

# **The Corporal Works of Mercy: A Dimension of Christian Spirituality**

## **The Two Dimensions of Christian Spirituality**

The word “spirituality” has been used to cover a wide range of religious experiences that have been evident throughout human history and found in all cultures inside and outside of formal religions. Thus, perhaps we should speak of “spiritualities” rather than a single common spirituality. In fact, when we attempt to define “spirituality” the case could be made that, within certain limits, each person necessarily has his or her own unique spirituality.

However, while there are many forms of spirituality, there are two basic elements or dimensions within any mature spirituality: 1) to put oneself in the presence of God and 2) to be transformed by that personal encounter. If both dimensions are not present, any claims for a mature spirituality fall short. For example, if spirituality means just “me and Jesus” without any effect on our relationship with others or the world, it falls short of a mature spirituality. Also, if we simply go about using our own definition of “good works” without the guidance of God we can delude ourselves and perhaps harm self or others.

Of course some major questions remain: 1) Who is this God whom I seek?, 2) How do I go about the process of putting myself in His presence?, 3) How will this encounter affect the way I lead my daily life?

Answers: 1) For Christians, the foundational experience of God was in Jesus. 2) We can put ourselves in the presence of God through reading the Scriptures, celebrating the sacraments and personal meditation. 3) If we listen to the words of Jesus in the Scriptures, he makes it simple. As he told the Pharisee: love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself:

Teacher, which is the great commandment of the law? And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Matt 22:34-39)

In the First Letter of John (4:7-12) this simple truth is again made clear:

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love....No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

Thus the two basic dimensions of a mature spirituality go hand-in-hand. They must both be operative. If we simply attempt to put ourselves in the presence of God and our lives are not transformed, we have not truly heard and/or responded to God's call. If we go about our attempts to love self and others without the guidance of God, we risk being misguided and bring about havoc instead of the good.

So, if we are to love self, others and the world as God wishes, where do mercy and the works of mercy fit in? First we must attempt to understand the meaning of mercy.

### **Understanding Mercy**

Mercy is simply love's concrete response to those in need and, of course, it can take many forms. When the Scriptures speak of seeking and receiving God's mercy, they mean to speak of how God's love is sought or experienced by his people from the vantage point of their concrete needs - the need for freedom from slavery, the need for peace, the need to be forgiven, the need for the material things to sustain life. Mercy is love responding to those in need.

Given the ongoing needs of mankind, throughout the history of the Jewish/Christian experience of God, a central theme has been that of God's mercy in response to those needs. For Jewish people, the foundational experience of God's mercy was seen as exemplified in the escape of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to a life of freedom.

For Christians, the foundational experience of God is found in Jesus, who revealed a God who shows mercy to all, especially sinners, social outcasts and those in need of healing. The Gospels report that Jesus made a special effort to seek out the outcasts and the needy and would actually come to identify himself with every person in need (Matt 25). Jesus' concrete acts of love for the needy - healing, forgiveness - were seen as acts or "works" of mercy.

### **Defining the Works of Mercy**

Thus, over the centuries, as Christians have endeavored to follow the example and teachings of Jesus, there developed a tradition in the Catholic Church of searching through the New Testament in order to identify "works of mercy", either performed by Jesus or required of his true followers. By definition, these works of mercy are those which are done freely and often go far beyond the demands of justice. For example Jesus says: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you....and from him who takes away your cloak do not withhold your coat as well." (Lk 6:27-29).

This tradition separated these works of mercy into two categories -- spiritual works of mercy (concerned with the needs of the soul) and corporal works of mercy (concerned with the needs of the body). This is not to suggest that we humans are made to two parts "stuck" together - body and soul - that are somehow independent, but that we humans do have physical and spiritual needs which are met in different ways.

For our purposes we will concentrate on the corporal works of mercy, but in passing, we can mention that the Catholic tradition identifies seven spiritual works of mercy and indicates where these are to be found in the NT:

- 1) To admonish the sinner. (Matt 18:15-20; Col 3:5-17; 1 Thess 5:12; 2 Thess 3:15) Admonishment may take the form of good example or of disciplinary action.
- 2) To instruct the ignorant. (Rom 11:25; I Cor 10:1; 1 Tim 4:6-16; 2 Tim 4:1-5; 1 Thess. 4:13) To inform and correct misunderstandings because of ignorance of the true Gospel message.
- 3) To counsel the doubtful. (Lk 24:36-53; Jn 20:26-29) This counsel can take the form of direct advice or good example and concerns doubts about faith, oneself, or about relationships with others.
- 4) To comfort the sorrowful. (Jn 11:19; 1 Thess 4:13-18) This concerns an empathetic presence with another who is bereaved, lonely or alienated in order to cope with and grow through their struggles.
- 5) To bear wrongs patiently. (Matt 16:24; James 5:7-11) This requires a strength to endure strain, stress, misunderstanding and evil without reacting and causing even more evil and suffering or becoming evil oneself.
- 6) To forgive all injuries. (Matt 6:15; 18:21-35; Col 3:13) Injuries are harmful acts received from others which can cause resentment, bitterness, hatred and a spirit of vindictiveness. Love and forgiveness can transform such experiences into reconciliation or at least a mitigation of injurious effects.
- 7) Pray for the living and the dead. (James 5:16; Col. 1:3,9; 2 Macc 12:45) Prayers for the living and the dead expresses a permanent bond that unites all Christians in the community of saints.

### **The Corporal Works of Mercy in Proper Context**

As we have noted, the works of mercy must be understood in terms of a mature spirituality. We have noted that a mature spirituality has two fundamental dimensions -- putting ourselves in the presence of God and being transformed by that experience.

At this point perhaps, we would do well to come up with a broad definition of “Christian spirituality”. Simply put, one way we could define Christian spirituality would be: Our life in the Spirit -- that is, the way we understand ourselves and live out our lives as the result of our experience of the gift of the Spirit of God (Spirit of Holiness/ Holy Spirit) which Jesus promised to send us (Jn 15:25-6).

To speak of God as Spirit is a traditional way of speaking about the presence of God in human life. Of course, God as Spirit is not other than God’s self. God as Spirit is simply

God, but God experienced as present to and personally making a difference in our lives and through us a difference in our world.

In this metaphor, God as Spirit is like the breath of the wind. Although invisible, its presence can be felt as a kind of energy, a principle of life, a creative force that influences our lives. Just as we know of the wind's presence only by its effects, e.g., of making the trees bend, so too we can only know if we have the invisible Spirit by the way we lead our everyday lives.

### **The Corporal Works of Mercy Examined**

Let us now examine the corporal works of mercy. The corporal works of mercy are also grounded in Scripture. We find some of them in the Book of Isaiah where the prophet tells the people that performing religious practices alone (like fasting) is not what God desires. He redefines religious practices, like fasting, in terms of service to those in need :

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

....If you take away from the midst of you the yoke, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.(Isaiah 58: 6-10)

We find this same theme echoed by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus indicated who will be welcomed into the Kingdom -- the sheep, not the goats:

Then the King will say to those (sheep) at his right hand, 'Come of blessed of 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 drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me'.

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?'

And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you , as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. (Matt 25:34-40)

And he goes on to indicate that those who did not so respond to those in need (the goats), were, in fact, not responding in love to Him.

Based mainly on these texts, the Catholic tradition came to list seven corporal works of mercy:

- 1) To feed the hungry. These are those who are deprived of food to sustain life and/or health. In order to feel some solidarity with the poor, Christians are encouraged to fast.
- 2) To give drink to the thirsty. Again, this is not to “spiritualize” thirst - thirst for truth or knowledge - but the actual physical needs of people to have affordable, clean water. It can include all those physical elements needed to sustain healthy individual and family life.
- 3) To clothe the naked. This can refer to not only those in need of sufficient clothing, bedding and the necessary items for work, but also it is applied to those stripped of human dignity and power.
- 4) To visit the imprisoned. Captivity can on a variety of forms including imprisonment for political, criminal and religious reasons, as well as being “prisoners” of domestic violence, sexism, racism and class distinction.
- 5) To shelter the homeless. The homeless can include those in emergency situations, street people, migrants, refugees, orphans and foster children. This includes not only physical shelter, but fostering a sense of belonging to the community of citizens.
- 6) To visit the sick. Many of the homebound, the mentally or physically sick and the elderly cannot afford nursing homes and need companionship and housekeeping. Volunteer opportunities abound to help such people.
- 7) To bury the dead. This includes not only insuring a decent physical burial, but the needs of the dying and their families as they face their last days on earth. A physical presence and the willingness to listen can be an important work of mercy. (This work of mercy was based on a respect for the body as a Temple of the Holy Spirit as found in 1 Cor: 3:16).

### **From Mercy to Justice**

We have noted earlier the warnings of the ancient prophets that the first dimension of spirituality is not enough. Putting ourselves in the presence of God - saying our prayers, keeping the feast days, going to Church, receiving the sacraments - is indispensable for our Christian life, but we must open ourselves to be transformed by that experience and go forth and do the works of spiritual and corporal mercy. If we do not do that we come under the judgment of the prophets and Jesus Himself.

However, it is equally important that we not stop with works of mercy. These are necessary and good, but we must always look beyond them to do what we can to establish justice in our families, communities, nations and the world.

Hear the words of the prophet Amos:

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream (Amos 5:21-24).

In the same way Jesus warns the Pharisees:

But woe to you Pharisees! for you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. (Lk 11:42) (See also Matt 23:23)

In the famous story of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:29-37) Jesus notes that the priest and the Levite, both deeply involved in matters of worship and known to be careful observers of the law, simply pass by the half-dead man beaten by robbers. But it is the hated Samaritan, who does not even recognize the Temple worship in Jerusalem, that is depicted as the true neighbor of the man in need. Religious activities are good and needed, but if they do not issue in works of mercy and justice they are hollow.

Jesus and the prophets remind us that hunger, homelessness, lack of medical care, the various kinds of imprisonment we noted are at their roots social problems. Justice demands that the social system be renewed in justice, so that so many works of mercy might not be needed. Society must provide workers with a just wage, affordable medical care, tear down the bars of discrimination of race, color, creed and sex. We must do all we can to prevent war and its horrors. Care for the environment is a way of respecting God's creation and protecting the lives and livelihood of the citizens of the world.

In a later session we will outline Catholic social thought, but the need to always look beyond the works of mercy is also of central importance to a mature Christian spirituality.