

Most everyone who lives in the Twin Cities have heard of Mary Jo Copeland, the founder of Sharing and Caring Hands, a charity she runs in downtown Minneapolis. For years, the charity has provided food and shelter to the homeless in our city, and through all those years Mary Jo has worked hard to provide and fight for those who have a need. Soon she'll be turning 80.

Her days began at 4 in the morning, when she gets up and goes to church. She has a key to Saint Alphonsus in Brooklyn Center, and lets herself in and begins a two-and-a-half-hour prayer regimen, which includes the rosary, Stations of the Cross, and the Liturgy of the Hours. In her words, "I wake up running to God," because the rest of the day she'll be running around doing God's work. In the words of Mark Schindeldecker, a retired postal worker who ran the food-service division at the charity, "She moves through walls." From there, she heads to Sharing and Caring Hands, which she founded in 1985.

Dennis Cass, the writer of a story about Mary Jo in the *New York Times* a few years ago, says he thought that Schindeldecker was speaking philosophically at first. But then he followed her one morning, and realized

that if you take your eyes off of her for a mere second, she'll vanish. On the morning he was with her, she helped unload donations, then proceeded to settle a dispute about boxes of free cereal, then inspected care packages. And then, there is the feet washing. Each day at two times, she would wash the feet of the homeless. After she does intake for the shelter, she goes into the main room, where men are soaking their feet in plastic tubs. She puts on latex gloves, and gets down on a kneeler and starts ministering to people. In watching this, Cass mentions how he saw her carefully massage the ankles of a man and rub his calluses, and work hydrocortizone ointment between his toes. A cynic might call this theater, or wonder what the point of it was. But Cass was struck by this, saying he saw in it a similarity to the warm, distant care you'd find in a hospital, as she attended to each man in turn, sometimes taking her gloves off to clip toenails, listen to complaints, or share in gossip – for they were a human being, not just merely a number in a line to be attended to. She even gives out shoes if someone's have worn out. Said one longtime volunteer, "She is not of this world. That's the only way to explain how she can keep doing what she is doing, day in and day out. She's taught me so many great lessons in surrendering and trusting in God. Worry is useless energy, she says. If God brought you to it, he'll get you through it."

Though today she's had to give up the feet washing due to her bad knee, she is busier than ever. She meets with people, and hears their stories still; she carefully discerns what to give and how much to people in need (for sadly not every story is one of authentic need); as quoted in the recent Catholic Spirit article she said "I'll give you bus tokens, and if you get a job, I'll give you a bus card."

With all the meeting of physical needs, Mary Jo also tries to meet people's spiritual needs as well. Prayer has always been a component of her life, getting her through some of the darkest times in her difficult childhood. Sometimes she prays 3 hours a day. Each day, she leads group and individual prayers to God, and to each family that comes in, she prays with people. In her most recent profile in the Catholic Spirit, the reporter Christina Capecchi noted how a man came up and said Mary Jo helped him stop drinking - and she looked at him and said he would always stay sober if he trusted in Christ. Then came a 55-year old professional cleaner who had fallen away from the faith, and Mary Jo prayed "you've been waiting for her to come back for a long time and now she's coming back." She'll also interact with the kids who stay at Mary's Place, the adjacent

shelter she runs for women and children, asking them who they prayed for over the past week. Cass observed her handing out \$2 to children, and saw that one little girl was so happy she looked as if she was about to burst – but that most of the kids were less interested in the cash than the hugs they got from Mary Jo. In observing this, he wrote “It’s one of her most powerful gifts, an ability to make you feel as if you are the center of her universe...it doesn’t feel like an act.”

She also has a focus that is always directed towards God. She does allow herself a few pleasures; for years she would spend Saturday nights with her beloved husband Dick at the Lookout in Maple Grove for dinner and dancing. Today, having lost him a few years ago, she’ll give herself the simple pleasure of eating cookie dough and watching a mystery on TV.

In her words, “I never really was a part of this world. I belonged to God. Belonging to the world didn’t mean anything to me...When I think about God in my life, I want to be a saint. It’s not time that makes a saint; it’s how you live.” And by that, she doesn’t mean she wants a statue or church named after her someday. A saint is simply someone who is in heaven,

and who has learned to love God completely. It's something we all must strive for.

Now in it's 37th year, Sharing and Caring hands is still providing food to 300 and 500 poor and marginalized every day, and Mary's Place next door provides transitional apartments for 600 people in need on top of that. While other shelters closed during Covid, hers is still going strong. It's done all this despite no state aid, making it entirely on private donations.

Her story is remarkable, and I share it because I think it provides for us an example of what it means to have the right focus in life, and to ready ourselves for our eventual encounter with God. Said Fr. Joseph Johnson her friend, in her, "What we see is a more transparent witness of what someone who has given her life entirely to Christ looks like." And summing up what she does at the shelter, Barb, who works with her there, "she gives hope."

All of us have that ability too, and it's our job. This world is so full of cynicism, of selfishness, of people feeling marginalized and isolated. So the question for us, is what are we going to do about it?

The Church has always cared deeply about the poor. Now, being poor is not a virtue; nor is it a sin to be wealthy. But what we want to do is provide hope whenever we can, and this week's readings give us a particular emphasis on providing hope to those in need. But this entails many things; not just giving to charity. There are poor people on the streets; and poor in spirit in our lives. We need to see them all.

Amos decries those who live comfortable lifestyles in luxury but have no care for those in need, including their own brothers and sisters from the Northern Kingdom who are being overrun by invaders ("the collapse of Joseph"); they are so focused on their own lifestyles they are blind to need. The first reading sets us up for the Gospel where Lazarus and the rich man is our parable. The rich man isn't a sinner for being rich; it's that he's neglected Lazarus day after day. God cares for him though - note we have his name written down, but not the rich mans name - kind of a turning of the tables as the important were named and remembered - and in the afterlife, there is a consequence.

The readings are a challenge because all of us have much; we may not be multi millionaires, but we live in a land that gives us many opportunities. How can we use what we have to help those in need? I'd suggest a few practical things.

For one, remember the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy. Print them out, put them in your prayer book or Bible or refrigerator, and think about living them out. Here's what they are as a refresher:

The Corporal...

**Feed the hungry.** Grocery stores sometimes have bags you can get or places to donate food; we have food donations here too that we give to the CAP agency and food shelves. There's much need out there.

**Give Drink to the thirsty.** We take it for granted that we have access to clean water. You can donate to help build wells for water for those in need.

**Shelter the homeless.** Mary Jo has an army of volunteers who help her; why not become one? You can donate money or time to Sharing and

Caring hands or many other organizations. Or look in your closets. Many homeless shelters need warm blankets for their beds. If you can knit or sew that would be an extra loving gift. Or consider a mission trip; our adult mission trip goes to Haiti or the Dominican Republic each year, often building houses. You can join them or support mission trips. Go through your closet and consider giving of your excess clothing; or maybe the kids have stuff they don't need anymore. Set aside a bin in the house to put these in and call up the DAV truck or clothing drive people and give them away.

**Visit the Sick.** Growing up when I was ill, my mom and dad couldn't make the virus go away, but helped so much by just being there. We can do this for one another. Those who are sick are often forgotten or avoided. Consider becoming a visitor to the homebound as a Samaritan Minister. Check in on elderly relatives who can't make it here to Mass. Do more than an annual Christmas card and make visiting a regular thing. Help with the lawn or the shoveling for an elderly neighbor or family member.

You can also give blood; we have several drives here with the Red Cross each year. You can also spend time volunteering at a nursing home – Get

creative and make use of your talents (e.g. sing, read, paint, call Bingo, etc.)! Or, the next time you make a meal that can be easily frozen, make a double batch and give it to a family in your parish who has a sick loved one.

**Visit the prisoners.** People in prison are still people, made in the image and likeness of God. No matter what someone has done, they deserve the opportunity to hear the Word of God and find the Truth of the message of Christ. We have a prison ministry and you can get involved. You can also volunteer and give Christmas presents to children whose parents are in prison. I'd also expand this to say think outside the box; some people are in prisons of their own making; prisons of anger; prisons of addiction; prisons of habitual sin. Maybe you know someone like that. Spend time with them to try to help them see the hope and take the needed steps to be set free.

**Bury the Dead.** Funerals give us the opportunity to grieve and show others support during difficult times. Through our prayers and actions during these times we show our respect for life, which is always a gift from God, and comfort to those who mourn.

Send a card to someone who has recently lost a loved one. Make your own card and use some of these prayers.

Visit the cemetery and pray for those you have lost.

**Give Alms to the Poor.** Donate money to organizations that have the ability to provide support and services for those in need. Do research and find organizations that put people in need first, rather than profit. Skip the morning latte and put that money in the collection basket at church. Find a charity that is meaningful to you and volunteer your time or donate.

There's also the Spiritual Works of Mercy...

**Counseling the doubtful.** Everyone has moments of doubt in their faith journey. Nevertheless, we should always remember that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life and turn to him along our way. We can Listen to counsel and receive instruction, that you may eventually become wise” as Prov 19:20 tells us. In times of doubt, we can turn to Christ who had doubts too in the Garden but ultimately trusted. We can reach out to a person of faith. We can give advice to people like Mary Jo does. We can look for

ways to build up our knowledge of the faith, and journey with someone struggling with doubt by praying with them or inviting them to Mass with us. We can listen; maybe just hearing someone out and what they are going through helps. And we can follow Christ with the witness of your life so that others may see God's love revealed in your actions

**Instructing the ignorant.** How do we talk about what we believe and why to others? Are we willing to be counter-cultural and evangelize? We can't be afraid to speak to what our Church teaches because God wants us to be happy - and not have the fake happiness the world would tell us is true.

**Admonishing the sinner.** We don't judge, but do judge actions - we do so with love, ultimately trying to get the person to make changes. Mary Jo doesn't just hand out money; she has to discern if a person will misuse it. She'll also challenge someone to help them to turn their lives around. Sometimes we have to do this with loved ones too. Parents, don't be afraid to use the word "no." All of us, let's not be afraid to call sin what is too.

**Forgiving injuries.** Forgiving others is difficult at times because we do not have God's limitless mercy and compassion. But Jesus teaches us that we

should forgive as God forgives, relying on him to help us show others the mercy of God. We can let go of a grudge; we can pray for God's help to do this; we can say "I'm sorry" to others.

**Bearing wrongs patiently.** Let's not be bitter about wrongs done against us. I know this is a hard one for me! Place your hope in God so that you can endure the troubles of this world and face them with a compassionate spirit. If you're frustrated with someone? Step away from the situation, take a few deep breaths, pray the Our Father, asking God for patience, and then address it. Don't bottle up things, but talk through something and ask God if you should let it go, or if it's something you need to address with someone and do it calmly.

**Praying for the living and the dead.** Prayer is one of the most powerful ways we can support others. Joining together in prayer for the living and the dead entrusts us all into God's care. We pray for people close to us or our needs, but we can light a candle for someone; we can have a mass said for them; or keep a book of prayer intentions for those in need.

Many of these things we can do with kids too; and they are great teaching tools for how we can truly help one another.

In all of our lives, we have much. And as I said, there is nothing wrong with having things; I even get a couple of lottery tickets a week for fun. But while winning might mean I could get a few more toys, those toys won't get me to heaven. For there is no U-Hauls in funeral processions. What does get us to heaven is loving one another as God has loved us - so let us do that by being generous with our time, talent and treasure. Let our eyes be open to the needy before us so that we can truly go and make a difference, helping to, like Mary Jo, bring hope into our world.