities for rehabilitation. For prisons are such places of pain and humiliation. Think of those horrible photos, found

ubiquitously online, of the cruel, sardonic mocking of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. They remind us that the fundamental basics of dealing with prisoners (*binding of limbs, confinement in space and dehumanising rituals*) have scarcely changed since Jesus' time.

In Mark's Gospel, the soldiers ironically mock what Jesus truly is: the Messiah King. How many other prisoners, like Jesus, would feel themselves at the very centre of ridicule? Being mocked because they were captive, laughed at because they stumbled blindly beneath such power, not able to respond, so those who taunt them are not afraid of them? Part of the humiliation Jesus must have felt was that he saw himself being treated, or mistreated, just like any other prisoner that night (as, for example, the two thieves eventually crucified beside him. No doubt because of that, many Christians take to heart Jesus' blessing of those who saw him in prison and visited him (Mt 25:36). One man who has responded to Jesus' call and conducted a remarkable ministry to prisoners, especially to young gang members in Los Angeles, is Jesuit Fr Greg Boyle.

Fr Greg writes about his ministry to and with his 'homies' in his book, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. He quotes biblical theologian Marcus Borg's observation that the principal suffering of the poor is shame and disgrace. It is toxic shame, Fr Greg says, a global sense of failure of the whole self: "Homies seem to live in the zip code of the eternally disappointing, and need a change of address. To this end one hopes (against all human inclination) to model not the 'one false move' God, but the 'no matter whatness' of God. You seek to imitate the kind of God you believe in, where disappointment is, well, Greek to him. You strive to live the black spiritual that says: 'God looks beyond our fault and sees our need.'"

However, he says, “before this can take hold in gang members, they strut around in protective shells of posturing which stunt their real and complete selves”.

Here Fr Greg describes an interaction with a young gang member in one of the ‘rehabilitation’ camps to which the courts remand minors for offences that fall short of felonies:

Often after Mass at the camps, kids will line up to talk one on one. The volunteers sometimes invite the minors to confession, but usually the kids just want to talk, be heard, get a blessing. At Camp Afflerbaugh, I’m seated on a bench outside in a baseball field and one by one, the homies come over to talk briefly. This day, there’s quite a line-up. The next kid approaching, I can tell, is all swagger and pose. His walk is chignon in its highest gear. His head bobs, side to side,

to make sure all eyes are riveted. He sits down, we shake hands, but he seems unable to shake the scowl etched across his face.

*“What’s your name?” I ask him.
“SNIPER,” he sneers.*

“OK, look (I had been down this block before), I have a feeling you didn’t pop outta your mom and she took one look at you and said ‘Sniper’. So come on, dog, what’s your name?”

“Gonzalez,” he relents a little.

“OK, now, son. I know the staff here will call you by your last name. I’m not down with that. Tell me, mijo, what’s your mom call you?”

“Cabron” (roughly translated, ‘bastard’).

There is not even the slightest flicker of innocence in his answer.

“Oye, no cabe duda. But son, I’m looking for a birth certificate here.”

The kid softens. I can tell it’s happening. But there is embarrassment and a newfound vulnerability.

“Napoleon,” he manages to squeak out, pronouncing it in Spanish.

“Wow,” I say, “that’s a fine, noble, historic name. But I’m almost positive that when your jefita calls you, she doesn’t use the whole nine yardas. Come on mijito, do you have an apoda? What’s your mom call you?”

Then I watch him go to some far, distant place – a location he has not visited in some time. His voice, body language, and whole being are taking on a new shape – right before my eyes.

*“Sometimes,” – his voice so quiet I lean in –
“Sometimes ... when my mom’s not mad at me ... she calls me Napito.”*

I watch this kid move, transformed, from Sniper to Gonzalez, to Cabron, to Napoleon, to Napito. We all just want to be called by the name our mom uses when she is not angry at us.

We all just want to be called by the name our mum uses when she is not angry at us. To put this another way, we want to be called by the name that our Creator had for us from the foundation of the world, the name that

marks our own loveliness, uniqueness and innate dignity and worth.

We all owe a debt of gratitude to those Catholic chaplains like John Brosnan, Peter Norden, Joe Caddy and others, for their many years of compassionate ministry to prisoners and their families. Currently, Sr Mary O’Shannassy SGS (director of Catholic Prison Ministry Victoria) and her collaborators help prisoners recover their dignity and respect as God’s beloved creatures in need.

Thank God that Catholic Prison Ministry Victoria, like St Pope John XXIII and Fr Greg Boyle, is prepared to visit prisons, which are rarely safe, salutary and sane places, even under the best of regimes. They heed the injunction of the Letter to the Hebrews. May we also be given the grace and courage to ‘be mindful of prisoners’. ▪

think about it

1. Reflect on your own experience of visiting ‘prisoners’. Perhaps you have ministered to people who are prisoners of drug, alcohol, and gambling or anger abuse. Has your personal faith assisted your efforts? If so, how? If not, why?
2. ‘We all just want to be called by the name our mom uses when she is not angry with us.’ What does this image evoke in you? Spend some time in silence with our Mother/Father God who loves you just as you are and way beyond your human imagining.
3. Reflect on the ideas below to discern if/how you might be drawn to further personal action in this work of mercy.
 - Donate funds to provide prayer sheets, bibles and rosary beads for Catholic Prison Ministry
 - Consider the homeless and what drove them to the streets
 - Remember those in prison as though you were in prison with them. (*Heb 13:3*) Pray for them.



To clothe the naked

We are all vulnerable and naked at our entry into this world and at our departure. We desperately need others to care for us. Like it or not, we are not in control. We are dependent. At such times, we experience our creaturehood most poignantly. It is truly a 'God moment' for each of us.

In between, we human beings often find esteem in the way we look. We can measure our standing with others by our appearance.

When a person is most vulnerable, as were Adam and Eve in the primeval story of Genesis, they need to be covered. The merciful act of 'clothing the naked' then, is an act of responding to the dependence of a fellow human being when they stand most in need. Sometimes it is good to remember that Jesus calls us to be tender to others in such moments of vulnerability. Hence, the importance of stories to remind us of our vocation to be ministers of mercy.

The classic story of St Martin of Tours recounted by his disciple Sulpicius Severus (360-425) reminds us that Christ himself is the one who is 'naked' before us constantly and will judge us with the words "When I was naked you ..."
(see Mt 25).

Accordingly, at a certain period, when Martin had nothing except his arms and his simple military dress, in the middle of winter, a winter which had shown itself more severe than ordinary, so that the extreme cold was proving fatal to many, he happened to meet at the gate of the city of Amiens a poor man destitute of clothing. He was entreating those that passed by to have compassion upon him, but all passed the wretched man without notice.

When Martin, that man full of God, recognised that a being to whom others showed no pity was, in that respect, left to him. Yet, what should he do? He had nothing except the cloak in which he was clad, for he had already parted with the rest of his garments for similar purposes. Taking, therefore, his sword with which he was girt, he divided his cloak into two equal parts, and gave one part to the poor man, while he again clothed himself with the remainder. Upon this, some of the bystanders laughed, because he was now an unsightly object, and stood out as but partly dressed. Many, however, who were of sounder understanding, groaned deeply because they themselves had done nothing similar. They especially felt this because, being possessed of more than Martin, they could have clothed the poor man without reducing themselves to nakedness. The following night, when Martin had resigned himself to sleep, he had a vision of Christ arrayed in that part of his cloak with which he had clothed the poor man.

What has this got to do with us today? Few people are literally naked, but certainly millions of people own no more clothing than what they wear each day. If you search your cupboards and your heart, you may discover that you have more than you need. You can lend something to a friend for a special occasion. You can also restrain yourself from an unnecessary purchase and give the money to an agency that helps people in need of clothing.

Around the world, the St Vincent de Paul Society is the lay association most easily associated with this sacred mission of 'clothing the naked'. The society was formed in 1833 by six students in Paris; the group's founder, Frederic Ozanam (1813-53), recognised the call to relieve need, but also to tackle the cause of the need. For this reason he identified two virtues for the society: the call of charity and of justice.

The 'Vinnies' show us all how important it is to respond to the 'nakedness' of human vulnerability with compassion. What we need in the Church today are more people who – like the Vinnies, modern-day Martins of Tours – point to the beautiful bond of solidarity that connects us each to one another. Blessed are they who 'walk' with others rather than 'talk' at them!

If anything is going to evangelise others it is such witness. That 'poet of the spirit' Seamus Heaney puts it all so beautifully in his recent collection of poems, Human Chain. The poems are great spiritual reading.

One stands out for me – *Miracle*. It recalls those who carried the paralysed man to Jesus and lowered him through the roof. Such 'miracles' as they helped perform go on today. The 'age of miracles' is not over whenever the compassion of Jesus is lived out; wherever, as Heaney puts it, they 'carry him'. Let us each in our Christian life 'Be mindful of them as they stand and wait'. ▪

MIRACLE

*Not the one who takes up
his bed and walks
But the ones who have known him all
along And carry him –
Their shoulders numb, the ache and stoop
deeplocked In their backs, the stretcher handles
Slippery with sweat. And no let-up
Until he's strapped on tight, made tiltable
And raised to the tiled roof, then lowered for
healing. Be mindful of them as they stand and wait
For the burn of the paid-
out ropes to cool,
Their slight lightheadedness and incredulity
To pass, those ones who had known him all along.*

—Seamus Heaney

think about it

1. Recall a time when you have been 'clothed' in your naked vulnerability by the compassion of another. How did it make you feel? Recall also a time when you have offered such love.
2. Identify some practical ways you already fulfil your Christian obligation to 'clothe the naked'. What more might you do? Choose one idea to commit to from today onwards.
3. Who are the 'Vinnies' members in your parish? Create an opportunity to ask them about the joys and challenges of their ministry. Express your gratitude for their work. Keep them and their clients in your prayers.

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To bury the dead

In 1974, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker won the Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Denial of Death*. The fear of our eventual extinction is so terrifying, so anxiety producing, Becker argued, that virtually all cultures construct elaborate schemes to deny our mortality and enable us to believe that we are immortal. In fact, Becker believed that perpetuating this denial of death constitutes one of the chief functions of culture.

But denying death is disastrous. It causes us to form illusory, false selves, and even worse, according to Becker, it foments all the horrific violence and aggression towards others that we see in the world today (since we must prove other death-denials false, and even eradicate them, else ours is exposed as a lie).

The denial of death, then, can never be our way as believers in Jesus, the Crucified and Risen One. For Christians are called to face the reality of death and hold it in creative tension with our sure hope of resurrection. The Crucified One is the Risen One!

Our faith in the Resurrection does not mean avoiding the brutal truth that death is a terrible and awesome moment. That is why we constantly ask Mary, Our Mother (in the Hail Mary), to “pray for us now and at the hour of our death”.

No wonder then the care and love we as Christians give when we lovingly ‘bury the dead’. Every person deserves the beauty and dignity of being lovingly farewelled at what one theologian has called ‘the moment of truth’.

In the Irish tradition, there is the beautiful practice of the ‘wake’ – where friends and relatives hold vigil and ‘accompany’ the deceased person before the final rites of the Church. The body is revered and blessed

because it is a ‘seed’ being planted that will rise to new life. In the early Church the body was buried facing the east, expressing the expectation of the second coming of Christ. Celtic poet John O’Donohue (who died suddenly in 2008 at age 52) often wrote of the mystery of how death transfigures our separation:

It is a strange and magical fact to be here, walking around in a body, to have a whole world within you and a world at your fingertips outside you. It is an immense privilege, and it is incredible that humans manage to forget the miracle of being here.

Rilke said: ‘Being here is so much.’ It is uncanny how social reality can deaden and numb us so that the mystical wonder of our lives goes totally unnoticed. We are here. We are wildly and dangerously free.

The more lonely side of being here is our separation in the world. When you live in a body you are separate from every other object and person. Many of our attempts to pray, to love, and to create are secret attempts at transfiguring that separation in order to build bridges outward so that others can reach us and we can reach them. At death, this physical separation is broken. The soul is released from its particular and exclusive location in this body. The soul then comes in to a free and fluent universe of spiritual belonging.

O’Donohue captures something of the sense of mystery and sheer awe surrounding the ‘passing over’ of the human person back into the silent heart of God.

Perhaps a sense of the *mysterium tremendum* is the reason the famous ancient Latin *tag De mortuis nil nisi bonum* – ‘Of the dead, speak nothing unless good’ –

conveys a profound truth. For to 'bury the dead' ultimately demands of us that we 'let God be God'. No trying to 'play God' in any way and judge other people after their deaths. Like it or not we are not in control. God is.

To bury the dead is, in Mary Oliver's words, "to let it go" and to stand vulnerable, aware that "underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut 33:27). ▀

IN BLACKWATER WOODS

Look, the trees are turning their own bodies into pillars of light, are giving off the rich fragrance of cinnamon and fulfilment, the long tapers of cattails are bursting and floating away over the blue shoulders of the ponds, and every pond, no matter what its name is, is nameless now. Every year everything I have ever learned in my lifetime leads back to this: the fires and the black river of loss whose other side is salvation, whose meaning none of us will ever know.

To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

—Mary Oliver

think about it

1. Recall your own experience of burying the dead. In what ways did you personally honour the life and dignity of the deceased?
2. Catholic funerals are rich in symbolism and ritual. Which elements do you most value of the Requiem liturgy, in the tradition of the Church?
3. One of the greatest challenges in this work of mercy is the 'letting go'. Do the tenants of the Christian faith expressed in the Creed, aid this struggle? If so, how? If not, why?



THIRSTY

Give drink to the thirsty

In Ireland we are never more than a few steps away from clean, safe drinking water; sadly such is not the case in the rest of the world. According to the World Health Organization, **2.6 billion** people do not have access to safe drinking water. As a result, they have all kinds of health problems. Access to food alone won't stop malnutrition when people can't digest the food because of waterborne parasites.

Ideas: Research charities such as Trocaire that work to provide the poor with access to clean drinking water. Be mindful of your own water usage at home - *not just because of the water rates!* Some Catholics choose to show spiritual solidarity by fasting from a favourite beverage and donating to charity.



HUNGRY

Give food to the hungry

According to a report published in September this year one in five Irish Children go to school or bed hungry. FOOD POVERTY is on the rise in Ireland with over **600,000 people** in the country being affected by it. Children and the elderly are particularly vulnerable. At the opening of a new central food bank in Dublin in March, CrossCare stated there is a *growing demand for food assistance* as more desperate families struggle.

Ideas: Have your parish organize a food drive, especially during the summer months when food needs go up and giving goes down. Many parishes help at local soup kitchens. Serving can also be a great way to encounter Christ by directly meeting people in need. Avoid wasting food.



IMPRISONED

Visit the imprisoned

In the Republic of Ireland the prison system is overcrowded with a prison population **increase of 400%** since 1970. In 2013 there were over 6,000 imprisoned in Ireland (NI & ROI) and 10 million across the world. Chaplains are responsible for the pastoral and spiritual care of the entire prison community, regardless of denomination.

Ideas: Besides researching the Irish Prison Chaplaincy Service, Catholics interested in getting involved in prison ministry can check with their parish to find out what prison ministry opportunities are available in their area, or contact the Social Support Agency of the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, CrossCare. Also help to care for the families of the imprisoned. Pray for those in prison.



SICK

Care for the sick

One of the most profound hardships is loneliness. When Adam was by himself, God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gn 2:18). The **impact of loneliness** is magnified by sickness, infirmity or old age. It is a great mercy to support someone when they are ill. As Christians, we encounter the suffering Christ. We are like Simon of Cyrene, helping Christ carry his cross when we visit someone in the hospital or at the nursing home.

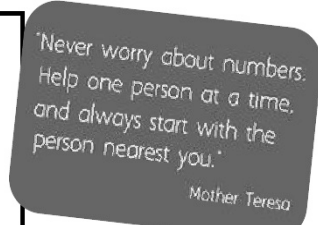
Ideas: Find out how you and your family can volunteer to help at a nursing home. Reach out to neighbours, to the people in the parish who are sick by offering to make meals or help family members care for their sick or elderly relative. Volunteer with a local Hospice.



CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY

What they are and how you can live them

The Corporal Works of Mercy are kind acts by which we help our neighbours with their material and physical needs.



HOMELESS

Shelter the homeless

The number of homeless families has **risen by 76%** since the start of the year, according to figures from the Department of the Environment. Jesus himself experienced many episodes of homelessness, starting at birth and even ending with him buried in another's tomb. In the face of the homeless, he challenges us when he says, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35). In our own day, it may not always be prudent to welcome strangers into our home, but helping charities that help the homeless and prevent homelessness can be a great way to start.

Ideas: Besides learning more about and supporting your local homeless shelter or charity, carrying around Ziploc bags with things like socks and toiletries in your car or handbag can be a great way to help.



NAKED

Clothe the naked

Everyone needs clothing for warmth, protection, modesty and dignity. **It is an act of love to help others obtain clothing**, especially those who need help. Whether it is St. Francis giving his fine clothes to a shabbily dressed, embarrassed knight or St. Martin of Tours cutting his military cloak to save a freezing beggar, Christian tradition has always celebrated the dignity of the body by clothing the naked. While helping those poor who have no clothes is a first concern, practicing this virtue also entails a reflection on how we dress as well.

Ideas: Give your gently used clothes to charity. One great tip is to hang all your clothes with the hook facing toward you. When you wear and wash them put them back the normal way. At the end of the season give away the clothes you see you haven't worn. Support the St V de P!



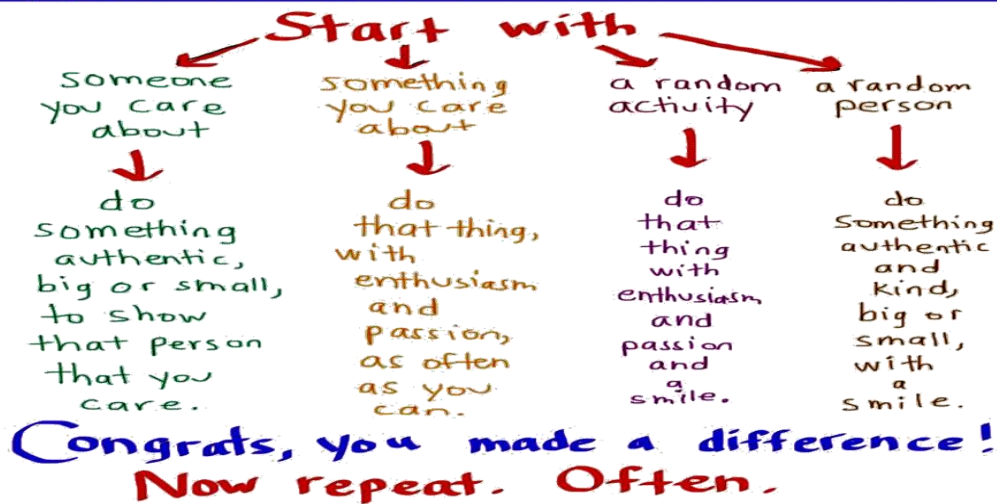
DEAD

Bury the dead

While Jesus Christ enumerated the first six corporal works of mercy in the Gospel of Matthew, the church adds a seventh. This merciful act is also drawn from Scripture by the example of Tobit (*in the Old Testament*) who is exiled for his righteous work of burying the dead. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says: "**The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the Resurrection. The burial of the dead is a corporal work of mercy; it honours the children of God, who are temples of the Holy Spirit**" (2300). It is an act of love to show respect for the bodies of the dead, since during life, they were temples of the Holy Spirit and received the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion

Ideas: Help with your parish's funeral or bereavement ministry. Donate to Catholic Cemeteries to pay for the burial of the poor. Treat cemeteries with respect.

How to make a difference



1. **Notice. Be aware.** What are the issues of most need in your area, your community. Whose voice is not heard, because they have no voice!!
2. What **gifts, talents, and strengths** has God gifted you with? What are you good at? What are your skills?
3. **Imagine** a cause or issue you care about. What are you **Passionate about?** It could be something local or something global. It could be something that affects a family member or friend, or it could be something you think of yourself. Do you currently do anything to address that issue?
4. **Dream** how you could use your talents, skills & time to make the situation better. What would it look like? How would you use your skills? **Be Creative**
5. **Find out more** about that cause and about charities, organisations or people who are working in that area. What work do they do?
6. Now **write down** one thing you can picture yourself, your group doing in the next month to work towards that cause.
7. Now **pair up** with a friend, someone of like mind so that you can pray for each other, support and encourage each other to make a difference.
8. **Decide** on what you can do to help and **Act!!**

You are
the change you
want to see in the
World...

A PRAYER

My Church, My Parish
is made up of people like **ME**.

I help make it what it is.

It will be friendly, if **I** am.

Its pews will be filled, if **I** help fill them.

It will do great work, if **I** work.

It will be radically welcoming and open to all,

if **I** embody hospitality & non-exclusion.

It will make generous gifts to many causes,

if **I** am a generous giver.

It will bring other people into its worship and community,

if **I** invite & bring them.

It will be a Church and Parish of Loyalty & Love,

of Mercy & Compassion,

of Fearlessness & Faith,

& a Church & Parish with an Inspiring Spirit,

if **I**, who make it what it is, am filled with these same things.

Therefore, with God's help, **I** dedicate myself to the task of being
all the things that **I** want

MY Church, MY Community & MY Parish
to be.

Amen



Your faith will
make the
difference!