

## **Celebrating Workers of Mercy/St. Vincent de Paul, Priest (1581-1660)**

(Isaiah 58:6-11; Mt. 25:31-46)

September 27, 2019

St. Mary Parish, Kalamazoo

6:00 p.m.

It's so wonderful that we can all gather together this evening, in spite of such miserable weather, to celebrate our dedication to the great virtues of charity and mercy here at St. Mary's Parish on this Feast of St. Vincent de Paul, the Patron Saint of Charity and Mercy. It's good for us to gather together as people devoted to working for unity among those we encounter, even in these challenging times all around us filled with conflict, division, and animosity among various groups of people, both in the political realm and, unfortunately, even in the life of the Church. People today seem to see things one way; "my" way.

This evening's Gospel passage is one of Jesus' most profoundly significant teachings, commonly known as the "Parable of the End Times". And, when it comes to Jesus' message, He is very clear: "there's one way to see this Truth: My way!"

And, in keeping with the image Jesus used in His Parable, I'm assuming that gathered together for our Mass this evening, we are mostly among the Sheep only---a "no Goats" gathering. Unlike some of Jesus' other parables, that allow some room for personal interpretation, this Parable is as clear as clear can be!

In many places within His teachings, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that of ALL God's commands, the two most important are to love God, with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength; and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves--- And, those TWO, are to be seen and lived as ONE.

Jesus taught us how to do that in very specific ways. The Beatitudes, and really the entire Sermon on the Mount, provide us with the principles by which we, as Jesus' followers, are to live. But Jesus didn't just teach others the attitudes that they should have, and the actions that should flow from those attitudes; He LIVED His own teachings in the ways He Himself cared for the poor, paid attention to those whom the rest of society ignored or even mistreated because of fear, spent time with the outcasts, embraced those with leprosy, and freed those who were held in bondage due to societal restrictions. As we might say today, Jesus not only talked the talk, but He walked the walk!

Jesus was so explicit, and clear, about this basic teaching because of the most important Truth that Jesus came to proclaim to the world: that God is Love, and out of that Love, God has created each and every human being to be made in God's very image and likeness, and therefore, every person is owed great human dignity, and must be treated with love and respect.

The reason why we have this Celebration of the Workers of Mercy today, is because, as I mentioned, today is the Feast Day of St. Vincent de Paul, the Patron Saint of Charity and all the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy. St. Vincent de Paul lived in the mid 1500's to mid-1600's in France. He's probably one of our better known Saints---a priest, who, after his own minor spiritual conversion, became, along with St. Louise de Marillac, a founder of two religious communities, a reformer of priestly spirituality, and one who also reformed seminary formation programs, and one who constantly tended to the needs of the poor, whom he referred to as "our masters".

His name has become synonymous with the St. Vincent de Paul Societies that were founded in the mid-1800's by Frederick Ozanam, and which are devoted to helping the poor throughout the world. Out of those Societies, there also grew the concept of Catholic Charities connected with every Diocese to address the needs of the poor and the marginalized.

We are very blessed to have active St. Vincent de Paul Societies here in our own Diocese, and a very active, and growing Catholic Charities, the "good works arm" of our Diocesan Church.

St. Vincent de Paul is one of many Saints who devoted his life to putting into practice this Parable of the End Times that we've heard this evening, because he was able to "see" Jesus in the poor and the needy.

So many of the great Saints had that same ability: to see Jesus in "the least of our brothers and sisters". Saints like Mother St. Teresa of Calcutta, known around the world, and acknowledged by just about everyone as a "saint" even before she died in 1997 (Sept.5) and was canonized just 3 years ago in 2016 (Sept.4). No matter what malady or deformity a human being had that might frighten or put off anyone else, Mother Teresa only saw the Loving Face of Jesus. She literally lived the dictates of Jesus' Parable of the End Times---she actually saw Jesus in the "*least brothers and sisters*" of Jesus.

Here in southwest Michigan, we are particularly blessed to be very familiar with another “saintly” person who lived and ministered to the poor and needy not that long ago in nearby Detroit, Capuchin Father Blessed Solanus Casey. As a truly simple, and gentle, priest of Jesus Christ, he gave of himself completely and totally in service to the poor. I love this quote of his taken from a letter he wrote to a woman in distress: *“In the promotion of mutual and common charity, next to our happy dependence on Almighty God Himself, He has made us mutually dependent also on one another....What a marvelously different society we would have here, and what an ideal world to live in, if we all would keep in mind the assurance of Jesus: ‘What you have done to the least of my brethren, you have done to Me.’”* (Blessed Solanus Casey, Michael Crosby, OFM, Cap, p. 238)

That’s exactly what we heard from the Prophet Isaiah in our First Reading this evening, when thru the Prophet, God Himself said that the kind of fasting and almsgiving He preferred was: *“releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke, setting free the oppressed, breaking off every yoke, sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house; clothing the naked and not turning your back on your own.”* ..... *“THEN, shall you call, and the Lord will answer and say: ‘Here I am!’”*

So, as we look around at one another here this evening, we come from many different places around the Diocese, have lots of special talents, hold various jobs and professions of influence to one degree or another---but what Jesus says to all of us is that we are to give praise to God by serving the needs of the poor. And one of the ways that we do that is by practicing the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy, and by being “the Sheep” in Jesus’ Parable of the End Times.

Of course, we have many other responsibilities as well---to be faithful to all Jesus’ teachings and to faithfully follow the Commandments. But the application of all those teachings is to be found in “seeing” Jesus in one another, and most especially in those whom Isaiah, and Jesus, identified with precision and clarity.

We are engaged in a wide variety of services and ministries. You are Workers of Charity and Mercy by working in food pantries, jail ministry, migrant ministry, providing funeral lunches; you go to visit the sick and homebound; you help to educate those in need, provide housing assistance, utility assistance, and those with medical needs; you show kindness and patience to those with mental and physical disabilities, provide employment assistance. Many of you support the

poor in far distant parts of the world thru sister parishes, and sister Dioceses. And that's only a partial list.

We have come together this evening to pray for the grace to continue doing what we do in the Name of Jesus, to give thanks to God for calling us to be His children, His sons and daughters, and therefore, brothers and sisters of His Son, Jesus. In Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate (Rejoice and Be Glad)*, on the universal calling that we all have through our Baptism to be Holy People, he wrote this: *"We may think that we give glory to God only by our worship and prayer, or simply by following certain ethical norms. It is true that the primacy belongs to our relationship with God; but we cannot forget that the ultimate criterion on which our lives will be judged is what we have done for others." (#104)* He also quoted St. Thomas Aquinas who, when asked which of our actions did he consider the noblest, answered unhesitatingly that they are the works of mercy towards our neighbor. (#106)

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, we are not here this evening by any means to pat ourselves on the back for what we're doing, because in truth, when we do all that we can to reach out in loving service to those in our lives who have material and spiritual needs, we are only doing what we, as true followers of Jesus, are supposed to do. Rather, we are here to say "Thank You Jesus" for helping us to see the world as You want us to see it: Your Way! Thank you for allowing us to be among the Sheep, and please keep us from ending up among the Goats. Even more so, we pray for conversion of mind and heart for anyone among the Goats, so that they can do what it takes to become counted among the Sheep.

And in doing so, like St. Vincent de Paul, Mother Teresa, Blessed Solanus Casey, and all the great Saints whom we aspire to follow, may we "see" Jesus, and respond in Love to all people, especially those considered to be the "least of our brothers and sisters".

God bless you, now and always!