

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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Mercy: The Language God Speaks **Bringing Adult Faith Formation in Catholic Education to Life**

*by Dr. Anne Walsh in Conversation with
Superintendent Lorrie Naar and Principal Norm Roberts*

*Anne Walsh is an educator and recognized leader in Adult Faith Formation in the Catholic Church in Canada. She was a keynote speaker at our 2023 symposium **On the Way**. In keeping our symposium theme alive, Anne reflects for us on God's mercy. Let us remember we are all... **On the Way!** Anne shares her stories to engage each of us in the conversation.*

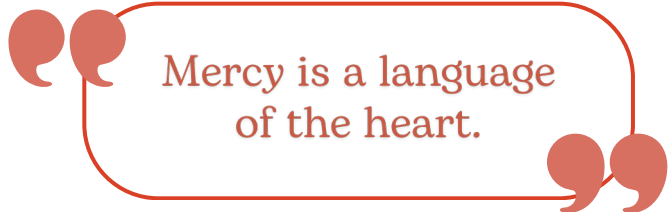
Let me tell you a story about something that happened one night when I was out walking with my father. I was no more than eight years old. Dad worked in the downtown core of the city, and also sang in our cathedral, which is also downtown in St John's. So he often came upon men who lived pretty much on the margins, invisible to many people. Dad often bought them coffee or a sandwich. He knew them all by name, and they knew him. One of these men, a man named Walter Morrissey, met us on our walk, and I boldly said, "Hello, Walter." Dad stopped, turned and looked me in the eye, and corrected me, "He's your elder. Speak properly to him." And I, of course, said, "Good evening, Mr. Morrissey."

Human dignity is the cornerstone of justice. Dad taught me that lesson many, many times — not in those words, of course, but in actions and gestures. I learned about justice by watching my mother and father in ordinary human interactions.

As a student and later a teacher and program coordinator in the Catholic Schools of Newfoundland and Labrador, that commitment to promote the dignity of each person and all persons, and to build communities of justice and peace, was deepened.

Mercy is a Language

We talk about doing the Corporal Works of Mercy, but there's much more to it than that. Mercy is a language. It is the language that God speaks. It is not a language like English, Spanish, French or Portuguese. Mercy is a language of the heart. It is a language of gestures and action, of showing, rather than saying, how deeply you care, how much you want the family, the school, the community or the world to be places where life can be lived to the full.

**Mercy is a language
of the heart.**

Learning the language of mercy needs to be a focus for Christians in today's world, and the goal of every member of our Catholic school community is to become fluent. Jesus calls all of us to become speakers of the language of mercy!

Hopefully, we first learn the language of mercy at home in our families. But regardless of where or how or when we were introduced to this language, like all language learning, mercy requires practise.

The Works of Mercy

We learn and practice God's language of mercy in our Catholic schools. In our communities of Catholic education, mercy can be found in everyday encounters. Mercy in action is the welcoming smile for everyone. With and among our students and staff, mercy is the outstretched hand, rather than the crossed arms. To our parents, mercy is the understanding word, rather than an impersonal response. To those who err, mercy is the Holy Thursday spent among prisoners rather than in a full church among the committed believers. Mercy is a choice. It is a decision to go out — out of the comfortable, the safe — to the unknown, uncomfortable areas of our community and the world where mercy is most needed.

Mercy is a choice that you and I must make, not once for a lifetime, but in every single encounter of every day, every time we open a classroom door, every time we round a corner of a school hallways, every time we encounter another person. For adults in our community of Catholic Education, faith formation happens through experience and — most importantly — through reflecting on our experiences.

As we practise merciful action, we become more merciful. Becoming more merciful is the goal of adult faith formation — becoming ever more fluent speakers of the language of God. God hears the cries of those who struggle and suffer through *your* ears. God sees through *your* eyes. And God expresses mercy and compassion through *your* heart and hands.

Jesus calls all of us to become speakers of the language of mercy!

Wherever people are crying today, God places God's own abundant love and compassion in the hearts of all people. Whenever one responds, speaking God's language of mercy, the cries of someone in need are answered. We teach our students about the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Let us consider these works as educators.

Corporal Works of Mercy	Spiritual Works of Mercy
<p>Feed the hungry Give drink to the thirsty Give alms to the poor Shelter the homeless Visit the sick Visit the imprisoned Bury the dead</p>	<p>Instruct the ignorant Counsel the doubtful Admonish the sinner Forgive injuries Comfort the sorrowful Bear wrongs patiently Pray for the living and the dead</p>

How do we hear the cry of others? How can we become aware of the struggles of others?

Listen with your heart. There are many ways to be hungry, and people are hungry for more than food. Have you ever spent time telling stories to a child? Have you ever helped an adult to learn a new skill? If you have done this, you have met a human hunger in a practical way, and in doing so, you have spoken God's language of mercy.

Look around you. Some people don't have adequate clothing. Others are stripped, not of physical clothing, but of their dignity or self-worth. If you have ever helped someone get back up on their feet after a set-back, you have spoken God's language of mercy, and shared God's compassion with someone in need.

Listen below the surface. You may never have welcomed a person experiencing homelessness into your home. But if you have ever welcomed a troubled friend and heard their story over a cup of tea in a warm kitchen, you have given shelter to someone who needed a safe harbour.

Listen with a wise and discerning heart. In our Catholic Schools, our approach to discipline, based in the spiritual works of mercy, is characterized by seeing the infinite dignity in all persons, and acting from the firm conviction that God is at work in the lives of each of us. Through the way we treat each other, God is at work, healing and binding up wounds and calling us to fullness of life.

Mercy is the language God speaks. Mercy is a core value for us in the vineyard of Catholic Education today. God's invitation, held out to us in every encounter, is to become more and more conversant in God's language of mercy and compassion, and to share God's overflowing love with reckless abandon in a world that desperately needs to know and experience this kind of love and mercy.

Let's Talk...



Great is your mercy, O LORD (Psalm 119:156)

During the Covid pandemic, we faced a number of challenges as we continued to deliver curriculum through online platforms. So much of that time was less than ideal. Our pedagogy is rooted in community building and respecting the dignity of each person as a child of God called to share their beauty with the world. The computer keyboards and monitors left us wanting and looking for new ways to connect and share our lives.

As a principal it was my role to navigate the tension between curriculum expectations and the wellbeing of students and teachers. It was a time of trying to respect the integrity of course content and facilitate empathetic hearts amongst our teachers and staff. It became evident that compassion, kindness, gentleness and mercy were integral to maintain the essence of our Catholic community. But, before we could extend kindness and mercy to our students, we had to look in the proverbial mirror and show that same mercy to ourselves. We were doing our best and had to believe that we were not alone — the Holy Spirit was leading us.

Catholic educators need to be proactive in choosing mercy as a response to the call of Christ. Seek out those in our hallways, classrooms and cafeterias who need kindness and mercy to recognize their existential goodness as a child of God. We can only answer this call if we first show that mercy to ourselves. We are called to be merciful to others just as God has already been merciful to us.



In what ways does reflecting on God's mercy challenge us personally?



Hearing Mercy Spoken through the OCSGE

As we reflect on our 'why' in Catholic Education, we look to the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations. The OCSGE's represent the hopes and dreams that we have for our students as they journey through our schools. Mercy is a core value in the OCSGE's as they embody compassion, forgiveness, and kindness. These hopes are centered around ensuring our students are loving human beings that will encounter God in their lives and who will love their neighbour, care for their community, and contribute to society. We see this call in Micah 6:8. "What does the Lord require of you? Do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

In our Catholic schools our staff are our greatest asset in providing meaningful experiences, role modelling, and affording opportunities for students to make connections with God and our faith. Through the Catholic learning environment that our staff create for our students they can help students find their 'why'. To do this, we must ensure that our staff have a full spiritual life and are witnesses to all that we want for students. It is essential that we create meaningful and ongoing faith formation opportunities for staff to continue to nourish their faith, and in turn bring that faith to our students. To authentically engage in faith, adults need to find experiences that are meaningful for them. This requires us to provide opportunities that meet staff where they are and allow them to experience a variety of ways to engage spiritually. Doing so will help to foster a vibrant, faith-filled community that integrates, models and nurtures the values in the OCSGE's into our students' educational experiences and personal growth.



How do you see the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations as a helpful tool for reflection for educators in our own spiritual development?



What does the Lord require of us? How do you see mercy in relations to justice, kindness and our humble walk with God?



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You can access the webinar discussion between Dr. Walsh, Lorrie Naar and Norm Roberts here:

<https://iceont.ca/two-part-webinar-series-in-conversation-with-dr-anne-walsh/>



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