

FROM THE PASTOR

My dear brothers and sisters,

This week we will look at the last **Corporal Work of Mercy: Burying the dead**. This one may seem out of place with the rest of the Corporal Works of Mercy, but it truly is a work of mercy. Remember when I wrote about clothing the naked (February 21 ... you can check out back issues of my articles on our parish website under "From the Pastor's Desk")? I said that clothing does more than protect us from the elements; it also defends the dignity of the person. This principle is at work here as well. What do I mean?

The body has a great dignity which must be honored. St. John Paul II said,

The body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus be a sign of it. (*Theology of the Body*, 19:4)

Okay... so what does that mean? It means that God created the body – specifically, the human body – to be the visible sign of His life and love. In the beginning, you remember that God created humanity in His image and likeness. You see: our bodies are a sign of God. A lot of times we think that it is only the soul that has eternal worth, but we believe that our bodies will be resurrected on the last day. Jesus rose not just in spirit, but in His Body (the Gospel writers make this clear when He eats with them after the Resurrection and has St. Thomas touch His hands and side).

Since we have such a reverence for the human body – both for the mystery of God it makes visible and for the belief that it will rise again – we honor our bodies with burial. We recognize by this that, while the soul is separated from the body in death, there is still a dignity to the human body. It deserves honor. It deserves respect. The Lord of Life entered into our death to break the power of death in our souls and bodies. We hear in the Gospels how Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, Mary Magdalene and some other women buried Jesus' body with dignity – Jesus experienced it so that we would know that death does not have the final word. In the Apostle's Creed, we profess our belief in the "**resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.**" Our bodies will be raised as glorified bodies on the Last Day and united again to our souls. Thus, we show respect to the body with burial – not allowing it to be defiled by animals or the elements.

Burying the Dead also entails praying for the dead. Those who have died in friendship with the Lord, but still have some attachments to sin and selfishness, need to be purified before entering into the fullness of God's Presence (not because God would be offended, but because it would do harm to the soul, the saints tell us). Praying at the Vigil (the Wake), the Mass of Christian Burial, and/or the Committal assist the soul in its purification process. Other prayers, especially having Masses said (since the Mass is the highest and most powerful prayer) also help. This mercy for the soul is so important, that s/he is not forgotten in their last journey into the Heart of God. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus went to the abode of the dead – that He went to the depths of the human condition. As we pray for those who have died, we reach out to touch Jesus who also died.

Burying the Dead is not just a Work of Mercy for the person who died, but also for those who survive. As we walk with the bereaved in their time of loss, we help them to cope with the pain. Our presence at the Vigil, the Funeral and/or Committal helps to hold them up. Our *prayers* for them give balm to their spirits in ways that our words, presence, hugs and casseroles cannot – for those prayers invite God to enter and heal the open wounds in their hearts, wounds that *we* cannot heal. Jesus, who wept at the death of His friend Lazarus (John 11:35) – even though He knew that He was going to raise him from the dead – knows the *pain of loss* from the inside. In this, He is present in the grieving and bereaved. When we reach out to those who have lost a loved one, we reach out to touch the weeping Jesus.

Throughout this **Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy**, may we grow in compassion and mercy through all of the Works of Mercy – both Spiritual and Corporal. May our mercy and love reach out to the people around us, and so be a sign of God's love in the world. May we be like the first Christians who drew people by the thousands to Christianity not solely by their preaching, but by their love and mercy.