

Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy

INSTRUCTING THE IGNORANT

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The first Spiritual Work of Mercy is to *instruct the ignorant*. I remember one time in second grade when my teacher at the Catholic elementary school I attended gave us students a test to see how much we knew about the truths of the Catholic Faith. The next day, my name was written on the chalk board, (along with the majority of the students in my class). Those whose names were written on the chalkboard were the ones who had not done as well as we should have on that catechism test and needed to retake it again after studying more with our parents.

One of the questions I answered incorrectly was the following: What is the name of the prayer that we pray to Mary? My response: The 'Hell' Mary. That was simply how that second grade mind thought one ought to spell the word 'Hail.' Needless to say, my answer was marked through with red ink. On a different question, I took a guess and answered that the three Divine Persons are Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

I bring these two examples forward to help illustrate the two types of ignorance we can face or ourselves be settled in. The first type of ignorance is knowledge that is simply misguided in some way regarding a truth of the Faith. The second type of ignorance is ignorance that prevails for when we simply have never been taught a truth. This second type of ignorance involves a strict lack/absence of the knowledge of one of the truths of the Faith.

Instructing the ignorant for us then involves confronting these two forms of ignorance found in society and our world today. Often, (as was the case for the three Divine Persons when I was a boy), many people, Catholics included, simply have never been instructed of a truth(s) of the Catholic Faith. In this sense, these people are ignorant in that they simply lack the knowledge of a particular truth.

I often experience this when explaining the Catholic understanding of the doctrine of *Sanctifying Grace*. Often when I explain that Sanctifying Grace is God's life, the Holy Spirit, dwelling in a human soul after receiving the sacraments and being free of grave sin, God's very life that *dwells* in us and *transforms* our humanity, people's eyes open wide

when hearing this truth of a teaching they had for various reasons never been taught before; (See Catechism of the Catholic Church 1999-2000). Inevitably they ask something like “Father, why didn’t anyone ever tell me this before?!” To instruct the ‘ignorant’ in this sense helps bring people closer to God.

Perhaps more common these days is the ‘hell’ Mary type of ignorance, the ignorance arising when people *think* they do know various truths of the Faith but actually know them only in a *partial* or *distorted* way. This type of ignorance arises from a multitude of reasons, included but not limited to poor catechetical instruction or by being informed by persons or sources who have various agendas, (i.e. learning about the Catholic Church from a biased non-Catholic or from by reading articles through the news media). Examples of this type of ignorance include when persons have heard the Catholic Church condemns anyone with same sex attraction to hell, that all who divorce are automatically excommunicated, that NFP is Catholic “birth control”, that Catholics worship Mary, and so on. Some people are willfully ignorant, (i.e. choosing to believe something that fits preconceived notions or agendas), while others simply are ignorant of the full truth of a Catholic teaching through no fault of their own.

It’s up to those of us who have been blessed with a full understanding of the truths of the Faith to educate ourselves of those truths more and more, and to teach those who are ignorant of these truths in a calm, loving, and complete way.

In doing so, we lead them from their ignorance. Jesus teaches in John’s Gospel that “The truth will set you free.” To *instruct the ignorant* is to show mercy by helping people be brought closer to God by enabling them to know the truths God has taught through the Church in an ever deeper way. Whatever type of ignorance a person may have, it’s merciful to help instruct them in the truth, in a loving way, because it helps lead them closer to God.

May we instruct the ‘ignorant’ we encounter at work, home, and Church— may we instruct ourselves, too, in any way we are ignorant of the full truths of the Faith. In doing so we help others and ourselves walk closer to God. May God bless you all!