

Spreading Acts of Mercy

Kristopher W. Seaman

For almost two years, I have been stopping often at a family-owned coffee shop by where I live in Dublin. Nearby the coffee shop are a number of homeless persons, with heads bowed down, rarely speaking, sitting next to an old paper cup, as an invitation to drop in coins. Routinely, the shop owners share food and drink with the homeless as well as with financially struggling neighbors. Having discovered this work of mercy, some of the shop's patrons leave a few extra euros with the owners to help out those in need. Sometimes the patrons also share which neighbors are in need. This coffee shop shows how to practice the corporal works of mercy at a neighborhood level.

Pope Francis declared a Jubilee Year of Mercy, which began on December 8, 2015, and continues through November 20, 2016. In *The Face of Mercy (Misericordiae Vultus)*, the document in which the year was declared, Pope Francis recommended practices Catholics could live out during the year.

It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the *corporal and spiritual works of mercy*. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples. Let us rediscover these *corporal works of mercy*: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. (*The Face of Mercy*, 15)

The Dublin coffee shop owners respond to the poor and needy with a heart full of mercy. At the same time, they have reawakened the conscience of others who are around the poor and needy. For Pope Francis, living from a heart of love—that is, acting from a heart filled with God's love—is to be “the face of mercy.” Mercy becomes corporal, bodily, and not merely conceptual. The coffee shop is putting many faces of mercy in action, by feeding and giving drink to the needy. Moreover, their witness has opened up the hearts of the neighborhood, with people participating in a network of mercy, doing more together than they could individually.

Continuing his reflection on the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis states:



The corporal works of mercy we perform often inspire others to do likewise.

In this Holy Year, we look forward to the experience of opening our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society: fringes which modern society itself creates. How many uncertain and painful situations there are in the world today! How many are the wounds borne by the flesh of those who have no voice because their cry is muffled and drowned out by the indifference of the rich! (15)

Often those in need of mercy are voiceless, faceless, just as the homeless in the opening narrative with bowed heads.

The corporal works of mercy that Pope Francis listed teach mercy as well as live it out. Jesus practiced these seven works, and through his practice, he teaches us what God's loving mercy looks like. When we practice mercy, we teach both ourselves and others what mercy looks like when it is lived out within daily living. Just as God became bodily in Christ Jesus, God's mercy also becomes bodily (physical) when we live these works out.

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