

families, communities, nations and the world. Hear the words of the prophet Amos: *I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream* (Amos 5: 21-24).

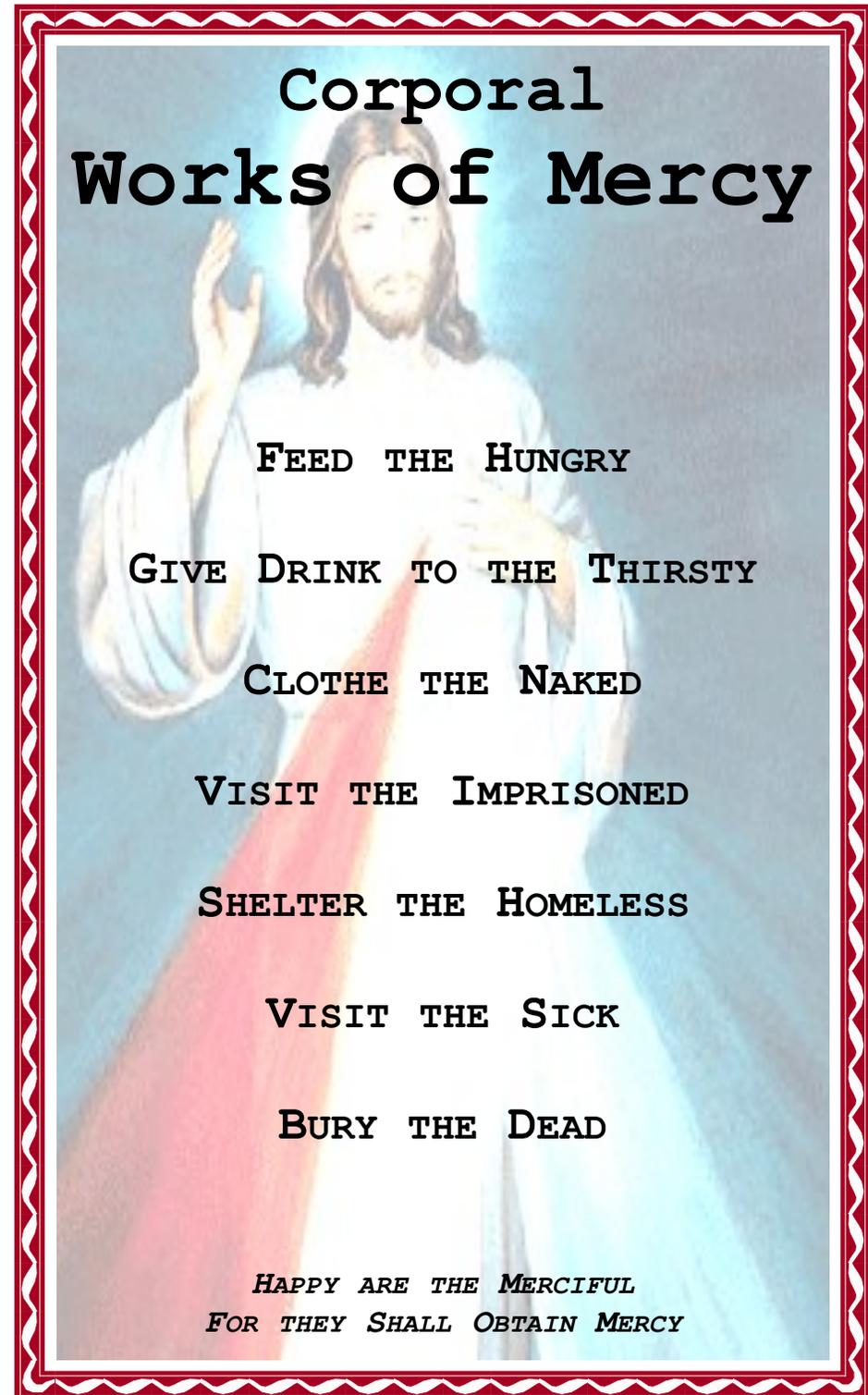
In the same way Jesus warns the Pharisees: *But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others* (Lk. 11: 42; also see Matt. 23: 23).

In the famous story of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10: 29-37) Jesus notes that the priest and the Levite, both deeply involved in matters of worship and known to be careful observers of the law, simply pass by the half-dead man beaten by robbers. But it is the hated Samaritan, who does not even recognize the Temple worship in Jerusalem, that is depicted as the true neighbor of the man in need. Religious activities are good and needed, but if they do not issue in works of mercy and justice they are hollow.

Jesus and the prophets remind us that hunger, homelessness, lack of medical care, the various kinds of imprisonment we noted are at their roots social problems. Justice demands that the social system be renewed in justice, so that many of the works of mercy might not be needed. The need to always look beyond the works of mercy is also of central importance to a mature Christian spirituality.

**FOR SPIRITUAL WORKS OF MERCY**

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## *The Corporal Works of Mercy*

As already noted in the pamphlet on the spiritual works of mercy, the works of mercy must be understood in terms of a mature spirituality. Mature spirituality has two fundamental dimensions—putting ourselves in the presence of God and being transformed by that experience.

At this point perhaps, we would do well to come up with a broad definition of "Christian spirituality." Simply put, one way we could define Christian spirituality would be: Our life in the Spirit -- that is, the way we understand ourselves and live out our lives as the result of our experience of the gift of the Spirit of God (Spirit of Holiness/Holy Spirit) which Jesus promised to send us (Jn. 15: 25-26).

To speak of God as Spirit is a traditional way of speaking about the presence of God in human life. Of course, God as Spirit is no other than God's self. God as Spirit is simply God, but experienced as present to and personally making a difference in our lives and through us a difference in our world. God as Spirit is like a breath of the wind. Although invisible, its presence can be felt as a kind of energy, a principal of life, a creative force that influences our lives. Just as we know of the wind's presence only by its effects, e.g., of making the trees bend, so too we can only know if we have the invisible Spirit by the way we lead our everyday lives.

The corporal works of mercy as with the spiritual works of mercy are grounded in Scripture. We find some of them in the Book of Isaiah where the prophet tells the people that performing religious practices alone (like fasting) is not what God desires. He redefines religious practices, like fasting, in terms of service to those in need: It is not enough to fast... but also to share your bread... (Isaiah 58: 6-10).

We find the same theme echoed by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus indicated who will be welcomed into the Kingdom --the sheep, not the goat: ...the sheep at his right hand ...the righteous asking when did we see thee hungry... (Matt. 25: 34-40). Jesus then goes on to indicate that those who did not so respond to those in need (the goats), were, in fact, not responding in love to Him.

## **BASED MAINLY ON THESE TEXTS, THE CATHOLIC TRADITION CAME TO LIST SEVEN CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY:**

1. **TO FEED THE HUNGRY.** These are those who are deprived of food to sustain life and/or health. In order to feel some solidarity with the poor, Christians are encouraged to fast.
2. **TO GIVE DRINK TO THE THIRSTY.** Again, this is not to "spiritualize" thirst -- thirst for truth or knowledge -- but the actual physical needs of people to have affordable, clean water. It can include all those physical elements needed to sustain healthy individual and family life.
3. **TO CLOTHE THE NAKED.** This can refer to not only those in need of sufficient clothing, bedding and the necessary items for work, but also it is applied to those stripped of human dignity and power.
4. **TO VISIT THE IMPRISONED.** Captivity can be in a variety of forms including imprisonment for political, criminal and religious reasons, as well as being "prisoners" of domestic violence, sexism, racism and class distinction.
5. **TO SHELTER THE HOMELESS.** The homeless can include those in emergency situations, street people, migrants, refugees, orphans and foster children. This includes not only physical shelter, but fostering a sense of belonging to the community of citizens.
6. **TO VISIT THE SICK.** Many of the homebound, the mentally or physically sick and the elderly cannot afford nursing homes and need companionship and housekeeping. Volunteer opportunities abound to help such people.
7. **TO BURY THE DEAD.** This includes not only insuring a Decent physical burial, but the needs of the dying and their families as they face their last days on earth. A physical presence and the willingness to listen can be an important work of mercy. (This work of mercy was based on a response for the body as a Temple of the Holy Spirit as found in 1 Cor. 3: 16).

It is equally important that we not stop with works of mercy. These are necessary and good, but we must always look beyond them to do what we can to establish justice in our