

Be Not Afraid

Bishop John M. LeVoir's Monthly Column

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Mercy – Our Mission

The time has come for the Church to take up the joyful call to mercy once more. – Pope Francis

We are in the midst of an extraordinary jubilee, the Holy Year of Mercy, declared by Pope Francis. This Holy Year commenced on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception last December and will conclude on the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, this November.

As you may know, the theme of the Holy Year is: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36).

Mercy brings good out of evil; the ultimate manifestation of this is Jesus Christ bringing eternal salvation through his Death on the Cross.

Mercy is lived out every day in ways big and small throughout the Diocese of New Ulm, often through the parishes that provide for community in Christ. Together, we are striving to respond to Christ’s call to be a light shining in the darkness of sin and tragedy in our world. During this special Year of Mercy, we are asked to reflect on how we can renew our commitment to this call.

As I celebrated Mass to begin our diocesan Day of Mercy on Divine Mercy Sunday, the Sunday after the celebration of our Lord’s Resurrection on Easter, there was much to reflect upon.

I pondered with gratitude God’s eternal mercy.

The Easter season reminds us of the joy we have in God’s merciful love. We rejoice in Jesus Christ’s Resurrection: the eternal triumph over death. We rejoice that we can share in Christ’s triumph, through faith and participation in the sacraments, thanks to God’s eternal mercy. Our God “delights in mercy” (Mi 7:18).

At the beginning of Lent, Pope Francis commissioned Missionaries of Mercy to go out into Catholic communities throughout the world during this Year of Mercy. One of these priests is Fr. John Ubel, rector of the Cathedral of St. Paul in St. Paul. Fr. Ubel joined people from across the diocese on Divine Mercy Sunday, proclaiming God’s love and witnessing to God’s mercy through the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which is a very tangible sign of God’s mercy.

I reflected on how we are all called in this Holy Year of Mercy to go out and witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

We live out the call to be people of mercy through the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. By living the works of mercy, we follow Jesus Christ’s example and bring good out of evil. The corporal works of mercy are found in the Gospel and provide a model for how we should treat all of our brothers and sisters. Jesus Christ reminds us: What we do for others, we do for him (Mt 25:35-41).

People from across the diocese participated in a corporal work of mercy on Divine Mercy Sunday at the Cathedral. Young and old alike worked side by side to package thousands of meals for our brothers and sisters in need in the African nation of Burkina Faso through Catholic Relief Services' Helping Hands project. If you missed the chance to participate on April 3, you can still help online at www.helpinghands.crs.org.

The food packaging project was a living example of the first of the seven corporal works of mercy. Below, I've highlighted some other examples of our living out Christ's call to mercy:

Feed the hungry

There are many people here in our community and around the world who don't have access to nutritious food. Donate to a food shelf that your parish helps support or give to other organizations that serve the hungry. Your donations make a big difference. One example: The March food drive at the Church of St. Mary in New Ulm alone brought in 583 pounds of food and \$1,200 in cash donations for the local food shelf.

Give drink to the thirsty

In many parts of the world, people suffer because they do not have clean water. You can support efforts to help more people access this essential resource by donating to Catholic Relief Services, which has helped more than 2 million people, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, gain access to clean water.

Shelter the homeless

Here in our community and throughout the world, there are so many people without a permanent home. Many of them are children. In the Diocese of New Ulm, Catholic Charities works with other religious and community organizations to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness. We are currently working to establish a shelter for homeless families with children in Brown County. Contact Paulette Kral at Catholic Charities for the Diocese of New Ulm at 866-670-5163, e-mail pkral@dnu.org to find out how you can help.

Give alms to the poor

Catholic Charities serves our neighbors in need, through counseling, emergency assistance, and response services following a tragedy or natural disaster. Many parishes collect clothing and other supplies for those in need and they welcome your contributions. The people of the diocese also extend a helping hand to the millions displaced around the world through war, persecution, natural disaster, and poverty through special and second collections.

Visit the sick

People who are elderly or sick can become isolated and lonely. There are many things you can do to help support people battling illness or becoming frail with age. Give blood, visit with a sick or elderly neighbor, offer to give a caregiver a break, and volunteer with activities at a local nursing home. Check with your parish bulletin or office to see who in your community is sick and could use your prayers and support.

Visit prisoners

People in jail and prison deserve the opportunity to hear the Word of God and be provided an opportunity for conversion of heart. Pray for those who are incarcerated and think about other ways you can help. Consider the example offered by the Encouragement Klatch Ministry, organized by people at St. Gertrude in Forest City, which provides regular meetings to offer encouragement and support to female inmates in the Meeker County jail.

Bury the dead

Parishes provide support for those grieving the loss of a loved one, long after the initial mourning period has ended, through prayers and Mass intentions. There are many Catholic cemeteries throughout the diocese. If your parish has a cemetery, support it through donations to the perpetual care or operating fund or ask if you can volunteer with cemetery upkeep. Consider volunteering for your parish's funeral hospitality ministry.

If you have other examples of how local Catholics are living out the seven corporal works of mercy, please help us share them by e-mailing dnu@dnu.org. There are seven spiritual works of mercy as well. We'll examine those in an upcoming column.

Disclosure of names

Our diocesan Day of Mercy took place just a few days after we disclosed the names of men credibly accused of sexual abuse of a minor while they were priests. (See pages 6-7 in this issue.) This timing wasn't intentional, but I believe it was fitting. We need God's mercy. We are called to respond with merciful love to those harmed.

We love our parishes. We respect our priests. It's hard to think that there was ever a priest who preyed on young people or ever a young person victimized by these terrible acts.

We need to accept this. Sexual abuse did happen. And it did happen within our diocese.

Several months ago, I asked my staff to reach out to the law firm of Jeff Anderson & Associates. Together, we worked to mutually and accurately identify men with credible claims of abuse made against them stemming from time they were assigned as priests.

Victims and survivors have shared how important disclosure can be in moving forward, for knowing the Church has heard what they have to say, for putting their healing first. We are called to open our hearts to those abused by priests. To be defensive or dismissive is not the proper response to them.

I ask you to join me during this Year of Mercy in praying for victims and survivors of abuse by priests. Together, we can embrace our brothers and sisters so hurt by clergy. Together we can move forward. Together, we can seek the healing of Jesus Christ.

Nothing is impossible with God's eternal mercy. As Pope Francis remarked, knowing that so many in this world are wounded by suffering, sickness, abuse, terrorism, and persecution, "Is it naïve to believe that this mercy can change the world? Yes, humanly speaking, it is foolish, but 'the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men'"

(1 Cor 1:25).