

Here's something I'll bet you haven't seen in a while: *The Baltimore Catechism*. Raise your hand if you learned about the Catholic Church from this book! Look at those old people! Who can give me the answer to question #191, anybody? You know, you were supposed to memorize the number with the question. "Which are the chief corporal works of mercy?" I was studying from this book back in the year JFK was shot. It's the only book in history that raised more questions than the assassination. Every Catholic who knows the seven corporal works of mercy and the seven spiritual works of mercy knows they were harder to memorize than they are to do.

If you paid attention to today's Gospel you know six of them: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to visit the imprisoned, to shelter the homeless, and to visit the sick. Even Jesus couldn't remember all seven. Actually, to bury the dead was added later, together with the seven spiritual works of mercy: to admonish the sinner, to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the sorrowful, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive all injuries, and to pray for the living and the dead. That answers question #192.

You may ask, is everyone obliged to perform works of mercy? You may ask because that's question #193, but also because it's the subject of today's Gospel. Jesus saves up this story for the end. We get all through the beatitudes, all through the parables, the miracles, those arguments with the scribes and pharisees, through the call to discipleship, and he's got us hooked. We say, "Yes, I believe in you, Jesus, I support you, and you go right up to Calvary now, and we'll be so proud to tell our children that we were there for the big one; we'll switch off the home shopping channel and watch it live on CNN. For the rest of our lives we'll remember exactly where we were and what we were doing when we heard the news of your death." Then Jesus says, "Before I go to Calvary there's just one last story I've been meaning to tell you." Then we learn that Christianity is not about watching, nor just about believing. It's about doing. (Ask not what your Jesus can do for you.) Are we obliged to works of mercy? You bet your St. Christopher medal we are.

The good news is you probably do them more than you know. When you bring canned goods to church, when you hold a child up to the drinking fountain, when you shine someone's shoes, when you go to nursing homes, when you babysit, when you visit the hospital, when you visit the cemetery, you do it to Christ. Sure we've missed opportunities, but we'll be surprised as sheep at how much we've done. Parents will precede priests to paradise.

What makes me think that ordinary deeds done every day are true works of mercy? I learned it from question #194: "All the ordinary deeds done every day to relieve the corporal or spiritual needs of others are true works of mercy, if done in the name of Christ." But I also learned it from Jesus, who says, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." You did it for Jesus.