even simply asking how I’m feeling has certainly lightened the load. These confrères, like Simon of Cyrene, help me carry this cross of healing a broken foot, and I’m not sure I would have been able to do it on my own without the mercy of the community.

Christ calls us to “be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Lk. 6:36). If we expect to attract and retain new vocations to our communities, we must show mercy and compassion to our brothers and sisters with whom we live. This doesn’t necessarily need to be done on a grand scale, but small, daily acts of compassion to one another cultivate a loving environment in which new life can grow and prosper.

Our vocation is a gift we probably don’t deserve, yet God in his goodness grants us this way of life that will ultimately lead us to him. Our duty in receiving this precious gift is to recognize our own brokenness and, like Uncle Jesse, have the courage to accept it with an enthusiastic “Have Mercy!” It is only then that we’re able to extend the same mercy, not only to our brothers and sisters but also to any prospective candidates.

**MERCY AT HEART OF VOCATION**
*By Sister Camille D’Arienzo, R.S.M.*

Among the endearing qualities of Pope Francis’ example of loving leadership is his promotion of the virtue of mercy. In this, his soul partners with that of William Shakespeare who explained mercy in the words of Portia, spoken to Shylock in Act IV, Scene 1 of *The Merchant of Venice*:

The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice bled;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
’Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown:
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;

Family members sometimes need the mercy of the religious community as they adjust to their loved one’s new life as a sister, brother, or priest. Pictured here is Brother Andre Dedecker, O.S.B. embracing his father, Darrel, after his first vows ceremony with the monks of St. Meinrad Arch-abbey. Behind them is his mother, Henrietta.
It is enshrined in the hearts of kings,  
It is an attribute to God himself;  
And earthly power doth then show likest God’s  
When mercy seasons justice.

As Shakespeare fathomed, mercy is a foundational quality of God; it is inherent in the essence of God. Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology connects the English term “mercy” with a Hebrew term hesed, which means God’s covenant’s loving kindness.

Mercy is central to an appreciation of God’s dealings with humankind. In English translations of the Bible, mercy makes this connection and shows us that this quality is also one that God requires of his people. It describes not just feelings or emotions, but compassion and love, as expressed in tangible ways.

Although people have the capacity for showing mercy, especially toward relatives, friends or others who claim their sympathy, (1 Kgs. 20:31; Isa. 49:15; Jer. 31:20; 1 Macc. 2:57), the human extension of mercy often lacks the called for generosity. This deficit seems more natural to the human condition (Prov. 5:9; 12:10; Isa. 13:18; 47:6; Jer. 6:23; 50:42; cf. Wisd. of Sol. 12:5). God, on the contrary, cannot be defined without mercy because “God is love.” Mercy, therefore, is an inexhaustible expression of God’s nature.

Mercy and hesed, the term for God’s covenant love, are integrally related. So close is the relationship that hesed sometimes is to be viewed in terms of mercy. In this relationship, mercy then comes to be seen as the quality in God that directs him to forge a relationship with people who absolutely do not deserve to be in relationship with him.

The parables that Jesus offered sparkle in a firmament darkened by evil. They recount alternate ways of responding to the sinner. We see this in the story of the Prodigal Son which, in truth, exposes the prodigal affection of the father. There’s no evidence that he’s planning ways to scold or punish his errant son. No, his love makes him only able to wait and hope and burst into welcome when his dissolute son returns to him, having sullied his own virtue and the family reputation.

Examples of mercy afforded by Jesus are often embedded in the outreach to individuals in need of spiritual or physical healing. These are often people incapable of returning favors or expressing appreciation. His hands tenderly touched the bodies of people from whom others fled—lepers for sure. It is as if his need to demonstrate his pity, his compassion, was greater than the suffering one’s need to receive it.

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**Mercy is central to religious life**

As followers of Jesus naturally the acceptance of and extension of mercy is at the heart of a religious vocation. The 16th century mystic, Teresa of Avila, understood this well, telling her sisters:

- Christ has no body now on earth but yours,  
- No hands but yours,  
- No feet but yours.  
- Yours are the eyes through which  
- Christ’s compassion  
- Is to look out to the world.

These words demonstrate a profound comprehension of the essence of a call to religious life. They also support a life lived in community. It is through the example and influence of our sisters that we gain the courage and wisdom to offer God’s love and mercy to others, especially to the loveless and unlovable. It is the persistent faith in the potential for conversion that allows us to reach out, to speak out, and to wait in patient silence for conversion. And sometimes patience itself has to be discarded. Catherine McAuley, the 19th century foundress of my religious community, insisted, “The poor need help now; not next week.”

The annals of the Brooklyn Sisters of Mercy contain an account of an outreach of mercy driven by urgency. For the man recorded as “The prisoner Greenwall” time was truly running out. Incarcerated in a local jail, John Greenwall was awaiting execution for a crime he insisted he had not committed.

Although he observed the sisters visiting other prisoners, his anger was so deep that he rebuffed their efforts to make contact with him. However, as time passed and his execution date drew near, he summoned them and they, after winning his trust, convinced him to welcome a Father O’Hara, the priest who administered the last rites.

On December 6, 1889 John Greenwall was the last man to die by hanging in New York State. His guilt was never fully confirmed.

As one who has spent 10 years visiting a man on death row (after which his death sentence was reduced to life in prison without parole) I suffered the dismay and discomfort of interacting with a repentant murderer who was anticipating death by lethal injection. He had three dates for this procedure and I spent hours in his presence before the executions were postponed and finally dismissed. Finding words for the impact of those vigils is beyond difficult for me. I cannot fathom what it must be for the one who waits to have his life ended.

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Good works and mercy

There are so many ways to become the hands and feet and heart of God to the desperate and abandoned. Those at the receiving end of love and mercy may be grateful enough to express appreciation; however the wise ones among us who extend kindness will neither require nor expect it. They understand the counsel St. Vincent de Paul gave to members of his fledgling religious community:

You will soon learn that charity is a heavy burden to bear, heavier than the kettle of soup and the basket of bread... But you must keep your gentleness and your smile.

It’s not enough to give bread and soup. That the rich can do. You are the little servant of the poor, the Maid of Charity, always smiling, always in good humor. The poor are your Masters, terribly sensitive and exacting, as you will see.

But the uglier and dirtier they are, the more unjust and bitter, the more you must give them of your love. It’s only because of your love, only your love, that the poor will forgive you the bread you give them.

Those who live their lives conscious of the example of Jesus, perhaps anticipating some future reward, have blessings enough in the certainty that God who sees the heart will reward it. As religious, we cannot expect that our efforts to be the mercy of God will result in appreciation and good feelings.

Still, sometimes acting as a conduit of God’s mercy brings us blessings when we least expect it. We can go through life often unaware of how our smallest kindness may fill a great void. This came home to me recently when I stopped in a McDonald’s for a cup of coffee.

The place was pretty empty, so I struck up a conversation with the young woman serving me. I asked if she was attending college. She replied that she’d graduated from high school the previous June and was working to earn enough for tuition. I told her that I had been a college professor for many years and was sure I’d enjoy having her as my student. To my surprise, she came from behind the counter, wrapped her arms around my neck and sobbed.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. To which she answered, “No one ever speaks to me the way you just did.”

A few minutes later I went to my car and returned with a $20 bill I keep for an emergency. I offered it to her for her college fund.

She declined it, saying, “No. I don’t want your money. What you just gave me is worth so much more.”

We who are members of religious communities carry within us the heritage of our foremothers and forefathers who challenged authority for the sake of the dependent and discarded. We have learned from their strength to explore alternate ways of getting behind doors closed to us. We often know the ways to gain trust and help and to offer both when others’ needs arise. We can see wounds invisible to others, and we are not afraid to tenderly touch those who hurt, to offer mercy and a word of love.

I write these words a few days after celebrating my 64th anniversary as a Sister of Mercy. I know that the greatest gift I could offer a young woman looking for an outlet for her love is the invitation to “Come and see.”

Come see what religious life is. Come and grow in mercy, which, as Shakespeare understood, is to grow in God—for the two are one.