

The Works of Mercy

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An outstanding difference between Christianity and Paganism is shown by their attitudes towards mercy. The gods of the Romans, Greeks, Babylonians and Persians were cruel, murderous, pitiless and bloodthirsty. Among those peoples mercy was considered a weakness of character. In pagan ethics charity, forgiveness of injuries, justice and brotherly love were unknown. "You have heard that it had been said: An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." (Matt. V, 38). It is not too much to say that shameless cruelty was one of the basic elements of paganism.

Christianity, however, superseded pagan cruelty with a dynamic doctrine of love. It was the Christian code of mercy, preached to slaves and gladiators, the poor and the oppressed, that regenerated the world. Our Lord taught men to conquer this cruelty with kindness. "As you would," says Christ, "that men should do to you, do you also to them in like manner." (Luke VI, 31). But what should one expect men to do to him? What should he do for them? The answers are to be found in the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

The seven corporal works of mercy are: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to harbour the harbourless; to visit the sick; to ransom the captive; and to bury the dead. The seven spiritual works of mercy are: to counsel the doubtful; to instruct the ignorant; to admonish sinners; to comfort the afflicted; to forgive offences; to bear wrongs patiently; and to pray for the living and the dead. These precepts are affirmative, and are always binding. Their performance is demanded of us by both the divine and natural law.

Christianity has always placed the works of mercy foremost among her teachings. "The Church has stirred up everywhere the heroism of charity, and has established Congregations and Religious and many other useful institutions for help and mercy, so that there might be hardly any kind of suffering which was not visited and relieved." (Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*).

Today, the world is turning back to the pagan ideals of old. Instead of gladiators, Red Spain is slaughtering priests. The lot of the Jews and Christians in Germany is unbearable. The Jews are fined and exiled for no reason

other than that they are Jews. Similarly persecutions are raging in Mexico, Italy and Russia. The individual is treated as if he belongs to the state; and it is only the state that matters. Has the world, then, forgotten about the spiritual and corporal works of mercy? Furthermore, how does the average man look upon the works of mercy? Many have forgotten, or never knew of, their existence. Others think that when they make a donation to some charitable institution they are performing adequately their Christian duties. While this may in some cases be true, they also have an obligation, personally, to help their neighbour. "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you gave me not to eat: I was thirsty, and you gave me not to drink. I was a stranger, and you took me not in; naked, and you covered me not; sick and in prison, and you did not visit me. Then they also shall answer him, saying: Lord, when did we see thee hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister to thee? Then He shall answer them saying: Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it not to one of these least, neither did you do it to me. (Matt. XXV, 41 et seq.). It is clear, then, from these words that each individual is commanded by Christ to perform personally the works of mercy. The works of mercy literally have the power of transforming the world. The performance of these precepts by the early Christians drew from pagans the reluctant exclamation: "See how they love one another!"

The world today is being corrupted by hatred and jealousy. Individual is striving against individual, society against society, community against community, state against state. Men no longer forgive offences. "But if you will not forgive man, neither will your Father forgive you your offences." (Matt. VI, 15).

The practice of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy is the mark of a good citizen. They can bring peace and happiness everywhere and can dispel the hatred between nations. Without them the world is a hard place in which to live. The works of mercy are the means by which a man can put his Christian principles into practice, for they express in essence the words of Christ: "All things therefore whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do you also to them. For this is the law and the prophets." (Matt. VII, 12).