

Novena of Grace 2016/Works of Mercy

Jubilee of Mercy

'It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the *corporal and spiritual works of mercy*. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples. Let us rediscover these *corporal works of mercy*: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. And let us not forget the *spiritual works of mercy*: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead.' **(Pope Francis - *Misericordiae Vultus* 15)**



4 March

Mark 12:30 – ‘You must love your neighbour as yourself’

‘Heal the world, make it a better place, for you and for me and the entire human race’ are words from the refrain of a song popular in the 1990s that come to mind when considering the first of the corporal works of mercy – **Feed the Hungry**. The commandment to love our neighbour as we would ourselves invites us to share what we have to eat with those who are hungry. When confronted with a large number of people who needed to be fed, the disciples around Jesus wanted to send them away as if it was no concern of theirs. Jesus intervened and said ‘There is no need for them to go; give them something to eat yourselves’ - (Matt 14:16). They made excuses of course, as we all do, but Jesus showed them how to provide for others and still have plenty left over. Selfless love knows no bounds, makes no distinctions and offers no excuses. **Mary’s Meals**, founded in 2002, began as a limited project to provide food to 200 children in Malawi. Today over a million children throughout the world receive free school meals **every day** as a result of the inspiration of one Scotsman – Magnus McFarlane-Barrow. Think about ‘meals on wheels’ which so successfully brings nourishment and company to so many who are housebound. It is supported and maintained by people who bring this Gospel passage to life by their practical love of neighbour. What can we do today?

5 March

Luke 18:14 - *'For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the man who humbles himself will be exalted'*

The Gospel story paints a picture of two different characters – the one who had a great welcome for himself and the other who had what some people today call 'low esteem' issues. Jesus was a great teacher. He created stories to help us open our minds to see our own blind spots and to point us towards the path of integrity and truth. Three of the spiritual works of mercy can be grouped under the heading of being outwardly mindful - **Counsel the Doubtful, Instruct the Ignorant and Admonish Sinners**. Instead of looking into ourselves these works invite us to consider humbly others who may require advice, knowledge or truthful challenge in their lives. The character Mrs 'Nettles' Kelly in the movie *Brooklyn* would not be a model for the compassionate directness that is required. Her social pecking order in the shop has the hallmark of the 'Pharisee'. The example of the publican in the Gospel, however, shows us the essential quality – humility – as we charitably offer our Christian hand to those who are uncertain, or without knowledge or insight. We are conscious always that what we say comes from a deep place of concern and with a consciousness of our own need for counsel, instruction and admonishment.



6 March

Luke 15:3 - *'This man' they said 'welcomes sinners and eats with them'*

The Story of the Prodigal is a fitting companion to the spiritual works around reconciliation and mercy – **Forgive Offences Willingly** and **Bear Wrongs Patiently**.

The gentle mercy of the Father is a model for us of generosity in the face of hurt and of welcome in response to betrayal. The insight and courage of the younger son is matched by the forgiving reception he received and the joyful celebration that followed. The older son finds it difficult to bear the 'wrongs' of his brother patiently. Pope Francis speaks of this parable: 'Let us never tire of also going out to the other son who stands outside, incapable of rejoicing, in order to explain to him that his judgement is severe and unjust and meaningless in light of the father's boundless mercy.' He also advises confessors to imitate the Father and to 'interrupt the speech prepared ahead of time by the prodigal son, so that confessors will learn to accept the plea for help and mercy pouring from the heart of every penitent'. These words of Pope Francis speak to us too as we face the 'elder brother' inside and indeed as we encounter the prodigal on his journey home.

7 March

John 4: 49 – *‘Go home,’ said Jesus, your son will live’*

How consoling those words must have been to the court official whose son was so gravely ill - words spoken from the heart. In the same way we are called to **‘Comfort the Afflicted’** who we encounter on our journey. In these days when we sometimes have little time to talk with each other or fear keeps us apart in public situations we miss out on opportunities to reach out to strangers who may need a generous ear and some comforting words. We speak today about being out of our ‘comfort zone’ and yet that is where followers of Jesus are called to be. We sometimes find it hard to put into words our concern for those who are ill, anxious or bereaved. We forget the value of a silent presence and a simple gesture. We don’t have to bring flowers - only the scent of kindness and understanding is asked of us.

8 March

John 5:7 - *‘I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is disturbed’*

The plight of the sick man at the pool of Bethzatha who had no one to help him in his time of need brings to mind two further works of mercy – **‘Visit the Sick’** and **‘Visit the Imprisoned’**. For some people who are sick the gift of presence is itself a bonus. Sick people often feel invisible and our visit can really make a difference. Hospitals and nursing homes have training programmes for those who wish to bring communion to the sick and this might be your calling. When we can also make a cup of tea, go for medication or massage weary hands we add so much to the care of those who are ill. Prisoners often feel invisible too as they are taken out of society. This Jubilee of Mercy invites us to contrast the notion of ‘restorative justice’ as opposed to ‘vengeful justice’. Is there some way that one can become part of a visiting team under the supervision of the chaplains?

9 March

Isaiah 49:10 - *‘They will never hunger or thirst, scorching wind and sun shall never plague them; for he who pities them will lead them and guide them to springs of water.’*

Pope Francis and his namesake St. Francis of Assisi are champions of the poor. They also share a love of all God’s creation as we saw from his recent document on the environment *‘Laudato Si’*. In it he says that ‘Water poverty especially affects Africa where large sectors of the population have no access to safe drinking water or experience droughts which impede agricultural production. Some countries have areas rich in water while others endure drastic scarcity’ (L.S. 28). The passage from Isaiah reading speaks truth and hope to us. The second corporal work of mercy is **‘Give Drink to the Thirsty’** and we can help to do that by our awareness of the causes of climate change and our own use of natural limited resources. Trócaire is the overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Ireland that works tirelessly to alleviate the effects of climate change on those who are most affected. We can help in this work by our practical support of the work of Trócaire.

10 March

John 5:44 – *'How can you believe, since you look to one another for approval and are not concerned with the approval that comes from the one God?'*

Clothes are a way in which some people gain the approval of others. For others clothing is not a window into a personality but a vital way of keeping warm and healthy. Saint Martin of Tours, we are told, gave half his cloak to a beggar and that very night Christ appeared to him in that half cloak to say thank you. When we recognise the face of Christ in others we are honouring the divine within them. That same respect for the body of Christ applies when someone dies and we honour their mortal remains with the rites of a Christian burial. Divine approval is what matters and what we wear in life and in death is immaterial at a spiritual level. Nonetheless our Christian charity leads us to such works of mercy as – **Clothe the Naked** and **Bury the Dead** as we honour the body of Christ.

11 March

John 7:29 – *'I have come from him and it was he who sent me'*

This phrase from today's Gospel puts us in touch with the relationship of God the Creator and Jesus the Messiah, the one anointed and sent. When we pray through Jesus to God, the source of life, we are availing of that avenue of communication that Jesus opened for us by his life, death and resurrection. It is in that same spirit we reflect on the spiritual work of mercy to – **'Pray for the living and the dead'**. Prayer is at its heart about connections. We offer in prayer the works of our day, we ask that God would be mindful of those still with us and those already gone home and we trust that God has everything under control. Our prayers reinforce our understanding of the communion of saints who intercede for us with God who knows what grace everyone needs. This connectedness is captured in the saying of St Ignatius of Loyola: 'Pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on you.'

12 March

John 7:40 - *'Would the Christ be from Galilee?'*

Jesus knew what it was like to be an outsider – to be misunderstood – to be rejected. His proclamation of a different kind of kingdom was challenging for those who held power and confusing for others who were genuinely searching for truth. We can exclude people or become suspicious about them because of fear. What will it mean for me if we allow these migrants into our country, into our city or into our estate? One of the corporal works of mercy is **Welcome the Stranger** - We have a long tradition of hospitality in our country – Céad Míle Fáilte – the land of a hundred thousand welcomes. Our Celtic spirituality also embraces this Christian ideal.

'I saw a stranger last night. I put food in the eating place, drink in the drinking place, music in the listening place, and in the sacred name of the Triune, he blessed myself and my house and my cattle and my dear ones. And the lark said in her song, 'Often, often, often goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.'

(Pat O'Donoghue – Dublin Diocesan Liturgy Resource Centre – Lent 2016)

ST FRANCIS XAVIER – 1506-1542



St Francis Xavier has promised that all who make the novena of Grace, nine days of prayer before the date of his canonisation, will receive great graces. That is generally our experience. Nine days when we come close to God and allow God come close to us; when we renew the graces of our Baptism and receive the Eucharist; when we ask for specific graces and just spend some time with Jesus Christ.

The novena of grace from 4-12 March each year promises the graces of God to those who take part. Men and women have been making the novena for over fifty years, and some for the first time. The novena concludes on the anniversary of the canonisation of Francis, with St Ignatius, on March 12.

FIRST JESUITS

Born in 1506, Francis Xavier was one of the first Jesuits and is best remembered for his missionary journeys. No saint since St Paul made so many journeys – his were from Lisbon in Europe to Goa in India, around the coastline of South India, to Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan and finally to the coast of China where he died of malaria on December 3rd 1552.

MISSIONARY JOURNEYS

Xavier is remembered for his journeys to bring the good news of Jesus to people who had never heard of him. He is remembered also as one of the first Jesuits, and with Peter Favre, one of the closest companion of St Ignatius Loyola, prior to the founding of the Jesuits in 1540 and his journey to India in 1546.

JOURNEY OF PRAYER

However we do not understand Xavier unless we follow his journey inwards: he began student life in Paris with the ambition of getting a big post in the church in Spain, for which he would work hard. He enjoyed life in Paris, was well known on the social and sporting scene and resisted for a long time any influence from his room-mates in the university, Ignatius of Loyola and Peter Favre. It is remembered that Ignatius found him pupils to tutor when Xavier's funds were low! Gradually the stone wall Xavier had put up to Ignatius were demolished and he made the Spiritual Exercises, during which his huge ambitions for himself became huge ambitions for God.



Quotation

‘Do not put on solemn airs when you speak with the people,’ he wrote to the Jesuits who followed him to the Far East, echoing his own practice. ‘Be very lowly and modest in all your dealings with others. Learn to pardon and support their weaknesses very patiently, reflecting that if they are not good now, they will be some day.’

Further Resources

St Francis Xavier, by Philip Fogarty SJ, an illustrated life of St Francis Xavier, is available **free** of charge for any parish who wishes to distribute it during the novena.

Organ accompaniment for ***O Thou who hearkened to the Call***, the hymn to St Francis Xavier.

Novena prayer – leaflet available from Messenger Office. 6764921. Discount for orders over 20.

