

Reflection and Study Guide for Educators

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

“Whatever you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do for me.” (Matthew 25:40)

Introduction: The *Old Testament* (Isaiah 58:6-10) and the *New Testament* (Matthew 25:34-40) are the biblical origins for the Corporal Works of Mercy. These charitable actions for the common good and basic human welfare reflect the Church’s teachings on Catholic social justice. Pope John Paul II reminds us in his encyclical, *Rich in Mercy*: “Jesus Christ taught that man not only receives and experiences the mercy of God, but that he is also called to practice mercy toward others: ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.’”

The Holy Spirit inspires our commitment to the Corporal Works of Mercy and our commitment defines our relationship with God. As His hands on Earth, the faithful are not only called to care for the less fortunate, but also to respect and care for the goods of God’s creation, intended for the whole human race. Each and every day, missionaries worldwide live the Corporal Works of Mercy through selfless, compassionate acts in response to the needs of the world’s poorest, most overlooked, forgotten and vulnerable members of society. (See video series: *The Field Afar*: www.maryknollmall.org)

The Corporal Works of Mercy in Song: “Whatsoever you do to the least of my people, that you do unto me,” is the refrain of a beautiful hymn, written and copyrighted by Willard Jabusch. Each verse concludes with: “Now enter into the home of my Father,” an invitation extended to those giving Christlike responses to the needy and poor.

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Feed the Hungry

“For I was hungry and you gave me food.” (Matthew 25:35)

At one time or another, just about everyone has been hungry, but the reasons vary from dieting to dire poverty. Too many of the world’s people have neither the resources to grow their own food, nor the money to buy food; more than one billion people live on one dollar or less per day. Most of the world’s developing nations are unable to buy adequate food for their people because their money goes to repay debts owed to world banking institutions. Further compounding the problem of feeding the world’s hungry are mass devastations caused by man-made and natural disasters. But today’s Catholics face these challenges because “our faith demands that we be creatively engaged in sharing the food that sustains life. There is no more basic human need.” (U.S. Bishops 1986 Pastoral Letter: “Economic Justice for All”)

Global Facts for Classroom or Group Discussions:

- Hunger-related diseases claim about 24,000 lives each day. (The Hunger Site: www.thehungersite.com)
- Nearly 800 million of the world’s 840 million malnourished people live in developing countries, including 150 million children age five and under. (Bread for the World Institute, Facts on Hunger and Poverty: www.centerforhunger.org)
- In U.S. households, over 33 million people, including almost 13 million children, experience hunger or the risk of hunger. (2002 Household Security in the U.S., USDA: www.usda.gov)
- Overfed people in wealthy countries equal the number of the world’s hungry or malnourished people. (World Watch Institute: www.worldwatch.org)
- Hunger is a symptom of poverty and inequality, and not of food scarcity, because the world produces enough food to feed each person between 3,000 to 4,000 calories per day. (See video: *The Global Banquet: Politics of Food*: www.maryknollmall.org)

As God’s hands on Earth, we can help alleviate hunger. Here are some suggestions:

- Learn more about the causes of widespread global hunger.
- Advocate for the hungry and support policies that address their needs at home or abroad.
- Act in solidarity with sister parishes to supply nutritional food for people in depressed areas.
- Organize church or school programs providing food for homebound elderly and sick people.
- Volunteer your time to cook and deliver wholesome food to the needy in your community.
- Support faith-based and nonprofit groups that sponsor soup kitchens and humanitarian aid for the poor.
- Never waste food; many millions of hungry people could be fed on food wasted in the U.S. alone.
- Share your meals with those who may have forgotten, or can’t afford to buy their own.

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Give Drink to the Thirsty

“For I was thirsty and you gave me drink.” (Matthew 25:35)

Water is vital to sustaining all life and the proper functioning of Earth’s ecosystems. Even though access to safe drinking water is a basic human right, not everyone knows what it is like to quench their thirst with a drink of cool, clear, clean water. Many water sources in areas of the United States have become polluted; fortunately, we have environmental legislation to enforce cleanups. In some of the world’s most impoverished regions, the majority of water sources are polluted and pose a high risk of disease. Addressing environmental and ecological issues from a faith-based perspective, the U.S. bishops launched an Environmental Justice Program in 1993. It calls for a greater awareness and relief of “disproportionate environmental burdens borne by the poor, and children’s environmental health issues.” (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Social Development and World Peace*: www.usccb.org)

Global Facts for Classroom or Group Discussions:

- Worldwide, 2.3 billion people suffer from water-related diseases; unclean water and poor sanitation kills 12 million each year, mostly in developing countries. (Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, *Pollution and the Environment*: www.jhuccp.org)
- About 20 percent of the world’s population lacks access to safe drinking water; 50 percent lacks adequate sanitation. (UNEP, *Global Environmental Outlook 2000*: www.un.org)
- All living creatures are impacted by polluted water and its usage for drinking, household needs, recreation, fishing and commerce. (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: www.epa.gov)
- At current water consumption levels, the U.N. estimates that by 2025 two out of three people will live in water-stressed conditions. (UNEP, *Global Environmental Outlook 2000*: www.un.org)

As God’s hands on Earth, we can help alleviate water pollution. Here are some suggestions:

- Learn more about the importance of ecosystems, water quality and protection of watersheds.
- Understand the basic causes of water pollution: contaminated run-off, natural and man-made disasters, acid rain, lack of sanitation and sewage treatment facilities.
- Conserve water, never take this life-sustaining resource for granted.
- Advocate for sustainable development projects to supply clean water sources at home and abroad, especially in developing countries.
- Support domestic and international legislation aimed at protecting the environment.
- Support water restoration projects and organizations working to halt environmental threats.
- Adhere to domestic recycling programs designed to reduce environmental wastes.
- Understand God’s creation related to the environment. (See video: *A Universe Drama in Three Acts*: www.maryknollmall.org)

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Clothe the Naked

“For I was naked and you clothed me.” (Matthew 25:35)

Younger siblings know well the “blessings” of hand-me-downs. Even if not exact fits, at least they have clothes and shoes. Countless children and adults in the world would walk barefooted and have little to wear, except for donations of usable clothing. Nor would they have household items such as towels, blankets and bed linens. To them, the “pre-owned” goods are true blessings.

Catholic social teaching also considers the naked as “those stripped of human dignity and power . . . and necessary tools for work.” (*The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism.*) The rights of human beings to dignity, the power to control their own lives, and even to work, are God given. Our moral responsibility is to preserve and protect those rights.

As God’s hands on Earth, we can help to clothe and unburden the needy. Here are some suggestions:

- Support and donate to drives run by schools, parishes and other charitable organizations that collect clothes and bedding for the local needy.
- Organize programs to provide towels and bed linens for hospitals that lack these essentials in distressed areas, particularly in developing nations.
- Act in solidarity to aid sister parishes in areas devastated by tornadoes, floods, earthquakes and hurricanes, leaving residents with virtually nothing. (See video: *Mano-con-Mano (Hand-to-Hand): Stories of Solidarity*: www.maryknollmall.org)
- Reach out to neighbors who have lost their possessions in fires, floods or in other ways.
- Encourage someone whose dignity may have become fragile due to loss of a job. Suggest retraining in a new area of work, or help them seek work if you are in a position to do so.
- Be charitable, but always remember that in giving it is most important to maintain a person’s sense of dignity; no one ever should be made to feel like a “charity case.”

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Reflection and Study Guide for Educators—Corporal Works of Mercy Shelter the Homeless

“For I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matthew 25:35)

Familiar sights in many cities worldwide are growing numbers of homeless men, women and even children sleeping in doorways, train stations and under bridges. Causes of homelessness are many and varied: the lack of permanent, affordable housing; overcrowded, temporary shelters; unemployment and underemployment; breaking up of families; mental and physical disabilities; and, on a major scale, wars and natural disasters that displace families and whole communities.

Despite our abundant resources to aid the homeless, we still have an estimated two million “street people” in the United States. In addition to helping our own locally, we have a moral responsibility to reach out with aid to people made homeless by disasters and conflicts in poverty-stricken countries.

Bear in mind that counted among the homeless are not only “street people,” but also “migrants, refugees, orphans, and foster children Providing shelter entails fostering a sense of belonging.”
(*The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*)

As God’s hands on Earth, we can help the homeless. Here are some suggestions:

- Understand the need for group homes for homeless and disabled people in your community.
- Donate to religious and nonprofit secular charities that care for displaced persons.
- Support national and international disaster relief programs.
- Volunteer your services to organizations that build affordable homes for the poor.
- Advocate for legislation to provide housing for poverty-stricken and disabled persons.
- Offer your love and home to an orphan, or consider becoming a foster parent.
- Provide a temporary home for migrant workers or refugees who are fleeing oppression.
- Welcome newcomers to your school or community; help them to feel at home.
- Organize a parish undertaking to provide shelter and support for a needy local family.
- Remember, to provide someone with a sense of belonging is to fulfill a basic human need.

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Visit the Sick

“For I was ill and you cared for me.” (Matthew 25:36)

“When we serve the poor and sick, we serve Jesus.” Saint Rose of Lima

Most of us have had our share of illnesses and injuries. Fortunately, we recovered fully with support from family, friends and neighbors. But within almost every community, there are less fortunate people who are isolated by illness, injury or old age. Think of how much it would mean to them if we reached out and offered them our helping hands. In fact, “supplying companionship and housekeeping for the sick, elderly, and homebound, and accommodating the needs of the physically and mentally disabled are principal avenues of serving the sick.” (*The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*)

Wealthy nations have all manner of medical facilities and medicines to treat all sorts of ailments, as well as advanced research facilities devoted to conquering dreaded diseases. But imagine living in remote, impoverished areas in developing countries with severely limited health-care facilities. Reaching out across the globe to helpless people devastated by poverty and sickness exemplifies Catholic social justice at its best. Think of what our charity could do for places such as sub-Saharan Africa, where the spread of AIDS is claiming a whole generation of people. (See video: *Coming to Say Goodbye: Stories of AIDS in Africa*: www.maryknollmall.org)

As God’s hands on Earth, we can help serve the sick. Here are some suggestions:

- Regularly visit sick or elderly family members and friends confined to nursing homes.
- Volunteer to drive patients to treatment facilities and doctors appointments.
- Become a hospital volunteer, bringing magazines and books to patients and reading to hospitalized children.
- If a schoolmate is ill at home or in the hospital, organize a class “get-well-soon” project or card.
- Offer to sit with homebound patients to provide primary care givers with time to themselves.
- Cook and deliver meals to the sick, elderly and homebound.
- Pray with the sick and elderly, offer consolation, be a compassionate listener.
- Contribute money and supplies, if needed, to nonprofit local health-care facilities that care for the terminally ill.
- Support overseas missions that staff and provide health-care facilities in developing nations.

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Visit the Imprisoned

“For I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (Matthew 25:36)

“You’re grounded,” were pretty familiar words in response to some infraction we committed as children. Many of us will recall the feeling of captivity when confined to our rooms, even for a short time. Consider, then, what it is like to serve time in prison.

We might say of justly convicted criminals, “they got what they deserve—a prison term to pay their debt to society in isolation from the comforts of home, family and friends.” We seek justice, and not vengeance, realizing that even the most vile criminals are entitled to humane treatment. We hate the sin, but not the sinner, for Jesus taught us both forgiveness and love of our enemies.

Throughout the world there are those imprisoned for little else than their political or religious convictions. Also there are those confined within webs of domestic violence and even racism. “Measures to release political and religious prisoners and intervene in cases of domestic violence constitute this work of mercy.” (*The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*)

As God’s hands on Earth, we can help the imprisoned. Here are some suggestions:

- Volunteer for local prison ministries, many of which are run by faith-based communities.
- Support educational and job-training programs to rehabilitate and restore inmates as useful members of society.
- Pray for the inmates’ families, because they are suffering too.
- Support parish programs to provide gifts for prisoners and their children at Christmas time.
- Encourage crime victims and victims of domestic violence to seek pastoral or secular professional counseling.
- Guard against racism; practice inclusion, not exclusion.
- Learn more about the plight of those unjustly imprisoned for political and religious beliefs, as well as how to advocate for their release.
- Be mindful that we are all members of the human race and equal in God’s eyes.

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Bury the Dead

“In death, God calls man to himself.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church (#1011)

“Even death cannot rob us of our fundamental dignity as human persons.”

Reflections on the Body, Cremation and Catholic Burial Rites, 1998, U.S. Catholic Bishops

“The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the Resurrection. The burial of the dead . . . honors the children of God, who are temples of the Holy Spirit.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church (#2300).*

For some long-suffering people, the prospect of death can be a welcome relief and more easily accepted by survivors than are tragic, untimely deaths. In either case, Christians believe that the act of “burying the dead” has far broader implications. It encompasses compassion and support for survivors to help them better cope with their loss and to encourage them to go on living with the living. Anyone who has ever lost someone dear to them knows firsthand the depths of pain and anguish associated with such a loss, whether it be of a spouse, parent, child, sibling, other family member, dear friend or classmate (perhaps even a pet). Youngsters who suffer any loss face particularly difficult circumstances.

As God’s hands on Earth, we can help ease the sufferings of the dying and give comfort to survivors. Here are some suggestions:

- Provide companionship, be a good listener, have compassion, comfort them with kindness and pray with them.
- Offer daily prayers for the grace of a happy death for the terminally ill, and for the peace and comfort of surviving family and friends.
- Urge those who have particular difficulty in coping to seek pastoral or professional counseling.
- Support religious and other organizations dedicated to care for the terminally ill and those that offer grief counseling.
- Attend funeral or wake services; your presence can mean so much to survivors.
- Send appropriate Mass cards for the dead and spiritual bouquets for the living. Even a simple note with your thoughts and prayers can have a healing effect on those grieving a loss.

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