

FROM THE PASTOR

My dear brothers and sisters,

This week we will look at two **Corporal Works of Mercy: Visiting the Imprisoned and Visiting the Sick**. In both of these works, we meet people who are limited in their mobility – neither by choice. For one, their bad choices have caused them to be confined, for the other, their bad health. And while one might quip that the sick are more deserving of our visit than are those imprisoned, *isn't that the whole point of mercy* – mercy is given to those who do not deserve it, for if it was deserved, it wouldn't be mercy.

Servant of God, Archbishop Fulton Sheen told priests at a retreat about a series of talks he did at a prison with 1,979 inmates. He started his first talk to the prisoners by saying:

Gentlemen, I want you to know that there is one great difference between you and me: you got caught, I didn't. In other words, we're all sinners. (Bishop Sheen Retreat to the priests of the

Diocese of Gary, 1973)

Here is the truth of the Gospel – we are *all* made in the image and likeness of God; we are all precious, loved deeply by God. Yet, we are all sinners. Not one of us can claim to have served God perfectly. Our sins do not make God hate us (though they do make Him weep for how they *hurt us*). No, God wants all the more to draw us back to Himself. Think of the wayward son in this weekend's Gospel (also known as the Prodigal Son) – though he had rejected his father, and, in essence, told him, “I wish you were *dead* so I could get *my* money,” the father was still waiting for him, longing for him to come home. When the son finally returned, the father *runs* out to meet him and holds a party for him. We can sometimes look down on those in prison, yet they are still deeply loved by God. (Please don't think that I am saying we don't need to take precautions, though – we do need to protect society. What I'm saying is that we always need to recognize the sacred dignity in each person.) I have had the opportunity to do prison ministry both when I was assigned in Keene and in Epping. Going in the first time was *very* uncomfortable – wondering who I was going to meet, how I would be able to minister to them, would I be able to get out in a timely manner, etc.. Yet, those who came to me for Confession or Holy Mass were looking for something, longing for something – or, rather, *Someone* – and I could bring that Someone to them.

We remember that Jesus was imprisoned, also. As He was brought to Annas and Caiaphas, and then before Pontius Pilate, He had to endure the indignity of being a prisoner. You see, there is no place too low for Christ – He has gone into the depths of our humanity to bring us to Himself. Somehow, in a mysterious way, Christ is present even in those who have sinned, and we are to minister to them despite their sin.

I have found visiting the sick to be a great gift. Growing up, both of my parents worked at the Concord Hospital, so I never had a fear of hospitals that some develop. My mother would often go to visit her aunt, and then her father at the nursing home. My grandfather had ten children, and most of them visited weekly, so he always had visitors. The thing that struck me, though, was how many people there *never* had visitors. Their family members – even their children – never came to see them. Such loneliness and abandonment!

When I ponder this, I can't help but reflect on Jesus' loneliness. During the Agony in the Garden, Jesus' closest friends fell asleep – **THREE TIMES** – even after He begged them to stay awake and pray with Him. During the trials, He had to endure the cry of “*Blasphemy*” and “*Crucify him*” with no one there to support Him. On the Way of the Cross, the unwilling help of Simon of Cyrene does not bring a friendly touch or a smile during this lonely time. Even from the Cross, Jesus cries out that He feels abandoned even by His Father.

The loneliness of Jesus

He went through this loneliness in order that we might know He is with us in our loneliness. And as we reach out to those in hospitals, nursing homes, or the homebound – those who are sick or frail or elderly – we reach out and touch Jesus' flesh, we comfort *Him* in His lonely hour, we bring to Him the love for which He desperately thirsts.

In this Year of Mercy, may we reach out in mercy to those who share the loneliness and weakness of Jesus.