

RESPECT LIFE MONTH

MERCY TRUMPS
POLARIZATION

For resources and ways to volunteer, visit us at
archla.org/respectlifemonth

MERCY = LOVE

Mercy is always a good idea. But, now that we've lived through so many months of increasing terrorist activity, racial unrest, violence by and to police, shootings of innocent people in our own streets, families separated at the border and children in cages or the horribly negative rhetoric in politics, we realize that now, more than ever, we need Mercy.

What is mercy? Mercy is the way God loves us—the form of love that recognizes all of our sins and forgives them anyway. The form of love that loves us even though each one of us betrays him through sin every single day. Mercy allows us to begin anew.



"Mercy begins inside each one of us. Mercy is the Christian attitude toward life. We have been forgiven by God and in exchange we forgive others. The love he has shown to us — the mercy that God shows us day in and day out — is the mercy that we must show to others. "

—Archbishop José Gomez



It is sobering to realize that, without God's mercy, none of us stand a chance. If we were to be judged solely by the way we respond to God's eternal love—by turning our backs on him, forgetting about him, choosing to disobey his laws—there would be no hope for redemption. Fortunately, as Pope Francis tells us, "the name of God is mercy".

Mercy is not only about receiving. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". The same is true of mercy. We receive mercy from God, but we are then empowered to be agents of mercy in the world.



The world needs mercy now more than ever. There was a time, not so long ago, when people with different political or religious beliefs could have amicable conversations with each other. There was a time when people did not judge each other swiftly and finally, without ever getting to know one another. Those days seem further and further in the past.

Our political, social, economic and philosophical divides seem larger than ever. Some people blame the current presidential administration while others say that the problems existed far earlier. Whatever the cause, we see the ramifications in our own families and among our friends. We “unfollow” or “unfriend” people on social media for simply posting a belief we don’t share. Many people will admit they don’t have friends or even spend time with people of an opposing political party. And, families are sharing less and less time talking through issues to try to determine what to believe and how to act together.

Polarization is not the same as mere difference. Difference suggests that someone has a differing opinion from yours. And, different can be good. We live in a pluralistic society. We depend on difference to govern our nation and to thrive. But, when difference becomes suspicion, we are in trouble. When we start to view ourselves and others as embodiments of our opinions, we cease to see each other as persons, and instead view each other as objects. Rather than individuals or families with opinions, we now use words such as “intersectionality” and “identity politics”. Terms that signify that a person’s identity depends upon circumstances, opinions or accidental characteristics.

In reality, our primary identity is sons and daughters of God. We are all members of the same family.

We are all loved into existence by the same Father and each one of us is unique and unrepeatable and given a mission and purpose all his or her own.

It is this difference, rooted in an eternal family connection, that creates the beautiful spectrum of human life and achievement.

Polarization may be plaguing our nation and our world, but it doesn’t need to be the defining position of our generation. As politics get further and further apart, there is a very real and powerful movement to pull people together and create opportunities for authentic dialogue.

For this to succeed, it must be based on the truth about the human person and the universe. There must be an understanding that we are created by God and for God. Through this lens, wonderful discussions can take place with people of differing opinions. Conversations rooted in mutual respect and admiration.

When efforts to unite take place in merely human terms, without understanding the fullness of the human person, body and soul, much is missing. Focusing only in physical terms means people grasp for points of intersection and lose their eternal meaning in favor of political expediency. Instead of being treated as whole persons with a God-given purpose, people can become pawns for political parties, the economy, or different ideologies.



“I think we too are the people who, on the one hand, want to listen to Jesus, but on the other hand, at times, like to find a stick to beat others with, to condemn others. And Jesus has this message for us: mercy. I think — and I say it with humility — that this is the Lord's most powerful message: Mercy.”

Pope Francis— Homily on March 17, 2013

WHAT IS TRULY NEEDED IS A MERCY REVOLUTION.

Mercy sees people, in all their reality, most importantly in light of their created uniqueness. Mercy understands that we are not always what we hope to be, but that we are called to be more and working to get there. Mercy requires that we slow down, set aside swift judgment, recognize our own failings, appreciate the other person, and work together to create a better world.

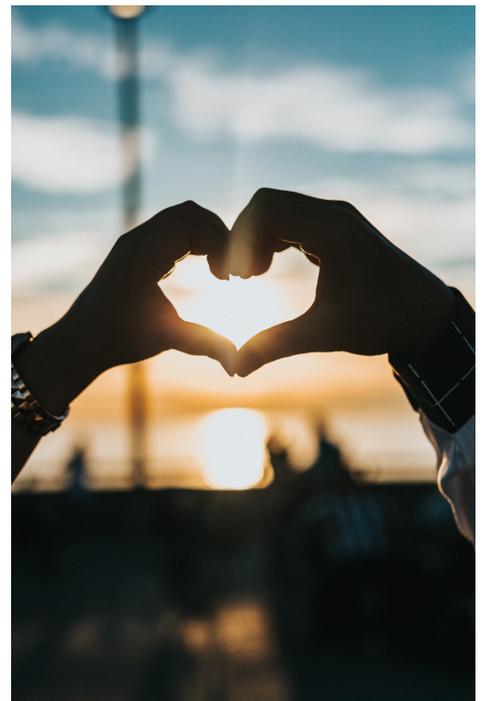
The Church has traditionally talked about doing “works of mercy”, or good works that help those in need. There are “corporal works of mercy”—good deeds that help people in their bodies, such as feeding the hungry and visiting the sick.

You probably perform corporal works of mercy all the time, though you might not realize it. Anytime you visit a sick or elderly relative, give clothing to the poor, buy breakfast for a person on the street, or pray for someone at a funeral, you could be doing a corporal work of mercy.

Why “could be”? The difference lies in intentionality. If your school is visiting a nursing home at Christmas and you are forced to go but attend with a hateful spirit, hands in pockets, refusing to participate, you are not performing a work of mercy. You are, in fact, wasting your time.

On the other hand, if you make the best of the situation and joyfully visit the aging patients, intentionally bringing them cheer because they, like you, are children of God, two things happen: God adds grace to your good works so that your bright smile and cheerful singing produce far greater results than your own talents could; and, God sends grace your way to make your heart happier and yourself more likely to remain on the path to heaven. Win, win!

Then there are the “spiritual works of mercy”. These are good deeds that help people in their souls —help them stay close to Jesus and away from what can do them harm. One example is “admonishing sinners”.



This is a difficult one. It means that, in the name of mercy, we are sometimes called upon to tell people when they are doing something sinful and to encourage them to change.

Can you think of a time when that might be necessary? What about if you have a friend who you know is abusing alcohol or drugs? You could just pretend you don't know, or even join in, but a true friend would want what is best for the other person. And, using drugs or drinking excessively is never in your friend's best interest.

"Admonishing sinners" requires that we try to help our friend make a better choice. But, there is a difference in the way we do it. This spiritual work of mercy is nothing like "shaming". There is no social media involved here. No shared photos of drunken dancing or tweets sharing someone's personal humiliation. All that does is spread distrust and hate. Works of mercy require a personal approach respecting the dignity of the person and wanting what is best for them. Even if that means telling a parent or other adult about their behavior.



The news of the world today are not always very good. Violence has become a part of the daily landscape. We are facing crises of mass killings, refugees, abortion, homelessness, overcrowded foster care, human trafficking, and pornography. It can be overwhelming.

How are we to respond in the face of so much tragedy? Our lives seem so far removed from what we see around the world that we can become desensitized. Rather than try to forget or block these issues, we can choose to do something positive to bring mercy to the world right where we are. Through your phone, you have access to a limitless amount of information and entertainment. How often do you approach what you do and say online in a spirit of prayer?

Words and actions online have real-life consequences. How often have you or someone you know said something online that would never have been said face to face? Social media provides a shield to hide behind. And, sometimes it makes us kinder—when we see something online that lets us know our friend needs a kind word or some extra help. But, often it inspires a mean-spiritedness that we might not have if we were looking someone in the eye while we made the same comments.

FIRST, learn about mercy. God's gift of mercy is powerful. It can overcome any resentment, hatred, or pain. If there is something in your life that you have not forgiven, or that has not been forgiven of you, talk to God about it. Make going to confession a priority.

SECOND, commit to being an agent of mercy in your circle of friends. Whether in-person or online, think (and pray!) before speaking so that your words and actions can bring out the best in you and others, not tearing them down or leading them to sin. Before you post pictures, think whether it puts others in a good light or makes them look bad so you look good. Also, reconsider posting photos of yourself that might make other people have sinful thoughts. Use the power of social media to inspire others to be merciful. How? By posting the volunteer work you are doing or by sharing a phrase that can impact other people's lives.

THIRD, go out in the world spreading mercy. Look to the list of corporal and spiritual works of mercy to see what you can do. You may have the opportunity to make a new friend in a way you never would have imagined. Go beyond the required number of service hours at your school or church and realize that, when you begin to open your heart to helping others, simply because they are fellow children of God, both their and your lives will change for the better.

FINALLY, ask God to share his mercy with you often. The best way to do this is by receiving the sacrament of Confession whenever you can. The world is a tough place, and we often put unrealistic expectations on ourselves or others. Mercy allows us to find peace in our lives and realize that our best is enough because God will add his grace to it and make something beautiful!

When we practice the works of mercy, graces are provided to the person who is doing them. Jesus said 'give and you will receive'. When practicing the works of mercy, we are following the will of God. We are giving something from ourselves to others and our Lord will provide what we need.

When doing works of mercy, we are progressing on our way to heaven. We are becoming more like Jesus, who is our model. He taught us how to treat others.

Christ's words were:

"Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moth and woodworm destroy them and thieves can break and steal; but store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where neither moth nor woodworm destroys them and thieves cannot break and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be too." (Mt 6, 19 - 21)

When we follow this teaching of the Lord, we exchange temporal goods for eternal ones, which are the ones that are really worthwhile.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why is Mercy so important for our world right now? Why is it important for you? What in your life is in need of mercy?
- Mercy is God's love for us that forgives and allows us to begin anew. Mercy is a wonderful thing, but it is based on the reality that we sin against God every day. How can you work to make yourself more receptive to mercy while also letting go of sin?
- What is a "work of mercy"? How is it different from just doing a nice thing for someone? What works of mercy have you done?
- What is the difference between spiritual and corporal works of mercy?
- Social media is one area of life that definitely needs a mercy make-over. What is another area of life in need of mercy? What can you do to be an agent of mercy in that situation?

For resources and ways to volunteer, visit us at
archla.org/respectlifemonth



ARCHDIOCESE OF LOS ANGELES
OFFICE OF LIFE, JUSTICE, AND PEACE