

Seven Corporal Works of Mercy

The new Respect Life theme for the coming year

“Whatever you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do for me.”

(Matthew 25:40)

Last year the Social Justice Committee introduced a monthly reflection on the many ways in which Catholic social teachings support a broad vision for respecting life – both through acts of charity and acts of justice. In an effort to continue exploration and reflection on these themes, the Social Justice Committee will focus on the Seven Works of Corporal Mercy for the coming year and their relationship to the Church’s social doctrine of respecting life.

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

The biblical origins for the Corporal Works of Mercy can be found in the Old Testament (Isaiah 58:6-10) and the New Testament (Matthew 25:34-40). 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 we not only receive and experience the mercy of God, but that we are also called to practice mercy toward others.” While the Corporal Works of Mercy’s connections to charity are perhaps self-evident, their connections to justice are equally important.

Charity and justice are the two feet of Catholic ministry and social teachings. The charity foot emphasizes private or individual acts that respond to an identified, immediate need through direct service (providing food, clothing, and shelter). Charitable actions are directed toward the effects or symptoms of injustice, and therefore need to be repeated. The justice foot emphasizes public or collective acts that respond to long-term needs and which promote social change within institutions. Acts of justice focus on dealing with the root causes of injustice in order to alleviate the need for continued charity.

Neither charity nor justice alone is sufficient. Walking requires two feet, and similarly, both charity and justice are essential for demonstrating our commitment to and respect for life. As we reflect on the Corporal Works of Mercy during the coming year, we’ll seek to better understand how to take steps in both charity and the more challenging area of justice.

