

Catholic

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Stewardship

SEEING LAZARUS THE BEGGAR
IN THOSE WE ENCOUNTER

RANDY HAIN

"Consider the possibility that in today's society our problem is not that we don't see Lazarus. We see him, accept his plight, and either throw money at him or ignore him."

As we grow in the Catholic faith, strive to be good stewards of God's blessings, and truly help those in need, many may find the call of stewardship a difficult and complex path to navigate. Donating money to good causes is very important, but actually lifting the burdens of the Lazaruses in our lives is even more essential.

Recall Jesus' parable in Luke 16:19–31: Lazarus—destitute and covered with sores—laid outside the door of a rich man's home and would have been content with the scraps from his table. But the rich man neglected to notice Lazarus until it was too late, bringing to mind Proverbs 21:13: "Those who shut their ears to the cry of the poor will themselves call out and not be answered."

Let's prayerfully consider how we can improve our basic interactions with our brothers and sisters in Christ who are struggling. Further, show how we can share beyond charitable giving: through love, prayer, witness, listening, or even a warm embrace. Likewise, let's expand our definition of Lazarus to include not only the countless poor, sick, homeless, and hungry of the world but also locally: the neighbor who is jobless, the coworker suffering from depression, the friend struggling financially, the family member who is sick, or the child with special needs who attends school with our own son or daughter. Lazarus is everywhere in our lives...if we have the courage to look for him.

Consider the possibility that our problem today is not that we fail to see Lazarus. We see him, accept his plight, and either throw money at him or ignore him. That may sound harsh, especially in light of statistics that show Americans are generous to those in need. The sums of money that flow from individuals and corporations to good causes are staggering. So what's the problem? Though many generously give their time, talent, and treasure to good causes and are truly a blessing, others hide behind walls where we address the problems of the world by merely dispensing money. Or worse, we do nothing.

Consider Jesus' words in Matthew 25:35–46:

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me." Christ asserts that helping the "least ones" is the same as helping him: "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me." For those who do nothing, he states: "Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels....Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me. And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

This Scripture is the source of the Catholic Church's teaching on the seven corporal works of mercy. And nowhere in Scripture do I see instructions to write a check or donate online. I recently took stock of my own stewardship and was surprised and disappointed to see that I mostly raise money for charities, write personal checks, and attend nonprofit board meetings. I spend less than a quarter of my time in front of those who need me. It seems I have allowed a wall to form around me that keeps me from interacting to make a difference. What's required is showing up and ministering to people in need. Using our expanded definition of Lazarus, we should realize that we're presented with many opportunities daily to help others, but we must own and act on our responsibility. We must strive to act more and reach out.

"If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,' but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it?"

—James 2:15–16

As we reflect on the many references to almsgiving in Scripture, we see that in biblical times, people were most likely seeing, touching, and talking directly with the people to whom they were giving alms and showing mercy. Today, however, thanks to factors like population growth, economic segregation within our cities, physical distance, and advances in technology, our almsgiving and acts of mercy are too often reduced to a point-and-click exercise on the computer. I'm not negating the impact of giving money, but

I want to also stress that being physically present and making a concerted effort to reach out to others can help us diminish the risk of losing our basic humanity.

Despite the reality that we each have our own habits, priorities, and focus, we can't get caught up in our to-do list. We should take time to step outside of our habits and focus on others. The habit we work to develop should be to recognize and help all the Lazaruses we encounter.

DIG DEEPER

How can we meet our call to help our brothers and sisters in Christ?

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Do we embrace or avoid the vulnerability we feel in defining a problem and seeking a solution?

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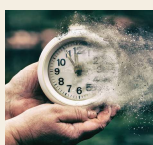
Are we impeded by a fear that people will want more than we can or want to give?

Merciful Actions

How do we reach beyond any cultural, emotional, and spiritual walls we have created to show mercy to Lazarus as Christ intended? These ideas can help us develop the courage and commitment to bring a Christlike attitude to Lazarus and act:



Ask the Lord for guidance. Pray for the clarity of sight to see Lazarus all around. Pray for the courage to break free of any barriers you have created and help Lazarus. Pray for the Holy Spirit to guide your actions.



Be present...and act today. Look daily for the presence of Lazarus in your family, friends, coworkers, and strangers. Someone is struggling at this moment with any number of challenges. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you discern who needs your help today. Don't wait until tomorrow because, by then, the same chance to reach out and make a difference may be gone.

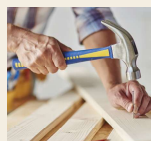


Love your neighbors. God is love. He loves everyone the same without prejudice. If you need help in reviving your humanity, remember that God created us in his own likeness (Genesis 5:1–2). “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37–40).



Practice and encourage generosity. We must ensure that the love for Jesus that we feel in our hearts is obvious to all we encounter. Forced giving or obligatory assistance to others doesn't please Christ and runs counter to his teachings.

“*True charity requires courage. Let's overcome the fear of getting our hands dirty so we can help those in need.*”



Get involved by physically being there. “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). Countless ministries and charities need help, not just money. Serve at soup kitchens, visit the elderly, participate in prison ministry, volunteer for the Special Olympics, build homes and schools in Haiti or anywhere. These are some of the countless opportunities available. We are to be women and men of action and joy because the Holy Spirit lives in us. Our time on earth is a mist that appears for a little while and vanishes. So make the most of it. Let's press on and be about our work of advancing the kingdom with our time, talent, and treasure.



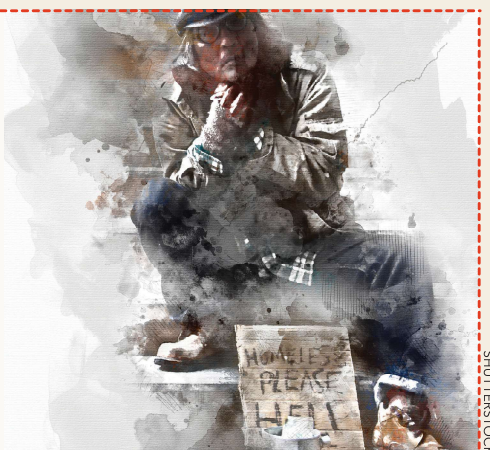
Practice detachment from worldly goods. This may well be the hardest for us to accomplish: putting more time and energy into our relationship with Christ and our commitment to helping others. Remember Lazarus and the rich man? The rich man's wealth and abundance blinded him to the plight of Lazarus. We must strive to detach ourselves from the pursuit of wealth for wealth's sake. Pope Francis speaks to this: “The world tells us to seek success, power, and money; God tells us to seek humility, service, and love.” Francis further explains the danger of materialistic pursuits: “When we do not adore God, we adore something else. Money and power are false idols which often take the place of God.”



Serve quietly. We can't aid Lazarus and honor the Lord if our motivation is recognition and glory for ourselves. As Jesus says in Matthew 6:1–4, “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.”

PRAYER

Lord, help me make a difference
for you that is utterly
disproportionate
to who I am. Amen.



SHUTTERSTOCK

It's a sad indictment of our times that the more perceived gain we see from technology and the pursuit of wealth, the more distant we become from the less fortunate. I have explored the moral imperative for helping Lazarus, but we are also encouraged to do so through countless scriptural references to "blessings we will receive" and the "building up of treasure in heaven." Consider the simple and compelling references found in Proverbs 14:21: "Whoever despises the hungry comes up short, but happy the one who is kind to the poor!" and Proverbs 11:24–25: "One person is lavish yet grows still richer; another is too sparing, yet is the poorer. Whoever confers benefits will be amply enriched, and whoever refreshes others will be refreshed."

God will show us the way if we only ask. When we give freely of ourselves and of our treasure to those in need and when we are honest with God, our graces will be greater. Let me explain. I work in downtown Atlanta and cross paths with a number of homeless people. As I walk by each person, conflicts and reasons for not giving rise up within me. *What will this person do with the money? I can't give to every needy person I encounter, right?* As I pass by, I find it difficult to look him or her in the eye. I asked Christ to help me. And in turn, I gave up to him the whole lot of my feelings (good and bad) about this situation. A few nights later, while exiting a Braves game, a homeless person approached me and asked for money. I looked him in the eye and gave him money.

Though it may take a while for us to get to where we should be, Christ is always present, prodding us along. We simply have to be honest with ourselves and ask for his graces.

Let's broaden our definition of Lazarus to include people we see every day as well as the less fortunate in our community and around the world. Avoid the trap the rich man fell into, which cost him a life in torment. As a friend, Dr. Ron Young, observes, "Most of us are more like the rich man than the beggar, Lazarus. We have abundance, especially when compared to the rest of the world. There is so much we can do to reach out to those in need in our everyday lives, but unfortunately we can become so consumed with the trappings of success and relative prosperity (emotional and financial) that we fail to see the people who need us most."

At different points each day, try to reflect on your actions toward others and examine those missed opportunities to help someone who is struggling so you can rectify them later. Expanded horizons and active engagement are required. Let's evolve our good intentions to a higher standard where we begin to recognize Lazarus more clearly and frequently and our first words are, "Please let me help you."

Also, remember this statement of truth as we ponder that we have the potential to *be* Lazarus: "There but for the grace of God go I."

Randy Hain is a devoted family man, business leader, writer, speaker, an active steward in the community, and a passionate advocate of the Catholic faith. He and his wife converted to the Catholic Church in 2006. Hain is involved in ministries and groups whose mission is to promote a unity of life, centered in Christ, that will help Catholic men and women integrate faith, family, and work. He is the senior editor of the fast-growing Integrated Catholic Life, an e-magazine that he cofounded with Deacon Mike Bickerstaff in 2010. Check out Randy's blog at integratedcatholiclife.org

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