

The Practice of Mercy

By Deacon Jim Vargas, OFS

Last year, I had the great fortune to join Father Joe's Villages, one of Southern California's largest homeless services providers, as its President and CEO. In so doing, I became part of a sacred mission—the mission to end homelessness in San Diego. In a very practical way, the heart of our mission at Father Joe's Villages relies on the everyday practice of mercy.

I see the enormity of the problem of homelessness, and how vulnerable and stigmatized the impoverished population really is. So often, as a community, we rush to judgment. We assume. We believe that people who are living on the street have done something to get there—they became addicted to drugs, burned bridges with friends and family, don't want to find work.

We come to the Village every day not 'to work'. We respond to a calling. We join each other in the center of our community, in one of the lowest-income areas of our city, to serve our neighbors in need—and by doing so, we change lives, we change San Diego, and we change the world for the better.

Mercy is the core of our daily duties, because it transcends judgment. At Father Joe's Villages, we believe that it is our calling to support our neighbors through love and compassion, and in no small part, with the help of Divine intervention. It is our obligation to help the men, women and children living on the streets of San Diego find a permanent place to call home. With a heart for the mission, and with the help of God's guidance, we practice mercy every day to help those in need.

I believe there are three ways that mercy manifests itself in our daily work: in compassion, in forgiveness, and as love in the action of faith and hope.

- Mercy brings us to be compassionate toward others, to take part in their suffering and become one with them. We choose to transcend the judgment that comes so naturally to us and see people for who they really are—human beings created in the image of God, with inherent dignity and incredible value.
- Mercy brings us to forgive, to stop wondering what choices brought someone to homelessness, because, simply put, it doesn't matter. What matters is helping them reclaim their lives. With that in mind, we will give them a second chance, a third chance, a fourth chance. With mercy, redemption is always a possibility. There is always a chance for salvation.
- Mercy is love in action. We open our minds and our hearts to those in need, and that allows us to serve in gratitude our God who is always so very merciful to us. It is His Face of Love and Mercy that we make visible in our work. It is His Face that is reflected back to us in those we serve. Mercy is also a great act of faith,

because it is not rooted in worldly wisdom and reason. It is rooted in eternal hope. It is not gained or deserved, and it is not conditional. Through mercy, we extend the love of God to those most in need—and it is life-changing, for those who serve and those who are served.

It is no wonder that in the Scriptures of various religions, mercy is portrayed as the very essence of God.

- The Book of Exodus describes how God always awaits our return in the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, the core of the Selichot prayers.
- The Qu'ran states. "We have not sent you except as a mercy to the worlds" and "Those who believe and do good deeds—the Gracious God will create love in their hearts."
- The Letter of James speaks of God's mercy: "For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment."

At Father Joe's Villages, we do God's work, and we practice God's unconditional love, mercy and compassion. Our door is always open. We do not judge. We see our clients as individuals, and we meet their unique needs. We believe that each and every one who comes to our door—no matter their past, present or future—deserves mercy.

As we continue to face the very real problem of homelessness, I am reminded that one of the most important qualities of mercy is that it is limitless. As long as there is pain in our community—as long as there are those living on the streets of San Diego without a place to call home, those who are hungry, those who need healthcare and clothing and a safe place to sleep—our call to show mercy will not end.

At Father Joe's Villages, we are committed to the belief that homelessness in our community should not be considered a given. It is a problem that can be solved, with God's direction and a commitment on the part of the community at large that none of our brothers and sisters suffer that condition. Mercy and justice demand it.