

A CORPORAL WORK OF MERCY: 'Visiting the Sick'

EDITOR'S NOTE: We offer this series of reflections on the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy in observance of the Year of Mercy, promulgated by Pope Francis. The jubilee year began on Dec. 8, 2015, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, and will end Nov. 20, 2016, the Feast of Christ the King.

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Special to the Exponent

During a class several years ago in the study of "Caritas" (Charity) at the University of Freiburg in Germany, we had a tour of the cathedral there, which was built between the years 1200 and 1620. Our professor pointed out one of the cathedral's stained glass windows, one of the oldest representations of the Corporal Works of Mercy, and the stonework over the front entrance that depicts the story of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25). The glass and stone works, he said, remind us to reflect on what we had done – or failed to do – and what we can do better in our everyday lives.

Across the street from the cathedral's main entrance is a "hospice" or "hospital" that has stood, in various forms, in the same spot for centuries, which reminds us that in the larger world we encounter our "neighbors" waiting to benefit from the charity we have received during our worship.

Catholics today still make the effort to meet the obligation to practice the Corporal and Spiritual Works of mercy, including visiting the sick and the infirm. I have witnessed numerous individuals, many of whom were involved in Church-based ministries, visiting the sick throughout my 27 years serving in the Diocese of Youngstown in the Office of Catholic Charities. That work of mercy is lived out in at least four different ways: through prayer, service, advocacy and sustainable institutional presence.

Prayer: I noticed that in every parish I would visit – either at daily or Sun-

day Mass – the faith community which had gathered together would pray for those who were sick in their parish and remember those throughout the world who suffered from pain or ill-health. This continued prayer reminds me of how fragile each one of us is, and how the support of community remains a critical factor in our lives.

Service: On these same visits I could see that prayer was complemented by specific acts of service. Time and again I encountered clergy, religious, and laity who would visit neighbors, friends and family members who were ill to offer assistance through gifts of food or through a car ride to the doctor. People confined to nursing homes or hospitals received the same charity. As anyone who has been sick knows, a simple visit from a friendly face – known or unknown – can mean so much.

Advocacy: Beyond direct personal care, advocating for persons who need affordable and accessible health care is also part of the call to visit the sick. The Church recognizes that persons – based on being made in the image and likeness of God, and endowed with inherent dignity – have a right to medical care (see "Pacem in Terris," 11). Technical and political issues aside, Christians are called to remind policy makers and governmental leaders that medical care is a right that must be recognized and honored.

Sustainable Institutional Presence: Given large populations and complex health care systems, heeding the call to visit the sick will be greatly enhanced through sustainable institutional presence. Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI has written that charity "needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community" ("Deus Caritas Est," 20 "God is Love"). The Diocese of Youngstown is blessed to have two major Catholic-sponsored systems dedicated to the care of those who are ill – regardless of an individual's ability to pay. The two systems are the Mercy Medical Center in Canton, sponsored by the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, and the Mercy



Health system (formerly Humility of Mary Health Partners) with hospitals located in Boardman, Warren and Youngstown. Mercy Health also sponsors the Assumption Nursing Home, Humility House and the Hospice House. Two other specialty health providers are the St. Joseph Care Center in Louisville, sponsored by the Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Mark and the Diocese of Youngstown, and the Antonine Village in North Jackson, sponsored by the Antonine Sisters. These institutional ministries of the Church – and many others around the world – continue in the same tradition of organized healing and care in a community.

As you enter and leave your parish church each weekend, reflect and pray over how you can become more aware of how the Corporal Works of Mercy are being lived out daily in your life and in the ministries of the Church. Find ways to connect through prayer, service, advocacy or supporting the institutional presence of the Church to visit and care for those who are ill. Contact your local parish, Catholic Charities office and Catholic health care system for ideas.

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