



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

The risk of giving mercy

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In giving safe haven to persecuted Jews during the second World War, Pius xii offered an example of how to perform acts of mercy: through sharing, feeling compassion for another person's suffering, taking personal risks, without fear of derision or misunderstandings. At Mass at Santa Marta on Monday, 5 June, Pope Francis held up his predecessor as a courageous model of mercy for Christians to follow. He also urged the faithful to examine their conscience and to rediscover and to put into practice "the 14 corporal and spiritual works of mercy".

For his reflection, Francis began with the day's first reading, taken from the Book of Tobit (1:3; 2:1-8). It presents "an entire story, but today it speaks to us about what Tobit was like — Tobit, Tobias' father — what his life of faith was like: a man of belief". Perhaps "it may seem at first that he boasts a bit", the Pope noted, "but no, it is not so".

Simply put, "it is a story with some bad moments and at the end there is a message". And "today this passage speaks to us of Tobit's testimony, that merciful witness". Tobit, Francis continued, "performs works of mercy". The text in fact, reads: "I, Tobit, walked in the ways of truth and righteousness all the days of my life, and I performed many acts of charity to my brethren and countrymen who went with me into the land of Assyria, to Nineveh" — because he had been a

prisoner, a slave in Nineveh, the Pope noted.

In short, Tobit was “a wealthy man, but he was generous”, the Pontiff said. “During the feast of Pentecost he had a good dinner prepared, and before sitting down at the table he told his son to go out and look for a poor Jewish brother and to invite him to dinner; he performed a work of mercy”. And then, the Pope continued, “the son came — he was happy; it was a day of celebration — and said that they had killed a Jewish brother”. Immediately Tobit “got up, left the dinner intact, then went to the square, removed the man from the square and carried him to a room, waiting for sunset to bury him”. And in the end, the passage reads: “When I returned I washed myself”, Tobit says, “and ate my food in sorrow”.

Tobit has therefore put into practice “a work of mercy, one of the 14 corporal and spiritual works of mercy”, Francis explained. And “in the list of the works of mercy that the Church gives us, this is the last one: praying to God for the living and the dead, and therefore also to bury the dead”. For this very reason, the Pope observed, “I would like to speak today about the works of mercy”.

“A work of mercy”, he explained, “means not only sharing what I have”. Of course, “this is very important, and Tobit shared his money, because he was rich and gave alms”. But “he also shared friendship: he invited the poor to dinner”. Therefore, the Pontiff cautioned, it is not enough simply “to share, but to feel compassion, that is: to suffer with those who suffer”.

Moreover, he pointed out, “a work of mercy is not something to alleviate the conscience: a good work so I am more at ease, I take a load off my back. No!”. Performing a work of mercy also means “feeling the pain of others”, because “sharing and compassion go together”. Therefore, “merciful is he who knows how to share and also to feel compassion for other people’s problems”.

And here, Francis suggested a series of questions for an examination of conscience: “Do I know how to share? Am I generous? When I see a person who is suffering, who is in trouble, do I also suffer? Do I know how to put myself in the shoes of others, in situations of suffering?”. The words of Tobit are eloquent: “I ate with sorrow”. They accurately express the idea of “sharing and feeling compassion. This is the first characteristic, the first way, the first consequence of a work of mercy: I share, I feel compassion”.

“But then there is another thing”, the Pope stressed. In fact, he emphasized that “performing works of mercy sometimes means taking risks”. To illustrate his point, the Pope again turned to the day’s reading from the Book of Tobit. “My neighbors laughed at me and said, ‘He is no longer afraid that he will be put to death for doing this; he once ran away, and here he is burying the dead again!’”.

Thus, Francis noted, “one often takes risks” in order to perform a work of mercy . “Let us think about Rome in the midst of war: about those who took risks, beginning with Pius xii, to hide Jews, so that they were not killed, so that they would not be deported. They risked their lives! But it was

a work of mercy, to save those people's lives!". That is why one must also "take risks".

In this reflection on what it takes to perform authentic works of mercy, the Pontiff also indicated the possibility that "at times", a well-intentioned person may end up "becoming an object of mockery". This is the case with Tobit, who states: "my neighbors laughed at me". Perhaps they called him "crazy" and looked at him askew for continuing to do these gestures for others, despite being "persecuted". As if to say that Tobit "does not know how to live well...".

But Tobit's story, the Pope affirmed, indicates for us the "three characteristics", the "three features of the works of mercy": sharing and feeling compassion for others, taking risks and being prepared to face derision. Tobit, continued the Pope, "is not like the rich man clothed in purple whom Jesus speaks about in the Gospel, who feasted and ignored poor Lazarus who was starving at the door of his palace; he knew he was there, but ignored him". Tobit, on the other hand, knows how "to share and feel compassion". And he also is willing "to take risks: one always takes risks and, as I have said, at times the risks are ugly". Moreover, we must "know that if we perform works of mercy, someone might say, 'this man is crazy, this woman is crazy: instead of being calm, comfortable at home, he or she goes to the hospital, goes here, goes there...'".

"Works of mercy", said the Pontiff, "are the way to find mercy". He explained: "In the Beatitudes, Jesus says, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy'". Moreover, the Pope added, he "who is capable of performing a work of mercy does so because he knows that he has received mercy before: it was the Lord who had mercy on him". And "if we do these things, it is because the Lord has had pity on us: let us think about our sins, our mistakes, and how the Lord has forgiven us, has forgiven us for everything; he has had this mercy". Therefore, the Pope recommended, "let us at least do the same for our brothers and sisters". This is the essence of "the works of mercy".

"I would like to add another thing", Francis continued, "that is not explicit but implicit in the passage we have read: works of mercy, performing works of mercy, is inconvenient". One might think, "I have a sick friend, I would like to visit him or her, but I am not in the mood; I prefer to rest, or watch tv, in peace...". Because "performing works of mercy means always being subjected to inconvenience". This sort of work "is discomforting, but the Lord suffered discomfort for us: he went to the cross, to give us mercy".

In conclusion, the Pontiff called for reflection "today on the works of mercy". And above all, he suggested, "let us remember them: there are 14, seven corporal and seven spiritual" works of mercy. And with a smile, he reassured those in the chapel at Santa Marta: "I will not ask here: 'Who knows what the works of mercy are, raise your hand'; I won't ask it, because I'm afraid only a few hands would be raised". But the Pope recommended that the faithful not miss the opportunity to find ways to perform the works of mercy: of course, by remembering "what they are", but also by asking themselves, "'Do I do this? Do I know how to share, do I know how to feel compassion? Do I take risks? Do I accept inconvenience in order to perform a work of mercy?'".

This is an important matter, the Pope added, because “the works of mercy are what rid us of selfishness and lead us to imitate Jesus more closely”. And it does not matter if “someone might make fun of us and say, ‘this person is crazy, the things he does instead of being comfortable...’”. It is not important, said Francis, “let it go”. But “today let us take some time — it will be good for us all — to think about the works of mercy and to ask ourselves: Do I do this?”.