

YEAR OF MERCY STAFF REFLECTION 3

“A MESSY BUSINESS”

Inspired by Dorothy Day, “The Scandal of the Works of Mercy” from *By Little and By Little: the Selected Works of Dorothy Day*, edited by Robert Ellsberg. Knopf, New York. 2005.

We know that we constantly err through lack of charity and prayer, but with confidence in God we can start each morning anew with the words of the Psalmist, “Now I have begun.” So pray for us that we have the love and joy in service that go with all beginnings.

Dorothy Day (1897-1980)

We ‘get the picture’ of Christian mercy as we see it lived out by a witness, a person who truly embodies the Gospel. Dorothy Day was a witness in the twentieth century. On his trip to the USA, Pope Francis singled out Dorothy as one of four historically meaningful Americans who dedicated their lives to service. Her social activism, her passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed, ‘were inspired by the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints.’

Dorothy Day stood for the centrality of the **corporal and spiritual works of mercy** in our lives. Scripture tells us that mercy is the condition of salvation. Matthew 25:31-46 enumerates six of these **corporal works**: feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; welcome the stranger; clothe the naked; visit the sick; visit the imprisoned. Dorothy also emphasized the **spiritual works**: to instruct the ignorant; to counsel the doubtful; to admonish sinners; to bear wrongs patiently; to forgive offences willingly; to comfort the afflicted; to pray for the living and the dead.

Unlike some who reduce Christianity to a philosophy, Dorothy Day knew that Christianity was an embodied set of practices: things that we DO for others.

It is through the practice of these spiritual and corporal works of mercy that we concretely practice our Christian faith. As Catholics, we cling to these as beacons for living the Christian lifestyle. Through them, we show our willingness to enter into the chaos of another. Perhaps more than anything else, that’s what uniquely defines us as Catholics: it’s our legacy. Living according to the works of mercy can be ‘a messy business’.

Being ensnared in ‘mess’ may lead us to empathise with others. Dorothy, in reflecting on her imprisonment – a frequent occurrence – discerned the evil of the ‘sense of futility.’

One of the greatest evils of the day is the sense of futility. Young people say, “What can one person do? What is the sense of our small effort?” They cannot see that we can only lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time; we can be responsible only for the one action of the present moment. But we can beg for an increase of love in our hearts that will vitalize and transform these actions, and know that God will take them and multiply them, as Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes.

What brick will I lay today?

What path will my school continue to build with each brick?



THIS IS THE NAME OF OUR GOD

-POPE FRANCIS

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“Christ of the Breadline”: Fritz Eichenberg. 1950.

Everything a baptized person does every day should be directly or indirectly related to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

Dorothy Day (1897-1980)



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