

Clothing the naked and sheltering the homeless

One of my favorite saints' stories is about St. Martin of Tours. As the legend goes, one day, Martin, a young soldier, saw a beggar on the side of the road. It was freezing and this man had barely any clothes. Martin had little to give him, so he took his own cloak, cut it in half with his sword, gave half to the beggar and wrapped himself in the other half. This powerful story can give us a good framework for living this month's works of mercy: sheltering the homeless and clothing the naked.

No Act Is Too Small

St. Martin didn't have a lot to give, but his small, humble act of giving went a long way. We, too, can look for opportunities to build serving others into our daily routine. If we pass a person who is homeless every day at the same place, we can plan to bring a sandwich along or a pair of gloves or socks. We can visit a homeless shelter on the weekends and help serve a meal. We can organize regular clean-outs of our homes and give away any good quality items that we do not use. The small, everyday acts we do form habits that can change our whole lives and even ripple out to our neighbors.

Plan Ahead

St. Martin responded to the need in front of him without hesitation, which is what makes his story so powerful. But since there is a shortage of good swords nowadays, planning in advance can go a long way toward making what we give really count. When it comes to donating clothing, check in advance to see what is most needed. A lot of items like new socks or underwear, particular sizes, or toiletries are in high demand at many homeless shelters and rarely get donated. Call ahead

to see what the organization really does (and doesn't) need.

Make Contact

As you go about doing small acts of service, pay attention to the people you encounter. Take time to smile at those you serve a meal to. Look the person in the eyes as you hand them their socks. Share a conversation or a prayer with the person on the street or in the shelter. You may be surprised by what you learn. When we live the works of mercy, we have the opportunity to meet him – that is, Jesus – face to face.

Ways to Share

- Volunteer sorting clothing at a local thrift shop or spend a volunteer day cleaning out and organizing a nearby charity's clothes closet.
- Ask your parish about Catholic Charities and see if your local agency has a need for clothing donations.
- If there is a refugee resettlement agency in your area, there may be opportunities to donate clothing, furnishings or household goods, or to volunteer setting up a new home for a refugee family.
- People leaving prison are often left with nothing after years behind bars. If there is a program in your area that serves those being released, there may be a need for clothing, particularly professional clothing for job interviews.
- Some dress-for-success projects need high quality used or new business attire. See if there is an opportunity to donate specialty clothing in your area.