

Almsgiving – Proof of “Love your neighbor”

„But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret... Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 6:1-4).

There are many sufferings that people endure while living their earthly life. Some are ill, others are needy, not having food to eat or clothes to wear; some are abandoned, forgotten, without relatives or friends.

Our Lord **taught** us Christians to have **mercy** on all of them and help them through **almsgiving**. **To have mercy means to love someone so much that you feel his pain and do everything you can to help him, to relieve his suffering.**

„He who gives to the poor will not be deprived”. Holy Scripture calls almsgiving seed, for he who sows the seed will not cast it to lose it, but to multiply it. So is he who gives to the poor, doesn't lose, but gains: the ones who received mercy will feel the urge to help / love someone else in turn, so the seed of love grows and multiplies, and on the other hand, the one who gives alms will increase spiritually, he will become better, more like God Who "sends rain upon both the good and the wicked" and will be rewarded a hundredfold, according to His promise.

Almsgiving is:

- **Physical** (directed towards the fulfillment of bodily, material needs of others).

Examples: to feed the hungry, to give water to the thirsty, to clothe the naked/poor, to receive in your house/circle of friends the stranger/orphan/traveler, to look for the sick/injured/helpless, to visit those in prisons/who made great sins/antisocial deeds in order to help them straighten themselves, to bury the dead, to do something for helping someone, to sacrifice themselves/to give their life for their neighbor.

- **Spiritual** (directed towards the fulfillment of spiritual needs of others).

Examples: the prayer for others, the advice and/or the good word addressed to someone, the compassion for someone who is in distress or suffering, to teach the ignorant what's good, to be kind to your neighbor, to protect someone from spiritual afflictions (protect him from temptations or harm), forgiveness of neighbors' mistakes, forgiveness and help for the enemies.

Spiritual charity is more important than the physical one, but most of the time they are done together. A good Christian is called to do both, according to the example of Jesus Christ.

When we give alms, we need to be careful to do it **with love, not regretfully** (feeling sorry we could keep for ourselves what we have given); **with sincerity, without any hidden interest** (without expecting any reward), **willingly** (because we want, not because someone is forcing us); **trusting in God** that He approves of our alms and will make it reach the person who truly needs it; **in secret/hidden** - only God may know of our mercy, so that He will reward us, also in secret, as He Himself promised.

Every opportunity to do charity is a trial/test that God offers us in order to test our love, to see if we have come closer to His likeness.

We owe to give alms to the needy that Jesus Christ has left us in the world, instead of Him. Jesus loves so much all people, and especially those who are in distress, that He identifies with them: "in as much as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." (Matthew 25:40)

Methodological guidance:

- The teacher presents various examples of physical or spiritual acts of mercy, or asks the children to exemplify; children may be asked to classify various acts of mercy in categories: physical, spiritual or mixed. The teacher can tell some illustrative stories and comment on them.
- Children are asked to give examples of situations when people suffer. The following question can be asked: do all the people who suffer deserve our mercy? (The Christian answer is always "yes")
- Brainstorming/Discussion on how to prove their love full of mercy through good deeds in specific situations.
- Talk about God's name of "Merciful". How did God - Jesus Christ prove mercy to us? (review the work of salvation that He did for us, while we were opposing him - sinners). God suffers for man, seeing how much affliction has sin brought onto him, and seeks to help him through every possible way.
- Talk about the need for the poor/suffering to accept to receive help / mercy; our pity should not force or humiliate anyone. This is perhaps another reason why God requires that mercy should be done in secret. (Example: St. Nicholas helps the three girls bringing them gifts secretly.)
- Talk about how God rewards mercy "in secret":
 - through help that comes through people when we ourselves need it (see the story below);
 - by renewing His grace in us (spiritual righteousness, our sanctification).

Applications:

1. In today's times, whom do you consider to be suffering?
2. How can you prove love through deeds if:
 - your friend had an accident that left him physically disabled;
 - your friend lost his mother recently and he is suffering a lot;
 - your girlfriend's father is in jail; she feels alone and ashamed;
 - your friend is unfairly accused of an act he has not committed;
 - your friend got a bad grade because he did not study;
 - your desk mate is sick. He had to stay at home for a week;
 - your neighbor is old. It is very difficult for him to climb the stairs to the second floor where he lives;
 - your old and sick neighbor asks you to buy her a piece of bread.
3. Formulates the teachings of the following texts:
 - a) Do not despise the poor. Ask yourself who they are and you will discover their majesty: they are the image of the Lord (...) Poor people are the administrators of our hope, the door-keepers of the kingdom, who open the door for the righteous and shut it down for the wicked and selfish. Terrible accusers, powerful attorneys (...)
(*Saint Gregory of Nyssa*)
 - b)

God the Most Holy,	Make it bloom in me	And to weep burning tears
Enlighten my mind,	The longing to do good	For those suffering
To fulfill in the path of life	And to always hear under heaven	And their sorrow to lighten,
Only the Law of Your Will.	The voice of those who ask me.	Glory to You always, Amen!

(*Love of your neighbor, by Vasile Militaru*)
4. Organize a discussion based on the analysis of the following statements:
 - People who suffer are responsible for their own situation.
 - The social security system will solve any problem of people in suffering.
 - In our country there are no more people in distress.
 - I cannot do much for those in need.
5. Comment on the following statement: "He, who loves little, gives a little; the one who loves more, gives more. And whoever loves a lot, what else does he have worthy to give? He gives himself." (Saint Porphyrios)
6. Together with your colleagues define a plan of action to help a category of people in distress.

Remember!

- Let's help people in distress!
- Let us be apostles of Christ in the midst of those in need!
- Everyone can have around them a person in suffering. Often our spiritual warmth should be a hand extended to a desperate man. Following the example of the saints, who have seen in the suffering of our neighbor the suffering of Christ, let us also learn to see in our neighbor in trouble, the image of Christ. Let's not forget that the Church is us, the Christians, and every one of us, based on our possibilities, can help those in distress, reducing their suffering and needs.

Find out more!

- “When a stranger knocks, mercy opens the hospitality door for him; once he enters, joy welcomes him; once received, humanity hosts him. The hungry is nourished by goodness, the despondent is guided by faith, and the troubled one by love.” *(Saint Ambrose of Milan)*
- “With a donated penny you can buy the sky. Not because Heaven is so cheap, but because God is so full of love. If you do not even have that penny, then give a glass of cold water!:) *(Saint John Chrysostom)*

The rich man and the merciful little girl

During the war, life was very difficult and people were suffering from hunger. But a rich man was determined to help the needy and sent word throughout the village that starting with the next day he will offer free bread to every child.

The next day, as early as dawn, many children had gathered in front of the house where the kind-hearted man lived. When he appeared with large baskets full of bread, the children rushed, pushing each other, struggling to find and grab a bigger bread. Everyone, as he grabbed a loaf of bread, ran gladly away because he had gotten a bigger piece. There was such a comotion...

But the man noticed that somewhere at the edge of the courtyard a little girl was waiting. After all the other children have chosen what bread they wanted and left with them, the little girl approached the first basket and looked into it. But there was nothing left in there. She looked in the second basket, but that was empty as well. To her joy, on the bottom of the third basket she found a small bread that no child had ever noticed. The little girl took the bread, thanked the kind man for it and went home.

All day long the man thought about how that little girl had behaved, and as a result, he ordered a small bread to be baked in the kitchen, having 10 gold coins hidden inside it. Then, early in the morning, he placed the small bread over the other loaves and went out again with all the baskets in the yard, where the 37 children had already gathered and were waiting impatiently.

Again the kids rushed and pushed each other. At the end, our little girl, who had waited quietly like she did the previous day, chose the smallest bread, the only one left in a basket. Once again, she kindly thanked the man and hurried home where her mother was waiting. When they sat at the table and the woman broke the bread, the gold coins rolled on the table. Reward!

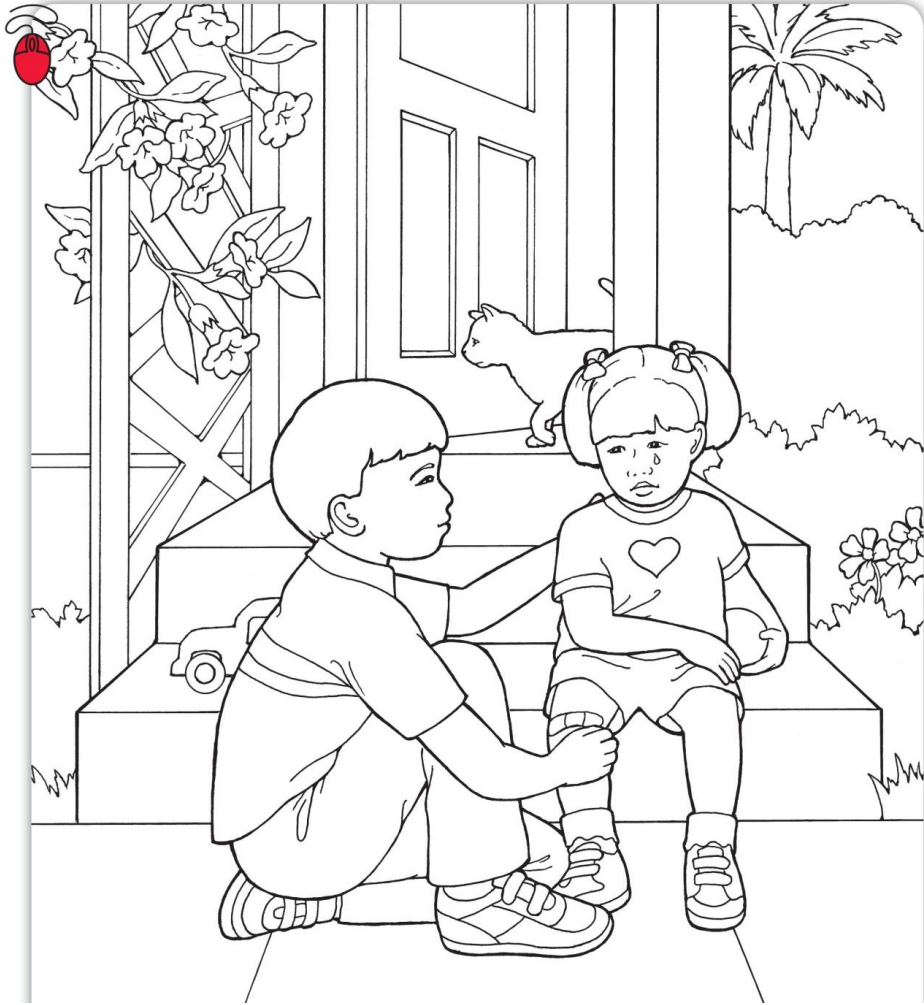
- Alas, the mother was scared, where could the money come from? What if the money got by mistake into the bread you brought? Perhaps the baker lost them while kneading the dough. Take them and get them back immediately!

The little girl returned to the baker's house and gave him the 10 gold coins, telling him how her mother found them in the loaf of bread. Looking at her lovingly, the man replied:

- The money did not get there by chance. After seeing yesterday how you had patience and were pleased even with the smallest bread, I decided to reward you. Today I've seen how honest you are because you could have kept everything, but you brought my money back. As a reward, every morning when you come to get some bread, you will also receive 10 gold coins.

Lord, how joyful the little girl was! She did not know how to thank the man for such kindness. She ran to her mother and gave her money, but after she had told her everything and her mother advised her once again, the little girl followed her advice. This is why, since then, every morning when she received the gold coins, the girl went to the other children and shared with them all the money. She knew that the others needed mercy as much as she did.

Poverty or wealth cannot defeat love, but love can overcome both poverty and wealth.



Love of your neighbor

by Vasile Militaru

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