

To instruct the ignorant is the first spiritual work of mercy. Ignorant may sound like a harsh word, but it is a harsh reality. What is not known or understood can hurt a person, not only physically or legally, but also spiritually. It is a matter of spiritual life or death. It is merciful to inform someone about the faith and assist them on the road to their eternal salvation.

A person may be uninformed for a variety of reasons, some of which are innocent, others are not. It may be youth or inexperience, or that the person is without one or both parents, teachers, schools, materials or opportunity. Or a person may be uninformed because of laziness, narrow-mindedness, arrogance or erroneous information, deception or misguidance. No matter the root cause, it is a work of mercy to inform the uninformed.

Jesus is the master when it comes to instructing the ignorant. His heart was moved with compassion for the people because they were “like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9:36); they did not have good teachers and they had not received sound instruction. He went to all of their towns and villages, and he taught anywhere and everywhere. There were times that his disciples failed to understand when he would patiently take them aside to review and explain (Mt 13:36). Jesus also taught one-on-one, as when Mary sat at his feet to listen to him (Lk 10:39).

There is a misperception that Jesus was always gentle when he instructed the ignorant. There were times when Jesus was exasperated with his disciples’ lack of comprehension and he scolded them, saying, “You of little faith” (Mt 16:18), yet despite his frustration, he went on to inform their ignorance (Mt 16:9-12). There were other occasions when Jesus assertively and abrasively challenged the ignorant, particularly the scribes and the Pharisees, whose ignorance was due to their own pride and arrogance, saying, “Woe to you,” yet even in such heated conflict, he taught them about their shortcomings.

There are numerous examples in the Bible of those who instructed the ignorant. Jacob instructed his 12 sons, Eli instructed young Samuel in the temple, and the prophet Nathan instructed David about his sins. In the New Testament, Peter instructed the disciples who were ignorant about how to apply the Mosaic Law to Gentile converts, and Paul mentored Barnabas, Timothy and Silas to be missionaries.

When an occasion arises to instruct, prayer comes first. Pray for the person before saying a word. Pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance as to how to best approach the person, what to teach, and how to teach it. Consult sacred Scripture because it “is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). Check the Catechism, too.

Then, approach the person with sincere love and compassion. The goal is their spiritual welfare. Avoid being a know-it-all, and never lord superior knowledge over another. Do not belittle or talk down. St. Paul advises, “The spiritually informed are to be patient with the ill-informed” (paraphrase, Rom 15:1). Be discreet. Exercise humility and gentleness. Become firm and forceful only when necessary, and do so with great care and restraint, for the well-being of the person being instructed remains the ultimate goal.