

## Clothe the Naked

Lectio Divina: Luke 15:11-32

One cold winter's day over 1600 years ago, a young soldier in the Roman army was riding down the lane at the gates of the city of Amiens. He happened to come across a beggar who was shivering in the cold for lack of clothing. As the soldier passed, the beggar lowered his face dejectedly, expecting at best a cold indifference. But the soldier, Martin, could not proceed with an untroubled conscience. He stopped, turned around, and drew his sword. The beggar's heart sank as he guessed that his poor life would now be abruptly ended. But Martin did not intend his sword for bloodshed that day. Instead he proceeded to cut his cloak in half and drape one of the halves across the shivering frame of the beggar. And with a brief exchanged glance of astonishment and gratitude, Martin turned and rode away. Later that night, as he slept in the barracks, Martin saw Jesus Christ in a dream wearing the same half of the cloak which he had given to the beggar. Three years later, Martin was baptized a Christian. This man, Martin would later be made bishop of Tours, France and become St. Martin of Tours.

This story from the life of St. Martin of Tours exemplifies the corporal work of mercy, to clothe the naked. Through this encounter, St. Martin experienced the parable of Christ, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink? When did we welcome you away from home or clothe you in your nakedness? When did we visit you when you were ill or in prison?" The king will answer them, 'I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me.'" (Matt 25:37-37). Martin acted out of compassion for that beggar that day, but it was only when he saw the Lord wearing part of his cloak did he fully realize the impact of his action.

As I have said before in these talks, the corporal and spiritual works of mercy are all about treating with dignity. Clothing the naked has a special quality of dignity because of the significance of the human body and clothing. I doubt if you will see a half-clothed beggar here on the street in Grand Blanc, but maybe you will one day. We can perform this corporal work of mercy by donating clothing to a donation center; especially in the winter months to help people stay warm. Clothing is beautiful, comfortable, and practical. It is beautiful because the human person is beautiful and what is beautiful should be complimented and accented with beauty. Clothing is comfortable to provide us with a sense of security, and it is practical to help us survive.

Working at the outreach center, I have seen how happy people can be when they find a piece of clothing they like. There is joy for both the one who receives the clothing and for the ones who give it. One day at the outreach center, a woman was so excited to fit into a shiny red top that she found, and we were all happy for her too. It is very satisfying when mothers come and get coats for their little ones. You are happy that it will help keep them warm.

Although people wear clothes they may still be naked in other ways. We should also try to clothe them. When a person's reputation has been damaged by gossip, aren't they naked in a certain sense? We have the responsibility to clothe them too. When someone is alone and without support in the face of a difficulty, we can clothe them with the support of our friendship.

Scripture mentions clothing many times. The way scripture presents clothing can help us to reflect on our dignity as children of God, and how we should try to affirm that dignity in each other.

Starting in the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve both “were naked, yet they felt no shame.” (Genesis 2:25) They both were created in God’s image and likeness; in a sense they were clothed with his love and affirmation. They were secure in his love and were not afraid of each other. When they disobeyed God, they disregarded the dignity which God had already clothed them in; although they were already created to be like God, they desired to be like God without him. A separation resulted between them and God and between themselves. The man and the woman became afraid and mistrusting of God and each other. They tried in a pathetic way to clothe themselves with fig leaves. Being banished from their original innocence, God clothed them in animal skins as a necessary protection, since they in a sense had thought that their own skin was not good enough. But God would send his Son clothed in human flesh to restore our fallen nature by uniting it with his divine nature. To accomplish our redemption, he was led to a place of execution, stripped of his earthly garments, and put to death in our place. In his nakedness and death, we have been redeemed.

We continue to find this mystery expressed in our sacramental life. In baptism, we are given a white garment to show that we have been clothed in Christ, that our old nature has been transformed and renewed in Christ. The alb which the priest wears represents the white garment of our new life. All the vestments which the priest wears are in some way symbolic of Christ in order to represent the dignity of the priest’s nature as an *alter Christus*, another Christ.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, when the son returns to his father, the father says to his servants, “Quick! Bring out the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Take the fatted calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and is found.” The father clothes his son in fine garments to express that he is his son, not a servant. He is reconciled to the father.

The dignity of being children of God and members of the Church is also expressed in terms of a wedding garment. In the book of revelation, John sees “a new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, beautiful as a bride prepared to meet her husband.” (Rev 21:2). And in the book of the prophet Isaiah it is written: “I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul, for he has clothed me with a robe of salvation and wrapped me in a mantle of justice like a bridegroom adorned with a diadem, like a bride bedecked with her jewels.” (Isaiah 61:10).

The images of the bride, the prodigal son, and Adam and Eve, reminds us of the incredible love which God has for us and the amazing dignity that he has given to us. It is helpful to remember this love and dignity that we have so that we may treat others in accordance with that love and dignity. If God loves us so much and calls us his sons and daughters, who are we to treat people any less than that? May the Lord help us to clothe the naked and perform every corporal and spiritual work of mercy so that when we meet him we may understand like St. Martin of Tours that all of these good deeds that we will have done for people were really done to the Lord himself.

Questions for reflection

Can you think of other kinds of nakedness which people suffer from? How can we help to “clothe” them? How can we help affirm the dignity in others?

Is there a concrete experience of this work of mercy which you can share?