Corporal Works of Mercy—Give Alms to the Poor

Giving alms (money or goods offered freely to the poor) is one of the pillars of Lent and an ancient practice in the Church. In the Bible, Tobit instructs his son to “Give alms from your possessions. Do not turn your face away from the poor and God’s face will not be turned away from you” (4:7). Jesus proclaimed in the Gospel of Matthew that giving to the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned is giving to him and is the key to entering his kingdom (25: 31-46). The Church teaches that almsgiving is an expression of “interior penance” (CCC 1434) and it is encouraged at all times, but especially during Lent. When we give freely to others we are changed for the better. Money and things have a tendency to make claims on us, to own us instead of us owning them. The act of giving is an expression of our freedom and reminds us that all we have is gift, freely bestowed on us by our loving Father. St. Peter gently admonishes us, “Above all, let your love [charity] for one another be intense, because love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:8).

Still, it can be confusing to give to charity in the modern world. There are so many charities asking for help that we can become tired and begin to doubt their legitimacy. We can feel put upon and tempted to begrudge our charity. Pope Benedict XVI cautions us not to let fears or ideologies hold back our expressions of charity by reminding us that “One does not make the world more human by refusing to act humanely here and now” (God Is Love, 31). Give freely and with a joyful heart, for as St. Paul writes, “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7).

~ Reflection by Deacon Chris Walchuk, Parish Social Ministry Director, Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Winona