



Works of Mercy

“This is my *commandment*,” Jesus says at the Last Supper, “that you love one another as I have loved you.” But can our love be authentic if we are just following orders? Yes, Pope Benedict XVI replies: “Love can be ‘commanded’ because it has first been given.” “Since we received a command to love God,” says St. Basil the Great, “we possess from the first moment of our existence an innate power and ability to love.” The Gospel awakens this inborn capacity of ours and channels it into a life lived in charity.

“God does not demand of us a feeling which we ourselves are incapable of producing,” Pope Benedict writes. “He . . . makes us see and experience His love, and since He has ‘loved us first,’ love can also bloom as a response within us.” We begin to love, not because we *have to*, but because we *want to*. We love from within, not from without.

God has “loved us first” in countless different ways. Imitating His bountiful love, our responding love will seek to enflesh itself with the same bewildering variety as divine love does. Love is patient, love is kind, St. Paul says—love takes whatever form the concrete circumstances call for in the moment at hand. This Jubilee Year Pope Francis calls for the especially attentive practice of love expressed as *mercy*.

The Latin word for mercy (*miser cordia*) suggests a “heart for misery,” a heart drawn

near to the bodily poverty and spiritual anguish of those with whom Jesus inseparably identifies. Moved to action by seeing Him embodied in others’ hunger and thirst, in their nakedness and homelessness, in their sickness and imprisonment, a merciful heart gives food and drink, clothes, shelters, visits, and buries; it makes the corporal works of mercy its own.

A heart turned inside out by misery brings the *spiritual* works of mercy to bear on suffering as well—counseling the doubtful, instructing the ignorant, admonishing the sinner, comforting the afflicted, forgiving offenses, bearing wrongs patiently, and praying for the living and the dead.

These corporal and spiritual works of mercy engage us both as individuals and as communities. God calls me to be merciful in my personal life, yes; but *my* calling is always part of *our* calling to build up a church of mercy. As a parish and as a diocese *we* must be merciful because it takes more than two hands to lift up all those who are bowed down. Working with others who have a heart for misery multiplies the victories of mercy, as the St. Vincent de Paul Society shows us so well.

This coming Lent, in the spirit of Pope Francis, I would like each pastor to take a public inventory of the works of mercy his parish currently undertakes. This would involve consulting parishioners in town-hall-type gatherings, in parish organizations, and in the Parish Council. In light of our diocesan prayer in this Year of Mercy—“Lord, show us the poor”—the following questions should be discussed in detail:

- How do *we as a parish* implement the works of mercy?
- Who among us feeds the hungry, visits the sick, instructs the ignorant, comforts the afflicted?
- Could we do more? What would it take to expand the boundaries of our common compassion?

Parish delegates will report the results of these inventories at a diocesan “Mercy Symposium” at the Powell Butte Retreat Center April 1-2. If our annual Catechetical Conference is any guide to expectation, this Jubilee Year gathering will forge personal connections across parishes, spread good ideas, and stimulate new initiatives of Catholic compassion throughout Central and Eastern Oregon. And all this may prompt answers to another good question the Year of Mercy puts to our consciences: what can *we as a diocese* do to show a heart for misery to the poor in our midst?