

# The Works of Mercy Explained



both  
Corporal and Spiritual  
Works of Mercy!

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# The Works of Mercy

The works of mercy have a long tradition in the Church. From the earliest days Christians have reached out with these works to widows, orphans, prisoners, and all people in any kind of need. Over the centuries the works of mercy have inspired great saints, witnesses, and founders of religious orders. They have always been closely tied to what the Gospel proclaims and what the sacraments signify. It could not be otherwise. But what exactly are the works of mercy? And what does it mean to put them into practice? We begin by taking a closer look at a very interesting word.

## Mercy



What does the word “**mercy**” mean?

It comes from the Latin word *miser cordia*, which is a combination of *miserere* (to have **pity or compassion**) and *cor* (heart). Together these two words express the idea of a heartfelt compassion for others—one that pushes us to help, to understand, and to forgive.

In the Bible, the two Hebrew words that are associated with mercy are *rahamim* and *hesed*. **Rahamim** literally means “entrails” and often refers to a mother’s womb. This word points to the intimate and special bond between mother and child. The closeness of this kind of relationship permits one to feel the joy and pain of the other as if it were one’s own.

**Hesed** on the other hand speaks of an alliance that is characterized by fidelity and love. This is the kind of love that God has for his people—a love that is undeserved, eternal, unending, and kind.

Mercy, therefore, is a trait that involves the heart. It is seeing others with tenderness, but also with a desire and willingness to act for their good.

# God Is Merciful

Mercy is a trait, a characteristic of God. Numerous Bible passages teach us about God's mercy. In Exodus, God proclaims that he is: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6). Later, in the New Testament, Jesus reveals the forgiving love of God. The parable of the Prodigal Son, found in Luke 15:11–32, is also known as the parable of the Merciful Father.

Mercy isn't just reserved for God alone. He invites us to be like him. In the Gospel, Jesus personally invites each one of us to **"be merciful, just as your Father is merciful"** (Lk 6:36).



## Pope Francis' Desire

Our Pope wants us to rediscover God's mercy. That is why Pope Francis called for an Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. Saint Thomas Aquinas taught that mercy is a quality of God and that it is in his mercy that God shows his almighty power.

How can this be? Kindness is often mistaken for weakness in our world. But mercy is not a weakness—**it is the strength of God's Love!** Through mercy, God loves us unconditionally and **never** ceases to forgive and renew us.

Pope Francis wants the faithful to fall in love with God's mercy, tenderness, and love. Because of this love, we are called to love our neighbor. And as Saint John of the Cross wrote: "In the evening of life, we will be judged on love."

Pope Francis recommends that Christians reflect on both the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. He suggests that this is a way to reawaken **our sleeping consciences** and to enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel. The Holy Father invites us to encounter the poor the way Jesus did. Pope Francis reminds us that it was Jesus who gave us the works of mercy so that we could know whether or not we are living as his disciples.

## Corporal Works of Mercy

Feed the hungry.  
Give drink to the thirsty.  
Clothe the naked.  
Shelter the homeless.  
Visit the sick.  
Visit the imprisoned.  
Bury the dead.

## Spiritual Works of Mercy

Counsel the doubtful.  
Instruct the ignorant.  
Admonish the sinner.  
Comfort the afflicted.  
Forgive offenses willingly.  
Bear wrongs patiently.  
Pray for the living and the dead.

We begin our discovery of the works of mercy so that they can be imprinted in our hearts and show us the way. Words from Scripture, the saints, and Pope Francis will guide us.

As we move ahead you will also find **Notebook** pages; these are spaces for your thoughts and questions. There are reflections on these pages that can help you consider what you have read.

# Corporal Works of Mercy

## 1. Feed the Hungry

*“The fasting  
I want, is it not  
to share your bread  
with the hungry?”*

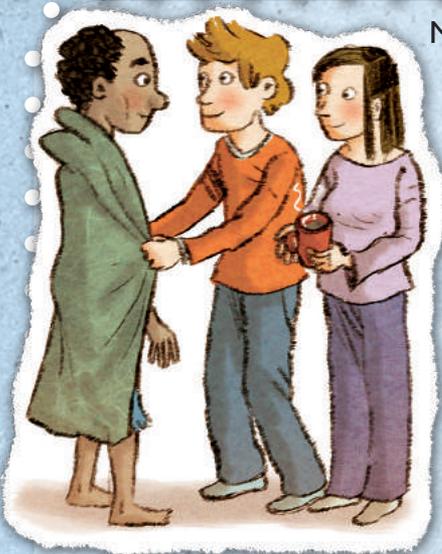
*See Is 58:6–7*



In the prayer that Jesus taught us, the **Our Father**, we say: “Give us this day our daily bread.” With these words we ask God to provide for our material needs, those things that help us live each day. As we pray, we ask for ourselves and intercede for all men and women. We are united to those who are suffering and recognize the needs of all our brothers and sisters.

If we want to carry out this first work of mercy, prayer alone is not enough. God asks us to provide for our neighbor, to intervene where there is a need, to share our “bread” with others. But what do we mean by “bread”? It means all food, the sustenance necessary for survival that should not be denied to anyone.

In the world there are many people who are hungry and don't have enough to eat—many of them are children. Without sufficient food they cannot grow and become strong and healthy adults; some even die from malnutrition and starvation. Yet in some parts of the world,



Many of the works of mercy can be found in Gospel passages in which Jesus speaks of the end times and the final judgment.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come you that are

blessed by my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; **for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me**

people waste food every day. This is unjust. Feeding the hungry challenges us to do something for those who lack the food they need. It also calls us to reflect on whether or not we are wasting the food we have.

This work of mercy urges us to **give our neighbors what they need to live**—and not to turn away. It also asks us to understand even deeper hungers. A person can be starving for love and understanding and **that** is the “bread” they need from us. The first work of mercy reminds us that in the Eucharist Jesus becomes the living Bread for us. He is the food that satisfies our hunger for love, for life, and for eternity: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever . . .” (Jn 6:51). When we allow Jesus to feed us, we become more like him. Then our lives can become “bread”: gift and sustenance for others.

## Jesus' Words

**clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'** Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and we visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, '**Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me**' (Mt 25:31–45).

# Notebook

✓ Ask yourself how you care for the life of your neighbors. Reflect on the ways you can provide for your neighbors' needs. Look around: What "bread" do those who are near you need? What are your siblings, your friends, your classmates hungry for? Write below what you can do to feed them.

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✓ Mother Teresa spent her life serving the poor and the marginalized by caring for their physical and spiritual needs. Ask God to show you one person you can "feed" today.

"Hunger for love is much more difficult to satisfy than hunger for bread."

Attributed to Mother Teresa of Calcutta

✓ There are many programs and initiatives that aim at giving food to people who don't have enough to eat. Together with your friends and your parish, you can organize something to help the poor. You can collect money or non-perishable items to help keep parish outreach ministries, local food pantries, or soup kitchens stocked. You may ask your parents about offering to pay for someone else's groceries when your family is shopping. Your class may prepare baskets or bags of food to give away and decorate them with a word or phrase from the Gospel.