

Corporal Works of Mercy – Respecting Life through “Burying the Dead”

“In death God calls men and women to himself” Catechism of the Catholic Church

The Corporal Work of Mercy, *Bury the Dead*, calls us to treat the dead “with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the Resurrection” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*). It is our calling to mourn and pray for the dead, to entrust them to God and to comfort their loved ones. On the surface this seems simple. However, as we consider this Corporal Work, it is important to reflect on how we feel about people who have passed. How does the way someone lived and the circumstances surrounding his or her death influence our opinions? As a society, we tend to judge favorably those who have lived a long, full life and who die of so called “natural” causes. People who die untimely deaths present more of a dichotomy in how we may view them.

There are many causes of untimely death, and society tends to group them into two categories: (1) those whose deaths fit into positive social circumstances and can be considered “no fault” deaths, and (2) and those whose deaths are surrounded by negative circumstances in which society may tend to place blame and sometimes view as “at fault” deaths. (We are not at all suggesting we agree with this societal categorization but we are simply recognizing that it exists).

Examples of “no fault” deaths include individuals who die from natural causes such as illness, those who die in natural disasters, innocent victims of crime and, and those who die due to altruistic action, such as police officers, soldiers and fire fighters who act with bravery to save others. This is one type of death – one in which society finds no fault in the way the individual dies.

Examples of what society may view as “at fault” deaths include individuals who die as the result of suicide, those who die from drug overdose, or from illnesses related to alcohol or other addictive behavior, gang members who die from gang violence, and those who are convicted of crimes and die from court ordered execution or at the hands of others. Society tends to view these deaths negatively and may stigmatize those who die from such causes.

In considering deaths where society may blame or stigmatize the person who has passed based on the circumstances surrounding their passing, Catholic social teaching offers several things for us to consider:

- First, we need to remember that in death as in life, we are all equal in God's eyes.
- Second, we need to realize biases exist in society and these may result in people judging 1) those with mental health issues or desperate life circumstances, which sometimes result in suicide; 2) those with addictive behaviors, which may be the result of genetic predisposition and exposure to difficult life circumstances; as well as others whose situations place them on the margins of society and whose circumstances may contribute to their untimely passing. We need to set aside these biases and see people for who they are and recognize the complexity of their life circumstances.
- Finally, it is important to "peel the onion" to remove the social layers and see what is really beneath the untimely deaths society tends to view so negatively. In doing so we may often find that intolerance, discrimination, poverty, inadequate access to health care and education and lack of opportunity are at the heart of many of the deaths society tends to view negatively.

The Corporal Work of Mercy to "bury the dead" calls us to take action and support all who are facing death. We are called to help ease their suffering regardless of the circumstances surrounding their passing. The Maryknoll Society suggests we take the following steps:

- Provide companionship, be a good listener, have compassion.
- Offer prayers for the terminally ill, and for the peace and comfort of surviving family.
- Urge those who have difficulty in coping to seek pastoral or professional counseling.
- Support organizations which care for the dying and those that offer grief counseling.
- Attend funeral or wake services; your presence can mean so much to survivors.

In addition, we should also work to address the underlying health and social justice issues which contribute to untimely deaths.