CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY
What they are and how you can live them BY BILL SCHOLL

The theme of mercy runs throughout the papacy of Pope Francis — so much so that he has declared an extraordinary jubilee Year of Mercy to start this Dec. 8.

But Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann was not caught out by the “pope of surprises” this time. Before Pope Francis even announced his jubilee year, a key component of it — the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy — had already been incorporated into the archbishop’s specific initiatives for the archdiocese.

For the next 10 years, in fact, the church in northeast Kansas will be encouraging and coaching Catholics on how to cultivate relationships through the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Archbishop Naumann is inviting all Catholics to learn the corporal works of mercy and look for opportunities to practice them.

Memorize the corporal works of mercy

The archbishop is encouraging all Catholics to memorize the corporal works of mercy. The mnemonic device “THIS HaND,” can help. T is for thirsty, H is for hungry, and so on. Only the “A” in hand is silent.

Thirsty: Give drink to the thirsty
Hungry: Give food to the hungry
Imprisoned: Visit the imprisoned
Sick: Care for the sick
Homeless: Shelter the homeless
Naked: Clothe the naked
Dead: Bury the dead
The average American is never more than a few steps away from clean, safe drinking water; sadly, such is not the case in the rest of the world. According to the World Health Organization, 2.6 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water. As a result, they have all kinds of health problems. Access to food alone won’t stop malnutrition when people can’t digest the food because of waterborne parasites.

Ideas: Research charities such as Catholic Relief Services that work to provide the poor with access to clean drinking water. Some Catholics choose to show spiritual solidarity by fasting from a favorite beverage and donating some of the funds to help.

The United States has the largest prison population in the world with one in every 100 American adults incarcerated at any given time, with the majority eventually returning to the community. Kansas has a wonderful mentorship program called Mentoring4Success that encourages people of faith to mentor inmates set for release. Each of the area Kansas prisons has Catholics who visit the inmates to minister to them.

Ideas: Besides researching Mentoring4Success, Catholics interested in getting involved in prison ministry can check with their parish to find out what prison ministry opportunities are available in their area, or contact the archdiocesan office for social justice. St. Dismas Prison Outreach (SDPO.org) helps to coordinate visits to some jails.

Given the facts about the situation of the poor around the world, we are challenged to find ways to show Christ’s love to our brothers and sisters throughout the world. For example, the problem of hunger or the need for a place to live are very tangible and we can do something about them here in our own area. In order to do that, we need to think about our own way of life in order to see how we can contribute.

Ideas: Have your parish organize a food drive, especially during the summer months when food needs go up and giving goes down. Many parishes help at local soup kitchens. Serving can also be a great way to encounter Christ by directly meeting people in need.

The impact of loneliness is magnified by sickness, infirmity or old age. It is a great mercy to accompany someone when they are ill. As Christians, we encounter the suffering Christ. We are like Simon of Cyrene, helping Christ carry his cross when we visit someone in the hospital or at the nursing home.

Ideas: Find out how you and your family can volunteer to help at a nursing home. Reach out to the people in the parish who are sick by offering to make meals or help family members care for their sick relative. Volunteer with Catholic Charities Hospice.

Our Lord himself experienced many episodes of homelessness, starting at birth and even ending with him buried in another’s tomb. In the face of the homeless, he challenges us when he says, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35). In our own day, it may not always be prudent to welcome strangers into our home, but helping charities that help the homeless and prevent homelessness can be a great way to start.

Ideas: Besides supporting your local homeless shelter, carrying around Ziploc bags with things like socks and toiletries in your car can be a great way to help the homeless when you encounter them.

God imbed our body with great dignity and so it is important that everyone is clothed with necessary, appropriate attire. Whether it is St. Francis giving his fine clothes to a shabbily dressed, embarrassed knight or St. Martin of Tours cutting his military cloak to save a freezing beggar, Christian tradition has always celebrated the dignity of the body by clothing the naked. While helping the poor who have no clothes is a first concern, practicing this virtue also entails a reflection on how we dress as well.

Ideas: Give your gently used clothes to charity. One great tip is to hang all your clothes with the hook facing toward you. When you wear and wash them put them back the normal way. At the end of the season give away the clothes you see you haven’t worn.

While Jesus Christ enumerated the first six corporal works of mercy in the Gospel of Matthew, the church adds a seventh. This merciful act is also drawn from Scripture by the example of Tobit in the Old Testament who is exiled for his righteous work of burying the dead. As Catholics, we believe that everyone who has ever lived will one day be reunited with their body. As it says in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the Resurrection. The burial of the dead is a corporal work of mercy; it honors the children of God, who are temples of the Holy Spirit” (2300).

Ideas: Help with your parish’s funeral ministry. Donate to Catholic Cemeteries to pay for the burial of the poor.