



THE POINT

As disciples we are called to meet the immediate physical and spiritual needs of others and to address attitudes, values, and structures in society that cause suffering and need.

Mercy and Action

The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity (love) inspire and give life to all the other virtues. Without love, the greatest of these, justice is soulless and empty. Love moves us to imitate Jesus in our response to the Father and to one another.

In a passage known as the “Judgment of Nations,” Jesus makes it very clear that the love of God and the active love for others cannot be separated (see Matthew 25:31–46). In his story, Jesus equates himself with the least of those in society, telling us that when we help those in need, we help him. In this passage, Jesus is responding to the question, “Who will enter the Kingdom of God?” He summarizes his teachings about the Kingdom and states the requirements for entering into the eternal Kingdom: his disciples must care for those most in need as they would care for Jesus himself. From Jesus’ entire message and from this passage in particular, the Church forms the Works of Mercy—charitable acts by which we care for the physical and spiritual needs of others.

Corporal Works of Mercy

Feed the hungry.
Give drink to the thirsty.
Clothe the naked.
Visit the sick.
Shelter the homeless.
Visit the imprisoned.
Bury the dead.

Spiritual Works of Mercy

Counsel the doubtful.
Instruct the ignorant.
Admonish the sinner.
Comfort the sorrowful.
Forgive injuries.

Bear wrongs patiently.
Pray for the living and the dead.

Mercy is charity on a person-to-person level. It is direct service or aid—caring for others, sharing their hurt, and taking care of their needs as best we can. Social change is about seeking to alleviate *causes* of a problem on behalf of people who are hurting. Understanding each approach to justice gives us a better sense of how we can help people who are hurting in our own communities, in our nation, and around the world.

In the social change aspect of justice, social structures are examined and possible changes to those structures are explored. Social structures are the commonly accepted ways of doing things that characterize social relationships. They include customs, laws, and social policies. A social structure can be as simple as telephone etiquette or as complex as a nation’s educational system or its method of providing health care.

Although they tend to be more indirect in helping people, social change efforts are concerned with meeting people’s needs just as Works of Mercy are. Long-term justice efforts focused on social change also recognize that providing only immediate relief for people who are mired in long-term problems does not address the real causes of their suffering. Also, when people are always on the receiving end of a relationship, they can develop a diminished sense of personal dignity. As a result, they might feel powerless to help themselves. By addressing the impact of social structures on people’s suffering, long-term solutions to problems might be uncovered.



LIVING AS A DISCIPLE

- **Act locally** Look around your neighborhood and find ways that you can contribute some sweat equity. This means, use your hands, feet, time, and energy to make someone else's life better. You will make a big difference for someone else, and most likely discover something important about yourself as well.
- **Think globally** There are a lot of ways that you can get involved in justice action. What do you care about passionately — the environment, war, justice, poverty, homelessness? Find an organization that believes what you do and join them.

PRAYER: *God of those who are poor, may I recognize your face in those most in need.*



PERSON OF FAITH

César Chávez (1927–1993)

César Chávez was born to a farm family near Yuma, Arizona. During the Great Depression, the family lost their home and became migrant workers in California. César was ten when he began working in the fields. Because the family moved often, following the work, César attended sixty-five different schools. Despite their poverty, his family often shared their food with others who were hungry. As he grew to adulthood, César began to look for ways to improve the appalling working and living conditions of migrant workers. Using the approach of nonviolence taught by Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and others, César organized the United Farm Workers, a union that worked to change laws and inform the public of the plight of farm workers, especially migrants. The union organized protest marches, hunger fasts, and boycotts. Eventually, the government passed laws for better wages and safer conditions for migrant workers. César and his wife Helen lived their faith with prayer and action for justice; the Works of Mercy were constant in their lives.



THE PATH OF DISCIPLESHIP

- What can I do to help others in immediate need?

- What can I do to contribute to social change?