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-- Most of us were probably taught to think of faith and doubt as opposite attitudes. People of great faith never doubt God, or so we thought. But we know it's not as simple as that.

-- Just think of Mother Teresa, now a saint of the Church. All of us believe she had great faith. But we've discovered that she went through times of profound doubt, doubt that God was present in her life. She had to trust during those times that God was there despite her sense of his absence.

-- This weekend we consider the work of mercy: to counsel the doubtful. Perhaps we immediately think of people with great crises of faith who need help. Though that does happen, more often "counselling the doubtful" takes place in ordinary ways.

-- Frequently people need help navigating the daily challenges of life. Perhaps someone is discouraged because he can't kick a bad habit. Or another person is frustrated dealing with people at work and is uncertain how she will deal with this problem.

-- Though occasionally we can give definite answers to their questions, especially if this involves giving correct information, often the counsel we give comes by accompanying them in their struggles and offering them a bit of encouragement and support.

-- As a priest, I often encounter people in the Sacrament of Reconciliation who need such encouragement. Occasionally, they have a question for which I can answer. Often, though, they just need encouragement to deal with their challenges in living a faithful Christian life.

-- What does this have to do with God's word this weekend? Well, I believe the link between this work of mercy and God's word comes in the attitude we see in God and particularly in Jesus' own life and work.

-- The Book of Wisdom tells us that God is merciful and overlooks our sins so we can repent. God doesn't tell us that sin is OK, but neither is God standing ready to shoot us down. That is being a good counsellor.

-- St. Paul takes up God's attitude of merciful forbearance by helping people not to be overly alarmed by those who pedal fear. He is exercising a calming influence on people who are disturbed.

-- And Jesus reaches out to Zacchaeus despite the fact that he is hated by everyone around him. As bad as IRS agents are thought of today, that is tame compared to how his profession was thought of then. He was more like a modern drug kingpin or even a child pornographer.

-- Jesus still reached out to him and encouraged him in his efforts to change his life. He ate with him and his friends and announced God's grace and saving power to them.

-- This spiritual work of mercy, counselling the doubtful, invites us to accompany people around us facing challenges in their faith journey. On occasion, we may be able to offer them answers to their questions.

-- Often, though, we may simply need to listen to them without judging. We can offer encouragement to them to do what they know deep down in their heart is right. We can assure them that God has not given up on them.

-- For, in fact, all of us have our moments of doubt. Blind faith is in short supply these days, and that may not be all that bad. God gives us strength in our times of doubt, just as he gave it to saints like Mother Teresa.

-- "Counsel" may be a scary word to many of us. It may imply having great expertise or wisdom. But, in the end, it is God who has the ultimate wisdom.

-- If we rely on God as our strength, we can give that same strength to others. And there is no greater "counsel" we can give than that.