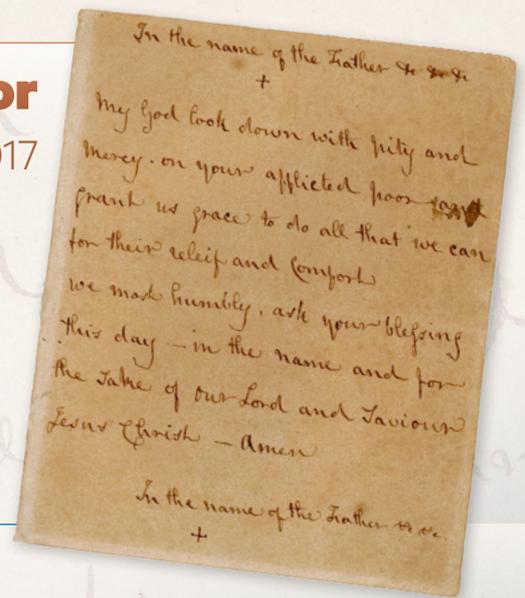


# World Day of the Poor

19 November 2017



Catherine McAuley's original handwritten prayer for the poor.

## A Prayer for Persons who are Poor

My God, look with compassion and mercy on those who are poor, and grant us grace to do all that we can for their relief and comfort.

We ask your blessing this day – in the name and for the sake of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ

Amen.

Contemporary version of Catherine's prayer for the poor from *Praying in the Spirit of Catherine McAuley, A Collection of Prayers* written or compiled by the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.



In his Message announcing the **First World Day of the Poor** (November 19, 2017), Pope Francis is not asking us simply to focus for twenty-four (24) hours on the poor. He is begging us to act—in the preceding week and throughout our lives—in concrete ways that carry on the Gospel mission of embracing, sharing with, and advocating for those who are emotionally, materially, economically, politically, or spiritually poor in any way. As his own life demonstrates, Francis is not into one-day, short-term stints of mercifulness.

For us in the Mercy family, November 19 can be a loud wake-up call—a summons to personal and communal self-examination and conversion. We say that we are committed to the merciful accompaniment and service of those who are poor. When was the last time I embraced a poor person, listened to his or her story, and then concretely shared what I am and have with that person? What are my tangible, daily encounters with the poor? Do I ever walk the streets of our poorest neighborhoods; go to prisons, shelters, or soup kitchens; visit the hospital wards of the poorest patients; or sit down and talk with homeless people sleeping under bridges, on warm air vents or park benches? Or are my encounters with them merely words, theoretical ideals articulated in our Mercy foundational documents?

In her "Prayer for the Poor People," Catherine McAuley begs God for the "grace to do all that we can for their relief and comfort" – "all that we can," not just a few occasional gestures in the general direction of the distant poor.

We might begin to honor the First World Day of the Poor by sitting down for awhile and meditating on our hands -- yes, our human hands. Are my hands withered? Are they innocently withered, by physical ailment or accident, like the hand of the man whom Jesus heals in Mark's gospel (3:1-6)? Or are my hands shriveled, dried up, devitalized by disuse in relation to those who are poor?

Francis sees the World Day of the Poor as a time for "deeds" and "works," not just "words."

The deeds he urges are encounter (embrace) and sharing. Over and over he asks for "outstretched hands" that touch and share with -- in true and tangible solidarity -- our sisters and brothers in need.

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He pleads for our genuinely coming to know, embrace, and stand with real persons who are stricken by material poverty or social need; and then sharing with them whatever will help them—sharing not what is falsely called “mine,” but what is already truly “ours.”

So let us ask our human hands: Have you ever really embraced persons who are poor in some way? And while you are embracing them, have you really listened to their feelings, and conveyed to them your respect, understanding, and compassion? For Francis, this is human encounter, the human act of reaching out, drawing near, touching, and conversing with others as equals. When was the last time I held the hand of a poor person, or put my hand on the shoulder or arm of a person impoverished in some crippling way? Our human hands are God-given instruments for such spiritual and corporal solidarity. If our hands cannot reach across the globe to the devastated Rohingya, Puerto Ricans, and South Sudanese, can we not at least carry their “dejected faces” in our hearts as Catherine McAuley did, and be a voice crying out for the justice and mercy owed to them?

Catherine used to say that “our mutual respect and charity is to be cordial; now cordial signifies something that revives, invigorates, and warms” (Practical Sayings, 5). Wouldn't it be wonderful if during the weeks preceding and following the First World Day of the Poor we engaged in a strenuous renewal of our efforts to revive, invigorate, and warm the poor of our world, while humbly receiving from them their own gifts of reviving, invigorating, and warming truth and love.

On November 11 as we remember the human death of Catherine McAuley, let us look at her dear hands, hands worn out by years of Days of the Poor. Early that morning she had, with these hands, tied up her old boots and sent them to the kitchen fire, her walking to encounter and share with the poor now over. Then, “about five in the evening, she asked for the blessed candle to be placed in her hand” (Elizabeth Moore, November 21, 1841)—her hand made ready for the redeeming hand of Christ by all the suffering poor it had embraced with sensitivity and compassion.

That November Day so long ago was the quiet culmination of a Lifetime of Days of, with, and for the Poor. May we all be taught and inspired by it.

Mary C. Sullivan, RSM