



The eight works of mercy

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‘In today’s world, hunger, violence and poverty cannot be understood apart from the changes and degradation affecting the environment.’ Pope Francis’ recognition of this led him to introduce an eighth work of mercy in 2016: ‘care for our common home’. Anna Rowlands and Robert Czerny survey the long and living tradition in which this new work of mercy stands.

In his message for the 2016 World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, *Show Mercy to our Common Home*, Pope Francis surprised many by introducing an eighth work of mercy: ‘care for our common home’. This new work of mercy would be both corporal and spiritual.

‘Nothing unites us to God more than an act of mercy, for it is by mercy that the Lord forgives our sins and gives us the grace to practise acts of mercy in his name.’

To paraphrase Saint James, ‘we can say that mercy without works is dead ... In our rapidly changing and increasingly globalized world, many new forms of poverty are appearing. In response to them, we need to be creative in developing new and practical forms of charitable outreach as concrete expressions of the way of mercy.’

The Christian life involves the practice of the traditional seven corporal and seven spiritual works of mercy. ‘We usually think of the works of mercy individually and in relation to a specific initiative: hospitals for the sick, soup kitchens for the hungry, shelters for the homeless, schools for those to be educated, the confessional and spiritual direction for those needing counsel and forgiveness... But if we look at the works of mercy as a whole, we see that the object of mercy is human life itself and everything it embraces.’

Obviously ‘human life itself and everything it embraces’ includes care for our common home. So let me propose a complement to the two traditional sets of seven: may the works of mercy also include care for our common home.



As a spiritual work of mercy, care for our common home calls for a ‘grateful contemplation of God’s world’ which ‘allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us’. As a corporal work of mercy, care for our common home requires ‘simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness’ and ‘makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world’.¹

The traditional works are an exercise of *miser cordia* in the Latin sense of the term – to take to heart (*cor*) someone else’s suffering (*miseria*) – and gave rise to a tradition evolving throughout the history of the Church. When we attend to specific needs, as the traditional works of mercy urge us to do, we should also work to change the conditions of the social and natural world that can lead to various forms of misery such as hunger, thirst, doubt and ignorance.

The opening of *Gaudium et spes*, the key document of Vatican II about the Church in the modern world, mentions the heart – *cor, corde* – and thus points to *miser cordia*:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties [*gaudium et spes, luctus et angor*] of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts [*quod in corde eorum non resonet*].²

Francis reminds us that *misericordia* is the essence of God's loving relationship with humanity and, by practising mercy, we cooperate with the mercy of God for us. Nothing unites us to God more than an act of mercy. In his mercy, God forgives us and through this mercy, we are given the grace to perform acts of mercy ourselves. Having received God's mercy, we must not act like the ungrateful servant who is cruel to others after being treated mercifully by his master (Matthew 18); rather, 'we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us'.³

Pope Francis characterises God's mercy as loving, surprising, tender and always already offered: 'All his life, Bergoglio has insisted on this quality of God who takes the initiative, who comes out to find us, and surprises us with his forgiveness... God beats you to it.'⁴ Jesus showed this in his story of the Prodigal Son. The father runs out to embrace his errant younger son; he does not wait for the son to reach home and ask for forgiveness.

Although we have come, rightly, to identify mercy with very specific concrete acts such as feeding the hungry and housing the homeless, the ultimate and full object of mercy is human life itself and all it embraces. And as *Laudato Si'* spells out with great force, the boundaries of 'all' must be widened to include the Earth and all life in 'our common home'.

In *Misericordiae Vultus*, the papal bull in which Pope Francis established the Jubilee Year of Mercy, he repeats the guidance of Pope Saint John XXIII at the opening of the Second Vatican Council 50 years earlier: 'Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity... The Catholic Church, as she holds high the torch of Catholic truth at this Ecumenical Council, wants to show herself a loving mother to all; patient, kind, moved by compassion and goodness toward her separated children'.⁵

The introduction of a new work of mercy reflects the perspective of *Laudato Si'* that stresses the interconnection of all humans not only with each other but with all of Creation, too. There is a complex interdependence between humans, other creatures and the natural world, so nature must be part of the scope of our practices of mercy. In today's world, hunger, violence and poverty cannot be understood apart from the changes and degradation affecting the environment.

In what follows, after having reviewed the tradition of the works of mercy, we seek to understand why 'care for our common home' is now to be found among them.

A living tradition

The decision of Pope Francis is not a complete novelty. Already in the past, the list of works of mercy has been changed or amplified. For centuries, the Church has taught that there are fourteen works of mercy: seven corporal and seven spiritual.

In *Misericordiae Vultus*, Pope Francis wrote:

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.⁶

On 1 September 2016, Pope Francis added 'care for our common home' as an eighth item to both of these lists.

The Gospel starting-point is in Matthew, chapter 25: on the Day of Judgment, those who had fed and clothed Jesus on earth by helping people in need will be saved. Here, the 'works' are only six. With this evangelical point of departure, many theologians have laid out different lists, among them Origen (3rd century), St Augustine (4th century) and St Thomas Aquinas (13th century). It was the medieval French theologian, Peter Comestor (died 1178) who added, 'To bury the dead', based on the Book of Tobit. In parallel, lists of spiritual works were developed too.

You are all looking forward to greeting Christ seated in heaven. Attend to him lying under the arches, attend to him hungry, attend to him shivering with cold, attend to him needy, attend to him in the foreigner.⁷

In Latin, *miser cordia* means more than the English ‘mercy’ or the French ‘*pitié*’. ‘Mercy’ tends to refer to generous acts of forgiveness, pardon or assistance. It is essentially a one-way relationship that does not require a positive attitude on the part of the one who gives towards the one in need.

By contrast, the Latin term *miser cordia* means carrying those who suffer (*miseri*) in one’s heart (*cor*). So the tradition of the works of mercy is not limited to establishing a list of concrete actions, but includes the attitude with which they are carried out and the relationships which they engender. Love is so much more than links between benefactor and beneficiary, as we learn from family life and from the boundless and constant care that binds spouses, parents and children, brothers and sisters together. Love is always at work, in good times and in bad.

Mercy is so important because it is, above all, the experience we have of God. In response to that mercy, we become imitators of the God in whose image we are made.⁸

There is an element of agency in the link between our loving gestures and the experience of a God who cares for us. We do not initiate mercy so much as cooperate with the presence of mercy at work in our lives. If we admit our own wretchedness – as did the Prodigal Son – then we can receive God’s mercy. In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus shows us this mutuality or reciprocity: ‘Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.’ We can exercise the works of mercy, including the forgiving of offences, if we recognise our own limitations and humbly accept God’s forgiveness.

We have a responsibility to imitate God, to follow his lead in forgiving. Forgiveness is a social necessity if society is not to be paralyzed by an accumulation of grievances of one against another.⁹

On the basis of this experience which deeply nourishes us, we can participate in the common good with works that counter evil, sin, limits and finitude.

We respond in many ways to suffering, privation and confusion, to distress, chaos and disorder, to the different forms of misery and wretchedness both on an individual and on a social level. Through ‘simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness’,¹⁰ we contribute to order, meaning and justice and to healing the chaos present in the world.

These gestures can turn into a culture and lifestyle. If we truly will what is good, we go beyond discrete actions – a helping hand here, a consoling word there. We develop an effective habit of virtue. In this sense, the works of mercy create a bridge: between the needs of whoever is in difficulty, and the path of human and spiritual growth of the person or group who carry them out. They are deeply practical ways in which we work on the formation of our desires. Pope Francis reminds us that mercy has a fully and integrally spiritual dimension. Fully practised, *miser cordia* is our transformation and continual conversion through prayerful action.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s sermon on Lazarus and the rich man challenges us to see the ways in which Christian teaching on treating the material conditions of the world is not a moralising discourse (as sometimes feared) but rather an absolutely serious and central commitment commanded and enacted by Christ:

Why did Christ heal the sick and suffering if he didn’t consider such external conditions important? Why is the kingdom of God equated with the deaf hear, the blind see?... And where do we get the incredible presumption to spiritualise these things that Christ saw and did very concretely? Jesus calls the poor blessed, but he does heal them, too, already here. Yes, the kingdom of God is at hand, for the blind see and the lame walk. He takes suffering so seriously that in a moment he must destroy it. ... [As] he says to his disciples: If you believe in me, you will do greater works than I. The kingdom of God is still just beginning to appear. The acts of healing are like heat lightning, like flashes of lightning from the new world.

Putting *miser cordia* into practice – merciful outreach to the less fortunate – was a central theme for Pope Francis as a bishop and has continued since his first days as pope. Francis has compared the Church to ‘a field-hospital after battle,’ healing wounds before all

else; she is a ‘mother and shepherdess’ and a channel of mercy, who ‘must accompany people and heal their wounds’¹¹ – the wounds of hunger, nakedness, despair...

Care for our Common Home

Pope Francis has brought fresh articulation and urgency to a theme that already occupied previous popes. Reflections on the environment and ecological matters are to be found in Pope Paul VI’s *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971): ‘Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace – pollution and refuse, new illness and absolute destructive capacity – but the human framework is no longer under man’s control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable.’¹²

Pope St John Paul II continued by linking mercy to environmental concerns. Due to the enormous and rapid development of science and technology, he wrote, humanity ‘has become the master of the earth and has subdued and dominated it. This dominion over the earth, sometimes understood in a one-sided superficial way, seems to leave no room for mercy.’¹³ To resist environmental devastation, he called for ‘ecological conversion’, that is, ‘a human ecology, capable of protecting the radical good of life in all its manifestations and of leaving behind for future generations an environment which conforms as closely as possible to the Creator’s plan.’¹⁴ In *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI pointed out the failures of the dominant economic models and proposed that we turn towards an economy of gift and a vision of love rather than simply justice as the basis of the social order. In common with his predecessor, in his 2010 message, ‘If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation’, he argued that we must see the relationship between connection with God and connection with creation if we are to work for global security.

In 2002, John Paul II and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew issued a Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics in which they stated the need to appreciate the divine plan for creation and to recognise that a change in lifestyle and consumption would happen only with ‘an inner change of heart’. Earlier, in 1997, the Ecumenical Patriarch asserted that ‘to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God.’

In their 2017 Joint Message on the World Day of Prayer for Creation, Patriarch Bartholomew joined Pope Francis in elaborating on this sin:

Our propensity to interrupt the world’s delicate and balanced ecosystems, our insatiable desire to manipulate and control the planet’s limited resources, and our greed for limitless profit in markets – all these have alienated us from the original purpose of creation... The human environment and the natural environment are deteriorating together, and this deterioration of the planet weighs upon the most vulnerable of its people. The impact of climate change affects, first and foremost, those who live in poverty in every corner of the globe. Our obligation to use the earth’s goods responsibly implies the recognition of and respect for all people and all living creatures. The urgent call and challenge to care for creation are an invitation for all of humanity to work towards sustainable and integral development.¹⁵

Pope Francis brings his own unique emphasis to this teaching. He proposes an ‘integral ecology’ that everywhere affirms the deep connections between all parts of the created order. Understanding that the mistreatment of nature is also a mistreatment of human beings, Francis challenges us to hear ‘both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’.¹⁶ Taking care of our common home includes innumerable actions that reduce environmental degradation, from small ones such as being careful about wasting water and energy, to great efforts like devising industrial policies and international agreements that take the evidence for climate change on board.

‘Care for our common home’ opens our eyes to the beauty of the Earth in all of its aspects. How can we allow our common home to become unliveable for animals and plants as well as humans? All these things:

... have value in themselves. Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost forever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.¹⁷

This passage of *Laudato Si'*, published in June 2015, links human activity to contemplation of creation, and so foreshadows the pope's September 2016 announcement of the eighth work of mercy in its two forms. As a spiritual work of mercy, care for our common home calls for a 'grateful contemplation of God's world' which 'allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us'. As a corporal work of mercy, care for our common home requires 'simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness' and 'makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world'.¹⁸

Combining care for our common home with the ancient tradition of the works of mercy, Pope Francis leads us beyond our customary modes of thinking, which finds it odd to think of being merciful to a lake or a grove of trees. To *care* takes us beyond the relationship of good stewardship. A steward does not have to love. But a parent loves and cares for a child, even to the point of sacrificing everything. A home is not simply a useful thing: we cling to the home where we are nurtured, kept safe, and learn our distinct cultural identity. Our earthly home cares for us; with Francis of Assisi and like so many Indigenous peoples, Pope Francis recognises that God sustains and governs us through our Sister, Mother Earth.

Misericordia engages us with the hungry when giving them something to eat is not only an external gesture, but responds to an impulse of the heart. And it is also the link which connects us to the generous earth when we truly *care* for our common home. 'Care' is heartfelt like *misericordia*, and 'home' is the inseparable vessel of our journey towards human plenitude. As integral ecology indicates, 'care for our common home' is the constant commitment to safeguard and perfect God's gift of creation.

Education in environmental responsibility can encourage ways of acting which directly and significantly affect the world around us, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices. All of these reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings. Reusing something instead of

immediately discarding it, when done for the right reasons, can be an act of love which expresses our own dignity.¹⁹

This adds a global dimension to the traditional works of mercy, which invite us to pay attention to the needs of individuals: to feed this hungry person, to console that grieving person. The integral ecological perspective of *Laudato Si'* goes beyond individuals. The eighth work of mercy raises the issue of global conditions and of integration. I may be a business owner and philanthropist who donates a lot of money but I ignore God's call to *misericordia* if my company pays workers too little to live on with dignity. Even if I support day centres and shelters for the homeless, I am ignoring God's call if my factory is contributing to the destruction of liveable habitats.

The effects of such destruction are too obvious to be ignored. For example, there are more refugees in Borno state in northeastern Nigeria than in all of Europe. This immense human displacement demonstrates the connections between climate change, violence and poverty. Dramatically shrinking water supplies have fed unemployment and inequality, which lead in turn to the disaffection that has driven many young men into the embrace of Boko Haram terror. Yet local communities, themselves struggling for livelihoods, have provided shelter and support to those who are displaced. Here we see the message of *Laudato Si'* played out: for good and for ill, everything is connected.

The eighth work of mercy completes and illuminates our compassion for the one in need when we practise any other work of mercy. And along with *Laudato Si'*, it reminds us that we cannot understand an individual human being in isolation from the social and natural world. When we give drink to the thirsty, the eighth work of mercy goes along with it: 'caring for our common home' means looking beyond the immediate needs; it also means considering the societal and environmental conditions needed to ensure that water is clean and available not only for the thirsty here and now, but also for future generations. This applies to the spiritual works of mercy no less than the corporal works. 'Care for our common home' will urge us to understand and change the societal and environmental conditions that, for example, keep people in ignorance or impel them to injure others.

The Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et misera* proclaims that God calls us:

... to promote a culture of mercy based on the rediscovery of encounter with others, a culture in which no one looks at another with indifference or turns away from the suffering of our brothers and sisters. *The works of mercy are 'handcrafted'*, in the sense that none of them is alike. Our hands can craft them in a thousand different ways, and even though the one God inspires them, and they are all fashioned from the same 'material', mercy itself, each one takes on a different form.²⁰

As living Church, what we do in carrying out all the works of mercy continues to handcraft them and to shape their meaning.

'When I was hungry,' said Jesus, 'you gave me to eat' (Matthew 25). To these words Pope Francis wants us to add, '...and you tried to improve conditions within our common home so that all might be fed.' This is the new integral viewpoint of the eighth work of mercy.

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¹ Pope Francis, *Show Mercy to Our Common Home* (2016), §5: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160901_messaggio-giornata-cura-creato.html.

² Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes* (1965), §1 http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

³ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus* (2016) §9: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html.

⁴ Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer* (Picador, 2014), pp. 12-13.

⁵ *Misericordiae Vultus*, §4 (quoting *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, Opening Address of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, 11 October 1962, §2-3).

⁶ *Misericordiae Vultus*, §15.

⁷ St Augustine, Sermon 25:8.

⁸ James F. Keenan SJ, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

⁹ *Jerome Biblical Commentary*.

¹⁰ *Laudato Si'* §230.

¹¹ Ivereigh 169.

¹² Pope Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), §21.

¹³ Pope St John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* (1980) §2 with reference to Gn 1:28.

¹⁴ *Pastores gregis* (2003) §70.

¹⁵ Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Joint Message for the World Day of Prayer for Creation* (2017): https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170901_messaggio-giornata-cura-creato.html.

¹⁶ *Laudato Si'*, §49.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, §33.

¹⁸ With references to *LS* §214, §85, §230-31.

¹⁹ *Laudato Si'*, §211.

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Misericordia et misera* (2016), §20: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20161120_misericordia-et-misera.html.