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POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St Peter's Square

Wednesday, 12 October 2016

[Multimedia]

32. Corporal and spiritual works of mercy

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In the preceding catechesis, we delved a little deeper into the great mystery of God's mercy.

We reflected on the Father's action in the Old Testament and then, in the Gospel account, we saw how Jesus, in his words and actions, is the Incarnation of Mercy.

He, in return, taught his disciples: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36). It is a responsibility that challenges the conscience and actions of every Christian. In fact, it is not enough to experience God's mercy in one's life; whoever receives it must also become a sign and instrument for others. Mercy, therefore, is not only reserved for particular moments, but it embraces our entire daily existence.

How can we, therefore, be witnesses of mercy? We do not think that it is done with great efforts or superhuman actions. No, it is not so. The Lord shows us a very simple path, made by small actions which, nonetheless, have great value in his eyes, to the extent to which he has told us that it is by these actions we will be judged. In fact, one of the most beautiful pages from Matthew's Gospel brings us the lesson which we can, in every way, hold to be true as the "testament of Jesus" by the Evangelist, who had experienced the action of Mercy directly on himself. Jesus says that every time we give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, cloth the naked and welcome the foreigner, visit the sick or imprisoned, we do the same to him (cf. Mt 25:31-46). The Church calls these actions "*corporal works of mercy*", because they assist people with their material necessities.

There are also, however, seven other *works of mercy called "spiritual"*, which pertain to other equally important needs, especially today, because they touch the person's soul, and often create the greatest suffering. We certainly remember a phrase which has entered into the common language: "Bear wrongs patiently". And there are; there are troublesome people! It might seem like a minor thing which makes us smile, but instead contains a feeling of profound charity; it is the same for the other six [spiritual works of mercy], which are good to remember: counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, console the afflicted, pardon offences, pray to God for the living and the dead. These are daily things! "But I am afflicted..." — "But God will help you, I don't have time...". No! I stop myself, I listen, I give my time and console him; that is an act of mercy, and it is done not only to him, it is done to Jesus!

In the following Catecheses, we will reflect on these works which the Church presents to us as the concrete way of living out mercy. Over the course of centuries, many simple people have put this into practice, giving their sincere witness of faith. The Church, after all, faithful to her Lord, nourishes a preferential love for the weakest. Often it is the people closest to us who need our help. We should not go out in search of some unknown business to accomplish. It is better to begin with the simplest, which the Lord tells us is the most urgent. In a world which, unfortunately, has been damaged by the virus of indifference, the works of mercy are the best antidote. In fact, they educate us to be attentive to the most basic needs of "the least of these my brethren" (Mt 25:40), in whom Jesus is present. Jesus is always present there. Where there is need, there is someone who has need, be it material or spiritual. Jesus is there. Recognizing his face in those who are in need is one way to really confront indifference. He allows us to be always vigilant, and avoid having Christ pass by without us recognizing him. It recalls to mind the words of St Augustine: "*Timeo Iesum transeuntem*" (Serm., 88, 14, 13): "I fear the Lord passing by", and I do not notice him; I fear that the Lord may pass before me in one of these little people in need, and I do not realize that it is Jesus. I fear that the Lord may pass by without my recognizing him! I wondered why St Augustine said he *feared* the passing by of Jesus. The answer, unfortunately, is in our behaviour: because we are often distracted, indifferent, and when the Lord closely passes us by, we lose the opportunity to encounter him. The works of mercy reawaken in us the need, and the ability, to make the faith alive and active with charity.

I am convinced that, through these simple, daily actions, we can achieve a true cultural revolution, like there was in the past. If every one of us, every day, does one of these, this will be a revolution in the world! Everyone, each and every one of us. How many Saints are remembered even today, not for the great works which they accomplished, but for the charity which they knew how to impart! We think of the recently canonized Mother Teresa: we do not remember her because of the many houses she opened in the world, but because she stooped down to every person she found in the middle of the street in order to restore their dignity. How many abandoned children did she embrace in her arms; how many moribund people has she accompanied to eternity, holding their hands! These works of mercy are the features of the face of Jesus Christ, who takes care of his littlest brethren in order to bring the tenderness and closeness of God to each of them. May the Holy Spirit help us; may the Holy Spirit kindle within us the desire to live this way of life: at least once a day, at least! Let us again learn the corporal and spiritual works of mercy by heart, and ask the Lord to help us put them into practice every day, and in those moments where we see Jesus in a person who is in need.

Special greetings:

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, particularly those from England, Jersey, Ireland, Denmark, Ghana, Namibia, Nigeria, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines and the United States of America. With prayerful good wishes that the present Jubilee of Mercy will be a moment of grace and spiritual renewal for you and your families, I invoke upon all of you joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Appeal for Syria

I want to stress and reaffirm my closeness to the victims of the inhuman conflict in Syria. It is with a sense of urgency that I renew my appeal to those responsible, imploring with all my strength, for the instatement of an immediate ceasefire, which is imposed and respected for at least as long as necessary to allow for the evacuation of civilians, especially children, who are still trapped under the ferocious bombardments.

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