



WALK IN THEIR SHOES: FAITH IN ACTION THROUGH IOCC

Youth Activities and Curriculum

Introduction

Throughout the year, Orthodox youth ministry programs across the country provide opportunities for young people to grow in faith and fellowship. This collection of activities is designed with flexibility in mind – you can choose to incorporate one or more activities during a single gathering, over several sessions, or as part of a special event.

The goal is to help young people learn more about the global work of International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) through faith, fun, and service. With hands-on experiences, team challenges, and thoughtful reflections, participants will explore how our Orthodox faith calls us to put that faith into action.

These activities hope to encourage young people to step outside their comfort zones, develop empathy and compassion, and discover how IOCC is making a difference around the world. They will also see how the Orthodox Church serves its neighbors, and how they can do the same in their own communities. While best suited for upper elementary and middle school students, these activities can be adapted for a wider age range as needed.

Below, you'll find IOCC-inspired activities ready to be woven into your youth group schedule, Sunday School curriculum, seasonal programming, or community service projects. Select the ones that best fit your youth group and goals.

Reflection Activities

- 1) **Quiet Time or "Alone with God" Time:** This is a great time for participants to spend some time in silence reflecting on the scripture that inspires IOCC's mission.
 - *Share:* Read Matthew 25: 35-36, 40: "For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me... as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

- *Reflect:* Ask the youth to take ten minutes of quiet time to reflect on the questions below.
 - Who is my neighbor? Who is a stranger? How can I pray for them today?
 - What are some ways we can show kindness and compassion to others?
 - How does this passage make you think about the way you engage with the world around you?
- *Materials (Optional):* Each year, IOCC creates a *Prayer Journal* for young people that offers a glimpse into the lives of children and families around the world. It's a great resource to include in a reflection time for the participants. If you'd like more information about the *Prayer Journal*, or would like to request free copies, visit ioccc.org/prayerjournal.

2) Walking in the Shoes of our Neighbor: This is a series of challenges for participants to understand what life might be like for people who don't have access to basic items. Break up into small groups and distribute the *Walking in the Shoes of our Neighbor* activity card. The goal is to see how many activities each group can complete throughout the course of the day.

- *Share:* Ask participants to use the activity card to complete the series of challenges to win points. Whichever group records the most points at the end of the day wins. The challenge is to try to go through the day without using certain things—like mirrors, electricity, or hot water—that we don't usually think about, but many people around the world don't always have access to. The goal is to have fun while learning empathy and understanding what it may be like to walk in someone else's shoes.
- *Reflect:* Use these questions to guide discussion after the activity.
 - Which challenge did you find the hardest? Why?
 - How did going without some of these everyday things help you understand what life may be like for someone who doesn't have them?
 - Can you think of a time when you took something for granted? How does this activity change the way you think about that?
 - What are some of the ways we can help others, near or far, who don't have the same resources we have?
- *Materials:* *Walking in the Shoes of our Neighbor* activity card included below.

3) Who is my neighbor? How is our Orthodox faith serving our neighbors?

Take a few moments to talk about IOCC's mission, impact, and ways to help.

- *Share:* Read IOCC's mission and inspiration passage:
 - IOCC's mission: IOCC, in the spirit of Christ's love, offers emergency relief and development programs to those in need worldwide, without discrimination, and strengthens the capacity of the Orthodox Church to so respond.
 - IOCC's inspiration passage, Matthew 25: 35-36,40: "For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me... as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."
- *Learn:* Choose from a series of IOCC highlights and stories:
 - Last year, IOCC served over 1.1 million people worldwide in 19 countries, including right here in the US.
 - In 2024, IOCC provided nutritious meals to over 63,000 students across 100 public schools in Lebanon.
 - In 2024, IOCC treated over 96,000 people with a painful disease called podocniosis, which causes painful swelling in the legs and feet.
 - In 2024, IOCC provided emergency aid in Gaza, including water, food, and hygiene items to people sheltering at St. Porphyrios Monastery.
 - After Hurricanes Helene and Milton struck the southeastern US, IOCC worked to muck-out and clean up damaged homes, preparing them for the rebuilding process.
 - *Hope and Health for a Displaced Family* (Gaza) story included below.
 - *A Mother and Son Flee Conflict* (Ukraine) story included below
 - *An Inspiring Story of Success* (Syria) story included below.
 - More stories can be found on iocc.org/latest
- *Reflect:* Use these questions to guide discussion after the activity.
 - "Whatever you did for the least..." – What does this mean to you?
 - How does this parable relate to us? Who is struggling around me?
 - How can I carry the spirit of Matthew 25 in my school, home, and parish?
 - What are three ways you can serve others right now?
 - What was one takeaway from the story we read about IOCC's work?

Hands-On Activities

- 1) **Weigh Your Food Waste:** During a shared meal, have each person collect and weigh their food waste using a bucket and scale. Make it a friendly competition by breaking up into groups to see which group produces the least waste, promoting mindful eating and awareness about food insecurity.
 - *Share:* Take a moment to consider how much food is wasted in just one meal. Now imagine what that waste could mean for families struggling with food insecurity. Millions of people around the world, including those in countries where IOCC works, don't know where their next meal is coming from.
 - *Learn:* Food security means making sure everyone in a society can easily get enough safe and healthy food at a reasonable cost. Food insecurity can lead to malnutrition, which harms physical growth, weakens the immune system, and affects mental health by increasing stress, depression, and anxiety. It also disrupts children's education and cognitive development, reinforcing a cycle of poverty and poor health across generations. According to the World Bank, in 2022, approximately 783 million people faced hunger, a rise of 122 million from 2019, largely due to the pandemic, conflicts, and extreme weather.

IOCC is actively addressing food insecurity in several countries, focusing on both immediate relief and long-term solutions.

 - **Lebanon:** IOCC provides vital food assistance to vulnerable families through emergency food parcels and a school snack program that delivers nutritious food to over 63,000 students in 100+ public schools. IOCC has also launched a community kitchen which provided hot meals to 33,610 Lebanese and refugee recipients, as well as bread to nearly 6,000 recipients, all over a six-month period. Additionally, monthly food packages improved food security for nearly 400 families, including both Lebanese and refugees. IOCC's award-winning community kitchen program also fosters connection and resilience by training women from both communities to prepare meals together.
 - **Ethiopia:** Malnutrition remains a critical issue, especially for children. IOCC has programs that provide highly nutritious foods, cooking and nutrition education, and training in sustainable farming practices to improve food access and prevent long-term health complications.
 - **Around the World:** IOCC's work extends to various countries, providing essential food aid, supporting agricultural projects, and promoting

sustainable food systems to break the cycle of hunger and poverty.

- *Reflect:* Use these questions to guide discussion after the activity.
 - What is food security and why does it matter?
 - What did you learn about food insecurity around the world from IOCC's work?
 - Were you surprised by how much food your cabin threw away? Why or why not?
 - What would it be like to go through the day not knowing where your next meal would come from?
 - What are some simple things you can do in your everyday life to waste less food?
 - *Materials:* Bucket for food waste, food scale
- 2) **Water Walk Obstacle Course:** Create an obstacle course competition and time participants carrying buckets of water across the course.
- *Share:* Take a moment to think about how much time and energy you devote (or don't need to devote) to accessing water every day. Around the world, millions of children walk miles – sometimes up to 10 miles a day – just to collect clean water. That's water to drink, cook with, bathe in. Now imagine doing this every single day, because your family depends on it to survive.
 - *Learn:* IOCC's water projects are making an impact in Lebanon, Syria, Uganda, and many other areas around the world in desperate need of conditions that meet the most basic living standards. The clean water we all need to survive – to drink, to bathe, to grow food without risking disease – is an essential human necessity. Here's what we're accomplishing:
 - Installing new wells and rebuilding damaged water and sewer lines
 - Building and repairing safe and sanitary school bathrooms
 - Implementing life-saving water purification systems
 - Teaching the right way to wash hands after using the bathroom and before eating and preparing food
 - Training the people who benefit from installed wells, water and sewer lines, and rainwater-harvesting systems to keep those systems functioning and do minor repairs with existing or donated tools
 - *Reflect:* Use these questions to guide discussion after the activity.
 - What do you think it would be like to do something like this every day?
 - Did anything about this experience surprise you?
 - How might walking long distances for water impact a person's health, education, or family life?
 - How can we be more mindful about our own water use

- *Materials:* Buckets to carry water, cones, pool noodles, or hula hoops to create an obstacle course.
- 3) **Hygiene and/or School Kit Assembly:** Organize an IOCC hygiene kit or school supply kit assembly for people in need around the world.
- *Share:* Emergency kits are small packages of essential supplies assembled in the United States and shipped to people in need around the world. Our hygiene and school supply kits are among the items most requested by our partners each year. Basic materials such as soap, shampoo, paper and pencils seem small but make a huge difference in an ongoing development program or when disaster strikes.
 - *Reflect:* Use these questions to guide discussion after the activity.
 - What items do we take for granted in our daily lives?
 - What are we thankful for?
 - How does it feel to know someone else would be using what you packed?
 - What impact do you think these kits could have on someone's daily life?
 - Why do you think hygiene and school items are some of the first areas that IOCC supports after a crisis?
 - *Materials:* Hygiene Kit and School Kit checklist are included below or visit iocc.org/kits to learn more. *Please note: IOCC does not provide kit materials, as they must be purchased locally. Kits can be assembled, packaged, and then shipped to the IOCC warehouse.*
- 4) **Letter-Writing Station:** Have the participants write encouraging letters to Orthodox homebound parishioners at local churches. Ask local priests for names and addresses of those who are homebound, in the hospital, or other people in need within their parish. If this is not possible, have the youth write letters to people who are special to them or may need encouraging words.
- *Share:* Read the stories of Saint Juliana and Mother Maria of Paris featured below.
 - *Reflect:* Use these questions to guide discussion after the activity.
 - Have you ever felt alone or that you didn't know who to talk to?
 - How can we show up for others in need within our own communities?
 - What did you learn about service and charity from St. Juliana's story?
 - *Materials:* Stationary, pens or pencils, envelopes, stamps, and lists of names and addresses. *Please note: IOCC cannot facilitate letter sending to beneficiaries.*

Evening Activity

- 1) **Akathist of Thanksgiving Service:** If your youth ministry activity involves evening prayers, consider singing the Akathist of Thanksgiving service instead, incorporating the activity below.
 - *Share:* Read the story of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker featured below.
 - *Reflect:* Use these questions to guide discussion after the activity.
 - How can we focus on gratitude and faith during hardship?
 - How can you carry a spirit of gratitude and service back home after this session?
 - What are some things you are thankful for?
 - How can we think about St. Nicholas' legacy when thinking about gratitude and service?
 - *Materials:* Click here to download the [Akathist of Thanksgiving PDF](#)

Learning Beyond the Session – Takeaway Activities

Let's inspire learning beyond a youth ministry activity! Below are five meaningful takeaways and action items that young people can incorporate at home. These are designed to help them extend their learning about IOCC, continue serving others, and apply their faith in everyday life.

1) Practice Daily Gratitude & Reflection

- *Takeaway:* Keep a short daily gratitude journal or prayer log.
- *Action Item:* Each night, write down one thing you're thankful for and one way you showed kindness to someone that day. Reflect on how God is present in those moments.

2) Build a Culture of Compassion

- *Takeaway:* Identify "neighbors" in need and offer support.
- *Action Item:* Choose one person in your life each week (a classmate, family member, parishioner) to encourage through a kind word, a helping hand, or a small act of service.

3) Assemble an IOCC Hygiene or School Kit

- *Takeaway:* You can make a big difference with something small.
- *Action Item:* Organize a mini project with your family, youth group, or Sunday School to assemble hygiene or school kits for those in need. Use IOCC's kit guidelines at ioccc.org/kits.

4) Live Out Matthew 25

- *Takeaway:* "Whatever you did for the least of these...you did for Me."
- *Action Item:* Make a "Matthew 25 List" of three ways you can serve others in the coming month – whether volunteering, donating gently used clothes, or visiting someone who may feel lonely. Post the list in a visible place and check them off as you go.

5) Pray for the World

- *Takeaway:* Our prayers can reach people around the world.
- *Action Item:* Choose one country each week where IOCC serves. Pray specifically for the people living there – especially children and families. Use a map or globe to learn about those places and keep them in your prayers.

Resources

St. Juliana the Merciful



St. Juliana the Merciful, commemorated on January 2, was known for her deep piety and compassion for the suffering. Born in the 16th C and orphaned early in life, she was taken in by relatives who ridiculed her devout nature, yet she endured their mockery with patience and grace. Despite her hardships, Juliana dedicated herself to prayer and acts of charity, nursing the sick and sewing clothes for the poor. Even during times of severe famine, she gave away her last morsel of food to a beggar, choosing to go hungry herself. When a devastating epidemic swept through her community, she devoted herself entirely to caring for the afflicted.

In her youth, Juliana's virtuous life attracted the attention of Yurii Osoryin, who soon married her. Her in-laws, impressed by her gentle spirit and diligent nature, entrusted her with the management of the household. Despite her many responsibilities, she remained unwavering in her devotion to prayer and service. She and Yurii were blessed with six sons and a daughter. Following the death of two of her sons, Juliana contemplated joining a monastery, but Yurii persuaded her to remain in the world to care for their children. According to her son, Kallistrat Osoryin, who later wrote her life story, Juliana increased her ascetic practices, sleeping only two hours each night and using a wooden board as her pillow.

After Yurii's death, Juliana gave away her portion of the inheritance to the poor and lived in poverty, yet she remained joyful, gracious, and thankful to God in all things. She continued her works of mercy, nursing the sick, feeding the hungry, and offering comfort to the destitute. Juliana was blessed with visions of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker and the Theotokos, who offered her guidance and reassurance.

Upon her repose, Juliana was buried next to her husband in the Church of St. Lazarus. In 1614, her relics were uncovered, exuding fragrant myrrh and becoming a source of healing for many. Today, she is venerated as a model of Christian charity and endurance, her life a testament to unwavering faith and boundless mercy.

Story adapted from [The Hub - Reaching Out: Our Call To Minister: Resource 3: The Life of Saint Juliana the Merciful - Orthodox Church in America](#). Icon courtesy of [oca.org](#)

Mother Maria of Paris



Mother Maria of Paris, born Elizaveta Pilenko in 1891 in Latvia, led a life marked by radical compassion. A gifted poet and intellectual, she was deeply involved in the Russian literary and revolutionary circles of her youth. After personal tragedies – including the death of her father, a failed marriage, and the loss of her daughter – Elizaveta’s faith deepened, transforming her heart toward a life of service.

Fleeing the Russian Revolution, she settled in Paris with her mother and surviving children. There, she became increasingly drawn to the suffering she saw around her – refugees, the poor, the lonely, and the marginalized. In 1932, after the death of another child, she took monastic vows with the blessing of Metropolitan Evlogy and became Mother Maria.

But Mother Maria redefined what it meant to be a nun. She refused to live in seclusion; instead, she believed that the Church must go out into the streets. She opened a home in Paris that served as a soup kitchen, shelter, and sanctuary. She fed the hungry, housed the homeless, and embraced the destitute with a mother’s love. Former prisoners, alcoholics, immigrants, and Jews fleeing the Nazis found in her a fierce defender and friend.

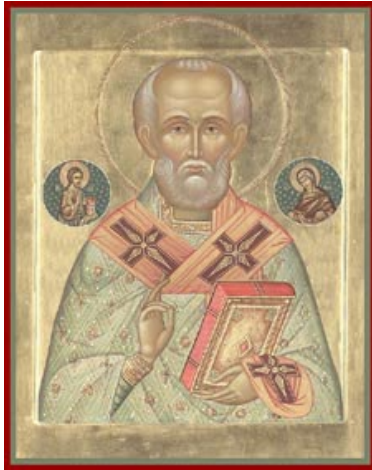
She often said, “At the Last Judgment I shall not be asked whether I was successful in my ascetic exercises, nor how many bows and prostrations I made. I shall be asked: did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick?” This conviction defined her life.

During World War II, her ministry became even more dangerous. Alongside Fr. Dimitri Klepinin and her son Yuri, she helped hide Jews and forged baptismal certificates to protect them. Eventually, she was arrested by the Gestapo. She was sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp, where she continued to share what little she had with fellow prisoners. She died there in 1945, reportedly taking the place of another woman selected for the gas chamber.

Canonized by the Orthodox Church in 2004, Mother Maria remains a shining example of faith in action – one who saw Christ in the face of every suffering person and served Him with boundless courage and love.

Story adapted from: [Righteous Martyr Maria \(Skobtsova\) - Orthodox Church in America](#). Icon courtesy of [oca.org](#)

St. Nicholas the Wonderworker



Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker, Archbishop of Myra in Lycia, was born in the 4th C to devout parents, Theophanes and Nonna in Patara. From his birth, he displayed signs of holiness, standing in the baptismal font for three hours as a newborn and refusing milk on Wednesdays and Fridays until his parents completed their prayers. Raised in a life of piety, he immersed himself in Scripture, prayer, and charity, distributing his inheritance to the poor.

Nicholas was ordained a priest by his uncle, Bishop Nicholas of Patara, who recognized the young man's spiritual depth and entrusted him with instructing the faithful. While still a young man, he secretly delivered gold to a man on the verge of selling his daughters into slavery, ensuring their honorable marriages and saving the family from ruin. This act began a life marked by secretive, generous deeds.

After a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Nicholas sought a life of seclusion in a monastery. However, he was called back to serve in Myra, where he was appointed archbishop. During the persecution of Christians under Emperor Diocletian, he was imprisoned but continued to encourage his flock. With the rise of Constantine, he was released and resumed his episcopal duties.

At the First Ecumenical Council in 325, Nicholas confronted the heretic Arius and, in a moment of fervor, struck him. For this, he was temporarily removed but was later reinstated after a vision in which Christ and the Theotokos returned his omophorion and Gospel.

Known for his boundless compassion, Nicholas performed numerous miracles. He saved three men unjustly condemned to death by stopping their execution and appearing to Emperor Constantine in a dream, convincing him to overturn their sentence. He also rescued sailors from a storm and provided food to the starving city of Myra.

In 1087, his relics were moved to Bari, Italy, where they continue to exude myrrh and attract pilgrims. Nicholas remains a revered saint across cultures, celebrated as a protector of children, travelers, and those in need. His legacy as a model of Christian charity endures, reminding the faithful of the power of humble, selfless love.

Icon courtesy of oca.org

IOCC Impact Stories

HOPE AND HEALTH FOR A DISPLACED FAMILY: Bringing Critical Aid to Gaza



Jana (not her real name), a young girl living in Gaza, had her life take a dramatic turn when conflict forced her family to flee their home. They suddenly found themselves living in a tent, struggling to make ends meet.

“We had no source of income, limited access to proper nutrition, and no clothing other than what we wore,” Jana’s mother Salam recalled.

But hope emerged through IOCC and its partner, Al Amal Rehabilitation Society, who were able to reach displaced families with critical food supplies in Rafah. As a result, IOCC was able to provide Jana’s family with hot meals for 28 days.

This nourishment and assistance reinvigorated Jana’s family. Her father reflected, “Our children, especially Jana, are healthier and more active now.”

With Jana’s health and strength recovered, the family envisions a brighter future. Her father added, “We hope for increased access to nutritious food and the continuity of these projects. Above all, we wish for a secure and dignified livelihood, where we can provide for our children’s needs and give them the opportunities they deserve.”

IOCC has worked in the Holy Land since 1997, collaborating with the local Orthodox church and other partners. Since the conflict escalated in October 2023, IOCC has stayed in close communication with local partners, delivering emergency food, medical support, and critical supplies to families like Jana’s.

[Hope and Health for a Displaced Family - International Orthodox Christian Charities](#)

A MOTHER AND SON FLEE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE: Antonina and Danilo Find Safety – and Hope



Antonina, 34, and her five-year-old son Danilo (not their real names) fled Ukraine for Poland in March of 2022. Antonina had no choice but to leave her husband, parents, and grandparents behind, as Danilo required surgery that couldn't be performed in Ukraine. Fortunately, they were able to find shelter at a refugee center in southern Poland.

Danilo has a genetic disorder, Klippel-Feil syndrome, which causes partial atrophy of his nerves and optic discs and hinders his motor and speech development. He also has a congenital heart defect that can only be corrected with surgery.

Antonina was able to find a special kindergarten for Danilo in Poland, but his schedule didn't leave her enough time to take a job. However, with funding from partner United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), and in collaboration with Eleos Poland, IOCC is helping Antonina and other Ukrainian refugees pay for essentials like food, clothes, medicine, public transportation, and rent.

The program has made it possible for Antonina to afford additional rehabilitation services for Danilo, and to buy the orthopedic equipment he needs to function and flourish. She is also able to purchase phone cards which allow her to talk with her family back in Ukraine.

As Antonina waits for Danilo's heart surgery, she remains grateful for all the help she has received, and for the generous support of the local community. She said, "The most important thing is Danilo and his health. I am happy that, despite the war, we are here among Polish friends who have welcomed us with open arms."

"Danilo's frequent smiles make me forget for a moment the situation in our homeland," she continued, "and the longing for loved ones. It is thanks to your support that we can live and sleep safely, despite worries and fears. I am very grateful to all of you for all your help, for every hand that reaches out to us."

[A Mother and Son Flee Conflict in Ukraine - International Orthodox Christian Charities](#)

AN INSPIRING STORY OF SUCCESS IN SYRIA: Helping Sanaa Realize Her Dream of University



At just eight years of age, Sanaa (not her real name), her parents, and her sister were forced to flee their family home in Syria due to intense fighting. Over the years, they were displaced several more times when conflict broke out again.

Sanaa's father, an agricultural engineer, took the only job he could find, working as a street vendor to support his family. Her mother, who had been denied the opportunity to attend university, feared that Sanaa would never realize her own dream of a university education.

But then, opportunity arose from despair. Since the conflict in Syria began, IOCC has worked with our local Orthodox partner, the Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development (DERD) of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, to address emergency needs, along with education and psychosocial support for displaced Syrians and Iraqi refugees.

One day, Sanaa learned about an educational support program through IOCC – and was immediately interested. The program targets vulnerable students seeking their 9th and 12th grade national certificates, while also providing opportunities in transitional grades, including 11th.

When Sanaa enrolled in the 11th grade, her teachers quickly realized that she had exceptional learning skills and was driven to excel. They worked diligently with her for two years so that she could take the national entrance exam for university.

Sanaa took the exam. She not only succeeded but also earned the highest result in her home governorate – enabling her to choose any college she wanted.

To recognize Sanaa's outstanding achievement, staff from IOCC/DERD met with her parents. Sanaa's father, his face streaked with tears, said: "I am so grateful for the support

you extended to my daughter. You made us feel that we have done something for our children, amid our loss. I wish the same for her sister as well.”

Sanaa plans to write and illustrate children’s books in English to convey stories to inspire kids in her country to persevere in the face of hardships and tragedies. She said, “My hopes for the future are high, and at times like these, I can confidently say that you have not merely helped a displaced girl to achieve her goal, you are motivating a generation of desperate children to hold on and fight hard for their futures. Many thanks....”

An Inspiring Story of Success in Syria - International Orthodox Christian Charities

Print Instructions:

The *Walking in the Shoes of our Neighbor* activity card is included below. It should be printed as one 8.5 x 11 piece of paper, double-sided, and then cut in half.

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Walking in the Shoes of our Neighbor Challenge

Which team can get the most tallies by the end of the day?

Staff will keep track of each complete task.

	No mirrors all day
	No snacks for the day
	Get ready without electricity
	Sleep without a pillow
	Wear the same shirt as yesterday
	Shower with cold water
	Tally how many times you use water
	Carry everything you need for the day to avoid gathering additional supplies.



**INTERNATIONAL ORTHODOX
CHRISTIAN CHARITIES**

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Matthew 25:35-40 (NIV)

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’”

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”



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