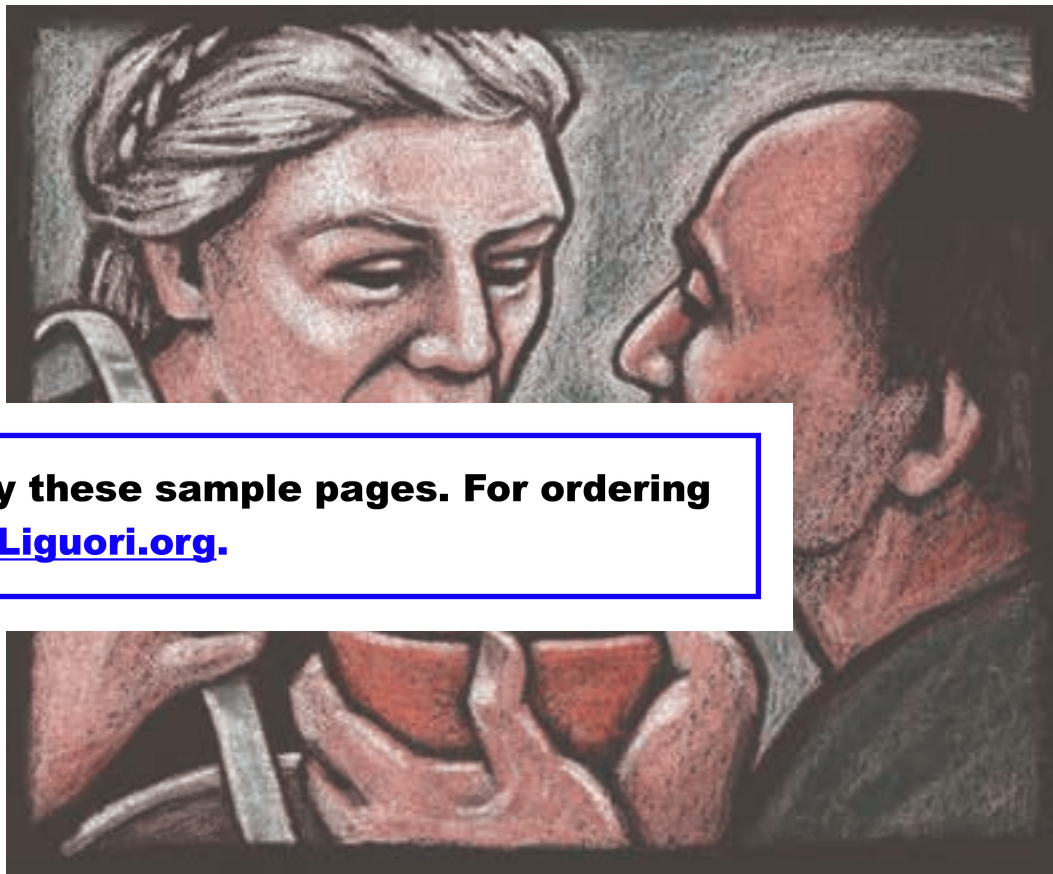


THE WORKS OF MERCY

Heart of
Catholic
Identity



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by James F. Keenan, SJ

Could mercy be the trademark for Catholicism? After all, we share much of our faith with other Christians, even with Jews and Muslims. We even share many things that make up our faith with all people of goodwill everywhere. But the works of mercy—those really are uniquely Catholic. Perhaps that's why Pope John Paul II named the Sunday after Easter as Divine Mercy Sunday (see box on p. 3). In this *Update* we'll take a look at what mercy means, and then how our corporal and spiritual works of mercy flow from mercy itself: God's grace in our lives.

Salvation: mercy's key

First, if we look closely at the Good Samaritan parable (Lk 10:25-37), we see that the story of our salvation is completely in the key of mercy.

Why does Jesus tell this parable? Jesus has just given the love commandment (to love God, our neighbor and ourselves). Then one of the scribes asks him, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus then tells the parable.

A close reading of it gives a very surprising answer to the question. Are

we not thinking that the answer to the question "Who is my neighbor?" will be the man lying wounded along the road? But it is not. The answer is the Samaritan. The *neighbor* is the one who shows mercy.

In the first thousand years of the Church, the parable was primarily preached on two levels: first, what Christ accomplishes for us; then, what we ought to do for others. For instance, Venerable Bede (English monk and Doctor of the Church, d. 735) wrote that the injured man who lies outside the gates is Adam, wounded by sin,