

Mercy, mercy me

By Maria Wiering

mwiering@CatholicReview.org

The bedraggled guy walks the center of MLK Boulevard, approaching my car. “Anything helps,” his sign says. I don’t carry cash, but I look at my Clif Bar wrapper and wonder if I should have saved my snack for him. I knew I’d see this guy. I see him everyday.

Instead, I look down. Or I give a pitying smile. I do something other than help. Would that really matter anyway, I wonder?

When I moved from Washington, D.C., to Baltimore two years ago, I was shocked by the ever-present signs of poverty, including begging men and women weaving between cars stopped at red lights. Baltimoreans are faced daily with the question of how to respond to the homeless, the hungry, the sick.

For many of us, it’s easiest to look away, to consider the poor as “other” and falsely assuage any guilt by believing that a few dollars to Catholic Charities fulfills our Christian obligation.

I was forced to confront my own milquetoast charity a few weeks ago, when a work assignment brought me to the door of a Catholic Worker House. There I met a couple who have given their lives to Works of Mercy. Here they are, in their 70s, radically offering all they have to the poor. Here I am, withholding \$20 from the collection plate “because I can’t afford it,” only to spend it later on happy hour.

I’m not the only young adult wrestling with my response to the poor. Kerry Weber, an editor at America Magazine in New York, recently authored a book about her attempt to live out all seven Corporal Works of Mercy during Lent. “Mercy in the City” (Loyola Press, 2014) describes – with honesty, humility and humor – “How to Feed the Hungry, Give Drink to the Thirsty, Visit the Imprisoned and Keep Your Day Job,” as the subtitle puts it.

In case your catechism is rusty, the Works of Mercy are taken from Matthew 25, where Christ tells his disciples to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless and visit the sick and the imprisoned. (Tradition adds – from elsewhere in Scripture – to bury the dead.)

If you do this, Jesus said, you do it for him; if you don’t, you’ve ignored him and risked eternal damnation.

Yikes.

Weber makes her way through breadlines, homeless shelters and clothing donations, but acknowledges that identifying opportunities to do Works of Mercy requires a

change in attitude, not necessarily one's daily routine. As Christians, we must be willing to be inconvenienced, uncomfortable and even suffer for the sake of others. "Amen, I say to you," Jesus said, "whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."

Pope Francis has hammered on the need for mercy, while repeating that the Catholic Church is not an NGO; we approach charity differently because we see eternal souls in those whom we help. (It's a point Archbishop William E. Lori emphasized with this year's Fortnight to Freedom and its theme "Freedom to Serve.")

Therein, however, lies the challenge: to open our eyes to see beyond "some homeless guy" to a person, Jesus in "the distressing disguise of the poor," as Mother Teresa said. I'm sincerely trying harder.

As Christians, the least we owe the beggar is our Clif Bar; he's actually entitled to our heart. We need to offer it to him, not only for his good, but for ours.

To read more Amen columns, [click here](#).

Maria Wiering is a staff writer for the Catholic Review.