**Works of Mercy**

**Visit the Prisoner/Counsel the Doubtful**

Jim Tonkowich – February 23, 2016

**Visit the Prisoner**

If you’ve ever visited the Mamertine Prison in Rome where the apostles Peter and Paul were incarcerated, you’ll have some idea of what an ancient prison looks like—in this case, a particularly nasty ancient prison where prisoners were lowered into the cell through a small hole in the ceiling of what was a dark, damp, fetid dungeon.

Prisoners—usually people awaiting trial or execution—received almost nothing from their jailers and survival depended on the kindness of friends on the outside. Thus for Christians, obeying Jesus’ words in Matthew 25:31-46, visiting prisoners became a life or death work of mercy.

Prisons today may are sanitary and prisoners’ material needs are met. Having said that, consider that prisons are typically violent places. Prisoners who arrive married typically receive divorce notices. If their marriage and family stay intact, the prison—particularly in the case of a federal crime—can be across the country. Nixon aid and founder of Prison Fellowship, Chuck Colson lived in McLean, but was incarcerated in Alabama. His family had the means to visit him, most families don’t.

Add to that the recidivism rate in the US. About 40% of those released from prison are back inside within three years. One of my colleagues at Prison Fellowship called prisons graduate schools for crime. And even worse, crime is a family business and not just for the Mafia. Perverse as it sounds, the sons of male prisoners want to grow up to be “just like dad” and many do.

So how can we show mercy? Let me suggest you go to the Prison Fellowship website (www.prisonfellowship.org) or to the Dismas Ministry website (www.dismasministry.org) for an overview.

Obviously we can visit prisoners in prison. But, there aren’t any prisons nearby (though there are jails). That being the case, what can we do? First, we can care for prisoners by visiting their families. Families of prisoners are certainly in our midst. They are often hard up, feeling ashamed, and needy on many levels. Second, we can visit the prisoners after they’ve been released. So called “re-entry” programs are vital for ex-offenders who wish to avoid being part of the recidivism statistic.

The Dismas website notes that those coming out of prison “need help with clothing, housing, employment, transportation, child care, health care, managing finances, interpersonal skills, counseling, drug and alcohol rehab and the support of a caring, spiritual community. In fact, belonging to a faith community is an important tie that can bind all of the needs and concerns of ex-inmates into success rather than repeated failure.” And I know from my days at Prison Fellowship that the only people who are there to welcome prisoners returning to their community are Christians.

If this piques your interest, more information is available from Prison Fellowship, Dismas, or Catholic Charities.

**Counsel the Doubtful**

This work of mercy is not apologetic, that is, it has nothing to do with convincing those who have questions (doubts) about Christianity or the Catholic Church. That is a work of mercy, but it’s not this one.

In a Washington Archdiocese blog entry on counsel the doubtful by Msgr. Charles Pope defines it this way, “It is that work which helps the undecided (or those of two minds on something) to come to a good and upright decision rooted in the call to holiness and the goal of attaining Heaven by God’s grace.”

Doubt in this case is not necessarily a bad thing. It’s being faced with choices and sorting them out. That is, it’s one of the most daily things in life. Should I change jobs? How can I help my children? Where will we retire? How do I get along better with my sister? Should I marry or pursue the priesthood or religious life?

“Without counsel plans fail,” says Proverbs 15:22, “but with many advisers they succeed.” Serving as an adviser is a work of mercy toward the person who in doubt about what decision to make. Now spiritual directors do that all the time, but more likely friends come to us.

How do we counsel the doubtful?

First, we should pray. Our friend is looking for wisdom and oddly enough he or she found us instead. God is the source of wisdom and so we call upon the Holy Spirit to shed his light on the situation.

Second, we should shut up. It’s amazing how many dilemmas people resolve simply by explaining them to another person. And even if they don’t resolve the questions, comfort comes just knowing that someone listens and understands. If we can be patient, actively listen, and ask clarifying questions we will develop reputations as brilliant counselors and the Holy Spirit will send us more people to counsel.

Third, we have to avoid the temptation to fix the problem. That is, avoid the temptation to behave like a guy. The goal is not to fix the problem, but to extend God’s mercy and with it his comfort. Perhaps the doubts themselves are a manifestation of God’s mercy and our friend, like Jesus, has to learn obedience by what he or she is suffering (Hebrews 5:8). As it is with every work of mercy, when we counsel the doubtful, we stand on holy ground and need to tread lightly.

Finally, we should be prepared, prepared to counsel spouse, children, family, friends, colleagues by becoming men and women of wisdom. After all, you can’t give to others what you don’t possess. How do we grow in wisdom? By studying the Scriptures, by knowing Church teaching, and by growing in our relationship with God through prayer, worship, the sacraments, fellowship, and obedience. That is the same things that make us holy also make us wise and able to counsel those in doubt.