

Corporal Works of Mercy – Respecting Life through “Clothing the Naked”

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

The Corporal Work of Mercy, *Clothe the Naked*, seems intuitive. It calls us to help those who may need things like shoes, clothes, jackets, blankets or similar items. Clothing is considered a basic human necessity similar to food and shelter. In Minnesota, clothing is considered non-taxable to ensure those with lower incomes can more easily meet their families’ basic needs. While the obvious interpretation of this Corporal Work has merit, Catholic social teaching challenges us to think more deeply about what it means to be naked. According to the *HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, naked includes “those stripped of human dignity and power . . . and necessary tools for work.”

There are many ways people can lose their sense of dignity and power. Systemic poverty is one main root cause, as it often leads to symptoms like abuse, addiction, depression, and other challenges and behaviors that prevent people from living to their full potential. Appearance-based discrimination can also strip people of their human dignity. How often do we judge and treat others differently based on what we see? What conclusions do we draw about young people who have tattoos or piercings? People who are severely overweight? Those who have physical abilities different from our own? Individuals who do not dress “appropriately” based on our standards? People from different cultural/ethnic communities?

Appearance-based discrimination and the stereotypes it evokes can have real consequences. A Los Angeles study in 2000 documented the price children paid who attended school wearing inadequate clothing due to poverty – including bullying and ridicule by classmates, behavioral problems, and academic distress. An article in USA Today in 2005 highlighted the significant impact appearance can have on perceived employability – affecting everything from paycheck size to actually getting passed over for opportunities.

People’s rights to dignity, the power to control their own lives, and even to work, are God given. There are many ways to address matters of charity and justice related to clothing the naked in order to retain people’s sense dignity. A few simple suggestions:

- Ensure clothing items you donate are clean, gently used, and in good repair. No one should be made to feel like a charity case. Items most often needed are school clothes for children and professional clothes for adults that fit current clothing style trends.
- Strive to be more aware of when you may judge or treat people differently based on their appearance. Challenge yourself to see people for who they are, not what they appear to be.
- Advocate for public laws and policies that support people’s dignity and foster greater opportunities for education and employment.

Also, the Social Justice Committee is sponsoring its annual Warmth Drive the weekend of October 15/16. New and gently used blankets and winter coats will be collected (large adult sizes especially needed). Personal care items and cash will also be accepted. See the SJC section of the parish website or bulletin board in the church entryway for more info.