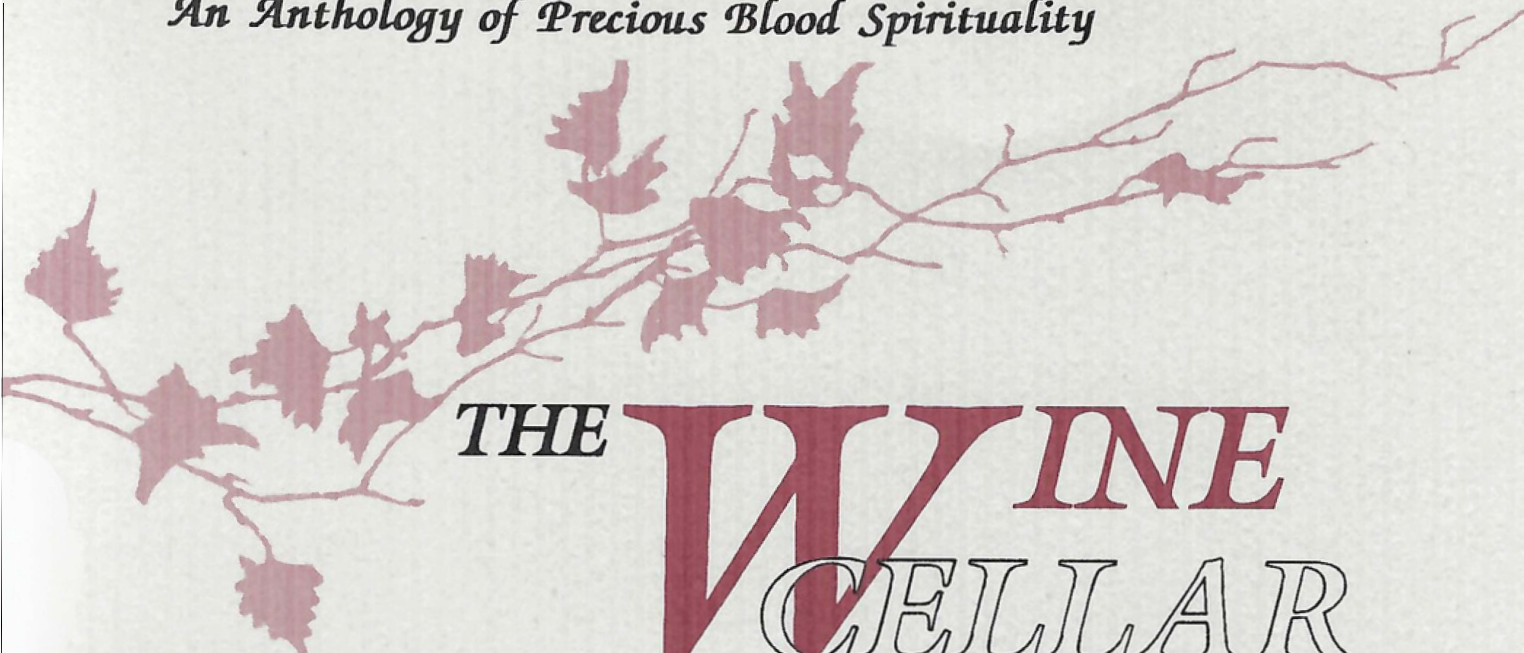


An Anthology of Precious Blood Spirituality



THE **WINE**
CELLAR

October 1996, Number 7



Compassion

*The heart of Jesus
is the wine cellar
of the Blood of Christ.*

St. Gaspar del Bufalo

THE
WINE
CELLAR

An Anthology of Precious Blood Spirituality

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Coming to Our Senses

Once the Buddha lived in a forest hermitage, and walking in the deep woods on day, he rounded a bend and came upon a cave. There was a tigress there with hollow eyes and gaunt ribs barely able to move. Her cubs were also very sick. In the extremity of the moment, the Buddha could see that she was about to turn on her cubs and eat them. The kittens, unaware of her intentions, were pawing her dry teats for milk. The love and care of a mother was a universal law of creation about to be broken here. The Buddha was overwhelmed with feeling at this scene of horror and suffering. As he realized that the tigress was about to feed on her own cubs, he was aware of the circle of suffering in the universe. Filled with these conflicting feelings, he knew what he must do. He climbed a high ridge and flung himself down in front of the tigress; he did this so that she would not have to be responsible for killing him. He offered his life to this creature so that she might be saved along with her cubs. She ate him and thus she and her cubs were saved.

This story immediately shocks our sensibilities. We do not recognize it as a part of our tradition. Indeed, it is from the *Jatakas*, originally an ancient oral tradition of tales from India about the lives of the Buddha; eventually they were written down with this often the first in many editions. Sometimes it takes a story such as this with its shocking ending to arrest our attention. We can barely imagine laying down our lives for another person, and the extreme situation we would have to be in, let alone dying for an animal. Not only does the offering of life stun us, but the great thoughtfulness of doing it in such a way that the tigress herself is not made to kill.

These feelings from profound awareness and attention come together in this complex and paradoxical moment and result in what Buddhists call *ahimsa*. There is no single word to translate this astonishing idea. It is compassion, and it is to say, “no wanton killing.” But even these are hardly close to the attitudes embedded in this culture’s sense of things. We might say, “Harm nothing,” but

even that only makes us think of more. Actually, I was going to title this editorial, "Ahimsa and Pascha," but some would have skewered their eyes together. *Pascha*, rooted in Hebrew and borrowed by the Greeks, describes this same attentiveness and its mystery in our lives.

I had heard or read somewhere that *pascha* originally referred to a shepherd, who upon seeing a wounded sheep, would point and say, "See, that one limps." His word was *pascha*. Something is then done about it. For ourselves, we are very culturally distant from animals and nature, to say nothing of distant from ourselves. We are eager to recover our sensibilities out of which compassion arises.

Our articles in this issue share stories of coming to this awareness of compassion, of *ahimsa*, and of *pascha*. Tom Welk begins exploring these word groups and concludes that compassion is something *with* someone else. He discovers it is rooted in hospitality. Paula Gero connects the simple stories of school children with her sudden awareness of compassion which leads her to prayer. Nature and the Pacific Ocean invite Jim Franck to risk deeper, closer attention and presence in his experiences of compassion with others and for himself. Maureen Lahiff realizes how difficult it is to put words to the attitude and stance of compassion. She speaks of honoring our wounds and of the power of the passion and blood of Jesus.

Angela Houska calls compassion a reconciling presence. She uses the incident of the leper who approaches Jesus and is literally touched by him. The NAB translation says that "Jesus was moved with pity," but the original states powerfully in one word, that Jesus was "moved deeply in his very guts" by what he saw. The compassionate offering of Jesus as new high priest is Pat Sena's reflection. Jesus becomes our model. Madeleine Kisner writes a litany of compassionate faces, and Benita Volk reflects on the color of red in striking ways.

It is an honor to be asked by Joseph Nassal and the provincial leadership to be the editor to follow him. Joseph inaugurated a beautifully crafted and thought provoking journal and resource to gather our writings from the Precious Blood Communities. Joseph remains with us as editorial board member representing the Kansas City Province. I am amazed at the deep sensitivity of compassion among our writers this month. They share intimate and holy stories, experiences of compassion. They have heard and answered the call of the blood. So, enjoy these articles in a meditative moment and reflect on the meaning of compassion in precious blood spirituality.



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Compassion

Foundation for Ministry

By Thomas Welk, CPPS

Compassion is a *sine qua non* of ministry. We cannot take care of another person's needs unless we know her/his needs. To do so we must, to some extent, suffer with that person; we must empathize with the other's situation.

Jesus fully modeled this ministry. It is the ministry of the Incarnation: "He himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." (Hebrews 2, 14. 16-18 NAB) Throughout Christian writings Jesus is described as relating fully to the human condition.

Compassion: A Basic Definition

Compassion is a word familiar to all of us. Its origin is not difficult to determine: from the Latin words *cum* (together, with) and *passus* (past participle of *patiri* = to suffer). Compassion literally and simply defined means "suffering with another." Compassion may be a simple word/concept to understand; however, the challenge of being compassionate is more difficult to meet.

Being compassionate demands that the suffering of the other person be experienced. Walking in another's shoes is the popular way of stating this concept. Suffering may be too strong a word to describe what happens in our daily interaction with others. Knowing another's

situation and responding from that realization is more likely the way we need to proceed.

Empathy is an English word that speaks to the same point. The word sympathy is often used synonymously with empathy, yet there is a subtle difference. When asked which word speaks to a helping relationship, we instinctively indicate empathy. Why? Etymological investigation of the two words provides us with the answer.

The Greek word *παθος* (suffering) comprises the essence of both words. It is the prefix

*In empathy
we vibrate
with
another person.*

that changes the basic sense of the words. *Συν* is generally translated as “together with,” but actually is better translated as “at the same time.” In other words, it is something that happens within ourselves. We have similar feelings. In sympathy we vibrate within ourselves.

The prefix in empathy comes from *εν*, simply meaning in, rather than only within oneself. A person of empathy projects him/herself into another person. In empathy we vibrate with the other person. Empathy implies the same sense as compassion, while sympathy relates to passion. A sympathetic/passionate person feels acutely within; an empathic/compassionate person not only feels (suffers) acutely within, but relates to, feels with (suffers) the other person.

Sympathy is often described as feeling sorry. Feeling sorry for whom? For ourselves. Looking at the “wounded” situation of another might well remind me of my own vulnerable condition, eliciting strong emotion (passion). If my wounds are recent and open, I will not be able to identify with another’s wounded condition. I will still be suffering too much within myself to relate to the suffering in the other.

Compassion: Ministry with the Marginalized

In its 1992 Assembly the Kansas City Province established several commissions to implement what had been discerned as pressing issues for the Province. Among these was a commission to flesh out the decision to address the needs of the marginalized. Originally, the title of this group was called the Commission on

Ministry to the Marginalized. Upon the observation and urging of several community members the word “to” was changed to “with” to more fully reflect how this ministry must take place.

Ministry cannot be engaged in from a higher (removed) position. It will only be effective from a collaborative approach (a being with). As Dr. Colin Morris stated, “You cannot preach the Gospel from the strong to the weak. You can only preach the Gospel from the weak to the strong.”

*If your liberation
is bound up with mine,
then let us
work
together.*

Lilla Watson, an Aboriginal Australian woman, made the same point: “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time, but if your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Psychologically, this makes much sense. People on the margins are extremely vulnerable. They know they must be alert to any signals that warn of danger. It is much like existence in the jungle. Those who are on the lower end of the power chain will not survive if they miss warnings. Antennae must constantly be sharply tuned.

In working with the marginalized we must keep in mind that they see us as coming at them from a position of power. They will pick up signals that we don't even know we are giving. If we are uncomfortable either with the person or the situation, it will be picked up. No words have to be spoken for this to happen. Body language communicates more loudly and more clearly than any words. Actually, words comprise only about 7% of communication.

The more marginalized and dependent the person, is the better they become at picking up the unspoken signals we give: the tone of voice, the gestures, the body language. The converse is also true. The more powerful we become, the more we lose that facility of picking up signals. The employee knows when the boss is in a bad mood; the boss must make an effort to know the mood of the employee. The employee knows well that his/her survival depends on properly reading the boss' moods.

Working with AIDS patients especially brought this home to me. Many of those affected by HIV are on the margins of our society.

Their antennae have been sharply honed to pick up any signals of danger. Survival depends on this. Any uncomfotableness on my part about either their condition or their life style is immediately picked up. My ministry with them has no effectiveness when I approach them from (in their perception) a position of power.

Indeed, Lilla Watson said it well, "If your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." Compassion enables us identify with the situation of those to whom we minister. In the midst of it, we dare not forget that we are in turn are being ministered to.

St. Paul describes this ministry with the marginalized:

Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for your own interests, but everyone for those of others. Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2, 3-8)

Paul himself carefully modeled this ministry. He did not consider himself better than those to whom he was proclaiming the Gospel. Being given perks and preferential treatment was not his style. "To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some. All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it." (1 Cor 9, 22-23)

Working with the marginalized is not without risk. It constantly got Jesus in trouble. When the Jewish leaders saw Jesus "eating with sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' Jesus heard them and answered, 'Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call respectable people, but outcasts.'" (Mk 2, 16-17)

*Working with the marginalized
is not without risk.*

Eventually, this association brought Jesus the ultimate sentence: death on the cross. His being with the marginalized of his time and place was an empowerment for them. The established powers were threatened by this, and it cost Jesus his life. But that was not to be the end of the story. His followers, though timid at first, became more emboldened with the gift of the Spirit, and in short order took on the challenge of continuing to empower the marginalized.

They, too, paid a price. The early Christians in Rome were martyred for one basic reason: they identified with the slaves, the outcasts, the marginalized and empowered them. This was too much of a threat to the Roman Empire; slavery was the bulwark of their economy. Christianity in its truest and fullest essence threatened the Roman Empire. This seditious, rebel band had to be eradicated. Peter, Paul, and many others in Rome paid the ultimate price for identifying with the marginalized.

Compassion: A Ministry of Hospitality

Compassion is not far removed from the scriptural sense of hospitality. Hospitality was/is a most sacred responsibility for the Semitic peoples. Our Western understanding of hospitality as being nice to one another does not begin to touch the Eastern depth of meaning.

This deeper sense of hospitality was brought home to me while traveling in Palestine. I had enlisted the services of a taxi driver to explore the area between Jerusalem and Jericho. We spotted a Bedouin camp out in the desert. Having stopped at a distance, the taxi driver explained to me that were we to venture closer to the camp we would be invited into the main tent. Upon our entrance we would be served bitter coffee, almost impossible to drink. The host would remark: "This is how life has been without you. Like the bitterest cup of coffee." Upon leaving we would be served a cup of tea, with such an abundance of sugar that it was practically syrup and also almost impossible to drink. Whereupon he would remark, "This is how life has been with you: like this sweetest cup of tea."

I didn't test the taxi driver's observation to determine if his words were fact or fiction. Nonetheless, it speaks eloquently to the give and take of hospitality. It also raises the question of who benefits more.

I experienced this same give-and-take while growing up in North Dakota. Our farm was a considerable distance from the nearest population center. Though we knew our neighbors well (close relatives), yet we yearned for wider outside contacts. As children, when we were out on the prairie and saw

*Hospitality
implies
a reciprocity.*

a cloud of dust raised by a car on the dirt road, we would rush to the farm house, desperately hoping that it would turn into our lane. Frequently, it was a salesman, conveniently timing his visit around mealtime. Without hesitation his need for food and drink would be met with an invitation to join the family meal. But were only the salesman's needs being met? Of course not. His visit, his presence among us enriched our lives. Our needs also were being met.

The Latin word *hospes*, from which the word *hospitality* is derived, speaks to this point. In addition to hospitality, several other English words are derived from this root word, notably hospital, hospice, host(ess), hotel. The definition of the Latin word is both host and guest. This speaks primarily to the relationship, rather than to who receives and/or who gives. Hospitality is not a top-down approach or a one way street. Hospitality implies a reciprocity. In the relationship both parties give and both parties receive.

As reflected in both the Hebrew and the Christian writings, hospitality is depicted as a sacred duty. Lack of hospitality was among the greatest of sins. "This saying is trustworthy: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. Therefore, a bishop must be irreproachable, married only once, temperate, self-controlled, decent, hospitable, able to teach." (1 Tim 3, 1-3)

Compassion: Spirituality of the Precious Blood

References to blood in the sacred scriptures to image this point are varied and multiple. Bible Quest (my computerized concordance) lists 375 references. A majority of these references touch on the issue of relatedness: How are we connected with God?

How are we connected to one another? When disconnected, how is the relationship reestablished? It is in this light that sacrifices are to be seen.

Blood was considered the seat of life. The pouring of blood upon the altar was seen as a way of uniting life with the Source of Life. Sacrifice comes from the Latin words *sacer* (holy) and *facere* (to make). Offering a sacrifice was a way of bringing about holiness, wholeness, unity.

Fully incarnate, fully human, he restored total unity with the God who is the source of all life. Where formerly there had been division and sin (from the German *sünde*, akin to *sondern* = to divide, put asunder), now there was reconciliation, atonement. Jesus is for us the model of hospitality and compassion.

Precious blood spirituality needs to speak loudly and clearly to a world in which blood too frequently is violently shed, indicative of much division and alienation. As Gaspar went to the marginalized, the outcasts of his time and place, so we need to stand with those on the fringes of our society.

As apostles of the precious blood we have offered ourselves as the people who will continue this same ministry. It is a challenging ministry. Burnout does not come from working too much. It comes from working too much and not seeing any results. Medical professionals offer a good example. I work closely with oncologists and nurses who strive vigorously to cure cancer. Unfortunately, in many cases their efforts are futile in light of their objective, saving a life. When death occurs, they tend to see themselves as failures. If they do not move beyond this attitude, they will soon experience burnout, with the resulting problems that go with this.

In my hospice work we deal with death on a daily basis. We have had six patients under our care die in one day. If we had defined our work as being successful in terms of curing cancer and "lives saved," we would have to judge ourselves as miserable failures. But that is not what we set up as our goal in hospice care. We strive to provide the

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support necessary for the patient and her/his loved ones to live the time that is remaining as fully as possible. If we have provided this necessary support, then we see ourselves as having succeeded. Death does not have the ultimate victory.

Precious blood spirituality speaks clearly to this point. Jesus shedding his blood to the last drop on the cross might well be seen as a failure. Indeed, many of his followers saw it as such. But for those who see a deeper meaning, the cross becomes the ultimate victory. As Paul writes, "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength." (1 Cor 1, 23-25)

Relying on our self-perceived strength only becomes weakness; relying on the weakness of the blood poured out becomes our strength. When we have used up all our strength, we have a well to draw on that will never run dry, the fount of the precious blood.



For Reflection

What other scriptural passages depict Jesus as fully embodying all that it means to be human? How is he described as fully identifying with the human condition?

Are there conditions in your present situation that indicate you are more likely in sympathy rather than empathy? What steps are being taken to ensure the necessary healing of self and others that will allow a ministry of compassion?

Who are the outcasts, the marginalized in your scope of ministry? How are their needs being addressed?

What devotions/prayers/activities remind you that you are to be an apostle of the Precious blood, pouring out your life so that others might have life?

COMPASSION

STORIES, REFLECTIONS, AND PRAYERS

By Paula Gero, CPPS

Five pages into Walk Two Moons* I had run out of compassion. Salamanca's mother was obviously heartless, her father philandering, her grandparents irresponsible, and the child herself "difficult." The book was, as intended, a journey back into understanding, a walk of two moons in someone else's moccasins. People are not as bad, or as simple, as they first appear. There are reasons. There are stories behind the stories. I fail in compassion when I am not listening to the stories.

Listening to the Stories

Jesus, you once upon a time walked many moons in our moccasins. You alone may open our hearts and read our stories. Judgement is yours. Mine is the listening, the walking beside, the wondering at the human story, the expecting of grace.

We were playing "Red Rover." I must have been about ten. The last girl on the opposing team was no friend of mine: she was pretty, she was "popular," and she owned more crinolines than I could dream of. She crashed into our line--and on into the brick school wall behind us. She would require stitches and dental work; she would not be quite as pretty again. I wasn't glad, exactly, but I did stand there, hands on hips, demanding to know whether she had actually broken through the chain of joined hands. Had my team, in fact, won?

This is an embarrassing memory, but an important one. I teach children; I dare not forget what it is like to be a child. There are flashes of compassion in the fifth grade, to be sure, but not the steady light of the virtue. "Me first," name-calling, and getting even are much more common attitudes. Compassion has yet to be learned

Remembering Pain

To some extent, it's a matter of experience. Personal pain, undergone and pondered, comes before compassion. The small, inevitable injustices of my student days jarred me into thinking about the kind of person I wanted to be: When I am a teacher, I won't do that.

And there have been more wrenching times: a brother in Vietnam. The death of a student. The fading of a friendship. The loss of a parent. I'm sure you have your own list. At each experience of pain, the possibility for compassion broadens. I have even thought when a new-found compassion grew out of a remembered ordeal, "Oh, so that is what it was for."

Prayer of a Wounded Heart

Jesus, you lived your life on earth "like us, in all things but sin." You, too, grew in wisdom, age, and grace. You, also, learned obedience from what you suffered. I imagine your opening your hands to life and all it has to teach, welcoming the thorn for the sake of the rose, thirst for the sake of the cup, nails for freedom, cross for crown, death for life. You hoped despite rejection. You blessed Jerusalem through your tears. You saw beyond Peter's denial to his confirmation in love. You "had compassion for the crowd." Needing the gift of compassion, I ask for strength to be open to my wounds.

Learning from Stories

She always had a lisp; there had been some speech therapy, but the common wisdom was "children outgrow these things." So, she was explaining, in a fifth grade religion class, that "Thomth Merton told how he became a Catholic in a book called The Theven Thtorey Mountain." The class snickered. I gave them my worst teacher-frown and said, "Don't do things that might embarrass people." And she said, indignantly, "I'm not embarrassed." Oh.

Compassion alone is not enough. With all the good will in the world, I will say the wrong thing sometimes, and omit to say what I should many more times. It takes wisdom and a special sort of courage. It takes thought; it takes prayer.

He was sitting glumly in the back of the room; oh, yes, I had

told him to stay in for recess. Now, why? Whatever it was, I had completely forgotten it.

“So, Joey,” I hedged. “Tell me about this morning.”

Eyes dry, jaw clenched. “I’m really, really, sorry, and I’ll never do it again.”

No help at all. I sat down. “Now, Joey, listen. You’re a great kid. I love your sense of humor. You are friendly, and intelligent, and so much fun to have in class...”

“Sister Paula.” Now there were tears. “Nobody ever said that to me before.”

Oh.

I open myself to compassion, and the spirit may use me in ways I do not expect. Sometimes out of “nowhere” I listen well, am in the right place, meet the right person, say the right thing. “That couldn’t have been me,” I say, but there I am.

Prayer for Compassion

Jesus, your Spirit blows among our dwellings. You call me, in prayer, to keep opening windows: To humility, for I tend to think the clay of my foundation is a better grade than other people’s clay. To wisdom, for feeling comes easily to me, but response does not. To courage, for it so easy to do nothing. To compassion. And when my windows are all tightly shut, send your Breath whistling down my chimney; your work in me is more than I can ask or imagine. Your compassion, your great love, is without end. And, great Teacher, do forget my sins as thoroughly as I forgot Joey’s. I still have no idea what he did.



*Creech, Sharon. Walk Two Moons. New York: HarperCollins, 1994. 1995 Newbery Award.

For Reflection

How has God spoken to me about compassion? What helpful stories have I heard from others? What have been my “Oh!” experiences? What prayer has arisen from these? What compassionate awareness?

Lured into Compassion

By James Franck, CPPS

I became a priest on May 31, 1964, I really had very little understanding of what my life would be like, but I was open to the possibilities. When the Society of the Precious Blood decided to divide into three new province, I opted for the Pacific Province. I had never been out West, but it sounded exciting. When I first saw the Pacific Ocean, I was not all that impressed. Only gradually did I come to appreciate and enjoy the coast and the shoreline and the many moods to be found there. At first, I used just to drive Highway 1 as it snakes along faithfully on the ups and downs and ins and outs. Spectacular views and scary roadways are the order of the day. Sometimes high above and then very close and at times in and out of the fog.

Over the years I was lured out of my car just to sit for hours on cliffs overlooking the vast Pacific. And then finally I came to enjoy just walking barefoot at the edge of the constantly ebbing and flowing water. At times I get caught by an unexpected wave. But I don't mind. It's where I enjoy being.

An Invitation from the Ocean

To me, compassion is like the lure of the ocean which gradually gathered me in. At first, I was satisfied to look from a distance and the safety of my car. Then there was the attraction of panoramic vistas from high cliffs. And finally there was the close encounters with the ever-living waves. Compassion is not so much something that I do as much as it is allowing the attraction of life to draw me ever closer and finally to make contact. Compassion is the lure that draws me ever closer to life. Many times I want to stay aloof and watch from a safe height and distance, enjoying the beauty of the panoramic vista. Compassion invites me to come closer, to encounter the softness, the squishiness, the wetness, and the surprising abundance of life at the edge. I have found that priestly ministry invites me here often.

*Compassion
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to life.*

Compassion at Death

My ministry as a priest constantly invites me into an ever fuller appreciation of life. It is at the edge that I find the sharpest contrast. It's where the water meets the land, where life meets death. The most profound moments of my ministry have been at funerals.

I have celebrated many funerals, those very sacred moments in peoples' lives when they are more vulnerable than at any time of their lives. As a priest I am invited to be there with them. As the overwhelming waves of sorrow surge up, I can stand there with them. The words don't really matter all that much. The roar of emotion drowns them out any way. What counts is presence, loving presence, that chooses to be there, that chooses to experience the wetness and the messiness. There is only mystery.

Several experiences stand out in my memory. In my first parish assignment in Manteca, California, I became good friends with a family while presenting a parish renewal program. They had agreed to be presenters with me. All the preparations, the excitement and success of the program, and the follow-up meetings started a long

*I will never forget
her scream
as long as I live.
The wound
was very painful.*

standing friendship. About a year after our program, the secretary of the parish informed me that Russ was there to see me. He came into my office and immediately burst into tears. His son, Michael, age 21, had been killed in an auto accident. Russ' wife, Ann, was visiting her brother in a town about an hour away. Russ asked me to go with him to tell Ann the news. I will never forget her scream as long as I live. Somehow, we all make it through

those terrible days. The wound was very painful. I often joined the parents in their Saturday morning ritual visit to the cemetery. And then I moved, and they moved to the east coast. But we are still friends, and the experience is very rich indeed.

In that same parish I had another very powerful experience of compassion. Again, the secretary asked me to come to the office. A woman was there crying inconsolably. Finally she was able to tell me what had happened. She had been driving down a neighborhood street when a little boy ran out from behind a parked care on his way to an ice cream truck. It all happened too fast, and there was nothing she could do. The little boy was killed. I did not know the woman, and I have never seen her since. I did spend several hours with her. Her pain touched me profoundly. I remember that at the time the tears were just streaming down my face. I kept thinking that my tears were not helping her, but I simply could not stop them. She had not yet been able to talk to the parents. After a while we agreed that it would be a good idea to talk with them. The parents met us at the door. They were so loving and compassionate. They understood. They did not blame her. Compassion? Yes. Simply being with someone in great pain. I know that my life is richer for the gift of this woman's presence and the wonderful presence of the parents of the little boy.

Reconciliation and Healing

Another place that I regularly experience compassion is in the sacrament of reconciliation. In doing parish missions, people sometimes have profound conversion experiences. They reveal themselves as profoundly vulnerable as they share their sinfulness and their profound need of God after being separated for a long time.

Being with someone who is deeply embarrassed and vulnerable is a humbling experience. I have often been moved to tears in this setting. It is so wonderful to be able to bring the news that God not only knows, but God loves and accepts them as they are. I am there to invite them to turn their eyes from their own shame and pain to the absolutely accepting gaze of Jesus. In the name of the Church, I can assure them that they truly are okay.

The tears of relief and joy often run down their cheeks and mine. This is truly a privileged place to be. They often need a moment or two to compose themselves before they walk away.

Other experiences of compassion come in spiritual direction. Here people are profoundly vulnerable as they try to understand how God is present in their lives, how God is inviting them to live, how they are afraid, or have said “no” or how they are saying “yes” to a love that is almost overwhelming. This experience of spiritual direction is to be with someone at the very edge of his/her being. Holy ground!

Again, to be invited to listen and to stand with someone at the place where things change quickly and often, is like walking the beach and enjoying the feel of breeze, sand and water, the smells of ocean, and the sheer beauty of the ever changing waves.

Receiving Compassion

To be able to offer compassion has been very important for me, but to receive compassion is wonderful as well. One such moment stands out in my life. In February of this year I received a call from my brother John that our mother had died suddenly and unexpectedly. In some ways I was ready because she had been failing mentally and physically. But I still was not ready.

I shall never forget the experience of compassion that came to me in those days. First of all was the experience of the immediate family. There was genuine love and care for one another as we all tried to cope with our loss. We shared the things that we were grateful for

*Somehow
as we shared
the pain became less.*

and relived some of the happy moments and the painful times. We felt the emptiness as we thought about life without Mother, the central figure in our life as a family. Somehow as we shared, the pain became less.

One of my most precious memories was of the day before the funeral. I had not counted on the many friends and relatives who kept coming. My experience was one of being carried by all of those people. It wasn't long at all. It was the same for the funeral the next day. I was in the middle of my worst nightmare -- celebrating Mother's funeral. An experience that I had looked forward to with dread was not mine to carry alone. My brother Dick remarked to me that he would never forget the sight of so many priests concelebrating with John and me. Nor will I. I won't say that it was a wonderful experience because of the pain.

But I truly felt carried by the compassion of God in so many friends and relatives. I experienced receiving compassion.

*My experience was one of being carried away
by all of those people.*



A Deeper Life at the Edge

It seems to me that my experiences of compassion have invited me into a deeper experience of life. One experience leads to another. I am not in control here. I stand at the edge mostly and am gently invited to live more fully and deeply. Insofar as I say, "Yes," I become what God is inviting me to be, a living member of the kingdom. Insofar as I say, "No," I defer to a later time and another invitation with all the risks of, "Later."

As I reflect on my experience of giving and receiving compassion, I go back to the countless miles of Pacific Ocean shoreline. God's compassion is like that. It's endless and it's different at each turn because we are all different. But God is infinitely present to us in our joys and in our sufferings. God is more present to us than we are to ourselves. I suspect that when we give or receive compassion, we share in the presence of God.

A members of the Precious Blood Community, we have a very special reminder in the Mass. As we receive the cup, we are invited to be with Jesus in his suffering, and we are invited to share with him. We are allowed to experience and share and carry and be with Jesus as he relives with us his passionate love. We are invited to be "com-" passionate with him.

We don't change anything or somehow make it better. We simply choose to stand with him, to allow his blood to wash over us. We know his experience and somehow share with him. I think that our compassion makes a difference to him. After all, he's God and infinitely vulnerable in his love for us. And, of course, this is a mutual love and compassion. As we receive the cup, Jesus simply stands with us. He doesn't change things or remove any of the suffering or the

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the cup,
we are invited
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in his suffering
and
in his joy.*

joy. He is simply with us, and we with him. Jesus was lured into the world and became one of us because of his compassion.

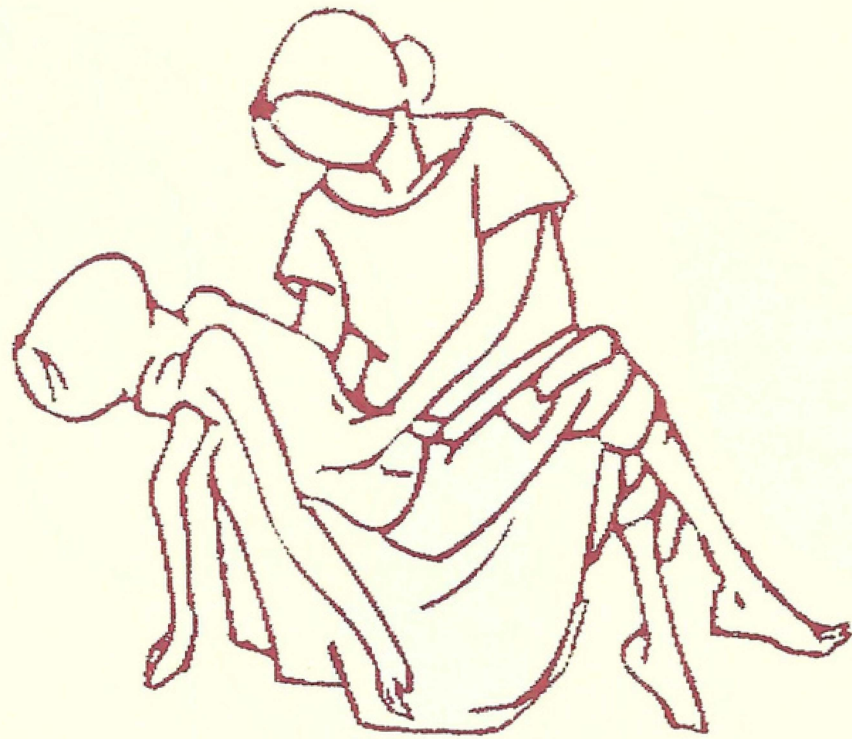


For Reflection

When did you have a profound experience of compassion in your ministry? Go back again to appreciate how God was present in you and through you.

When did you experience compassion from someone? Prayerfully return to that moment.

When and where in the moments of your life are you being called to drink of the cup? What change are you being invited to make?



When you are inwardly peaceful, don't miss the opportunity to perform as many acts of gentleness as you can — and as frequently as you can — no matter how small these acts may seem; for, as our Lord says: "To the person who is faithful in little things, greater ones will be given." (Lk 16, 10)

But most important, don't lose heart, be patient, wait, do all you can to develop a spirit of compassion. I have no doubt that God is holding you by the hand; if God allows you to stumble, it is only to let you know that if God were not holding your hand, you would fall. This is how God gets you to take a tighter hold.

St. Francis de Sales
Letter to Madame de la Fléchère, 8 April 1608

Sacraments in Red

By Benita Volk, CPPS

When I close my eyes
I see red

oriental poppies --
translucent scarlet angels
so shameless in their bold silky wings
they disarm the breath

ruby-throated hummingbirds --
iridescent comets thrumming
in vermilion trumpet vines

bright barns
stolid and sheltering
against black winter woods

the small jewel that beads
on a needle-pricked finger

the sudden strike of a match
like the quick flare of anger
burgeoning to bruises

the poisoned flower
that blooms on a chest
ruptured by lead

the slit wrist
the gushing jugular
the red-hot lava flow of rage
and

on the altar cloth of spring snow
tulips --
sacrificial chalices offering redemption
for all the red of this red red world

Standing in Our Wounds Together

By Maureen Lahiff

The context for what I have to say about compassion is my own experience. I don't claim any universal insights, but I do hope that what I have to say will be useful for people of similar backgrounds and in similar ministry situations. When I was growing up, the first born of many daughters, we never noticed that we lacked anything. My sisters and I got better educations than my parents, thanks to financial aid and affirmative action. Although I began to volunteer in inner city neighborhoods when I was in high school and have done so consistently ever since, most of my ministry has been with people who are not burdened by material poverty.

Compassion: Feeling and Stance

Struggling to describe compassion is like trying to describe love. Words are not enough, but part of being compassionate is to try to talk about it anyway.

Compassion, as I understand it, is connection with another person who is suffering. Genuine compassion sees the person, rather than focusing on their situation. Authentic compassion sees individuals, not just groups of people. While a desire to do what we can to alleviate suffering flows from compassion, it is not to be mistaken for the essence of compassion.

Sometimes, the connection is immediate and affective. At other times, the connection is not primarily on the emotional level; the link is forged because we have chosen to look with the eyes of Jesus. Compassion involves feelings, but it is more than a feeling. We can choose to be compassionate even when we are afraid and repulsed by what we see. If we consistently choose to look with the eyes of Jesus, then our affections become more and more vulnerable.

Compassion or Pity

Pity is marked by a sense of the difference between our situation and another's; compassion springs from what we have in common. Pity costs us money, and perhaps time; compassion costs us ourselves.

Pity allows us to keep the person at a distance, to see them as other, or at most a distant relative. Pity sees others' conditions as problems to be solved, preferably as efficiently and quickly as possible. Pity shores up barriers between "us" and "them." Pity thinks we've earned what we have and it is ours to control. Pity often leads to discussions about priorities, either-or conflicts. Service that flows from pity reinforces distinctions, creates obligations, and holds people bound. Pity thinks it deserves thanks.

Compassion demands that we bring people near. Compassion forces us to widen the circle around the table, even if it means that none of us are as close to the table as we used to be. Compassion later feels glad that this has happened, that it was worth more than we could have imagined. Compassion sees people not as others but as brothers and sisters for whom Christ died, as dear neighbors, as members of the same community. Compassion knows that presence comes before efficient solutions. Compassion realizes that everything we have, and our abilities to obtain what we have, are free gifts from God. Compassion is grateful. When compassion leads to discussions about priorities, the focus is not the economics of scarcity and conflict but the economics of abundance and mutual enrichment. Service that flows from compassion is liberating, because it makes no demands. Compassion feels privileged to have been in the presence of the holy. The New Testament picture of compassion is the Good Samaritan, the owner of the vineyard who paid everyone the same wage, and above all, Jesus.

*Compassion
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are not enough.*

Unless our response to others' suffering flows from solidarity, from a connection based on our common humanity, it cannot be the liberating compassion of Jesus.

Honoring Our Own Wounds

How do we become compassionate? By taking our own losses and wounds seriously. By understanding that Jesus takes our losses and wounds seriously.

I learned, as a child, to make light of my own pain compared to the sufferings of others. I also learned that pain was my lot in life. Doing God's will always meant hardship; if we enjoyed our work or our lives too much, we had certainly gone astray. Our family night prayer included the Memorare. Certain lines stand out for me in my memory. We were "poor banished children of Eve, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears." Comfort and joy would come in the next life, after we did our time in purgatory.

I also learned that Christians were expected to give alms and work to alleviate the sufferings of others. By focusing on the differences between our situation and the circumstances of others to whom we gave alms, we kept them at a distance. It was more pity than compassion.

I believe that we have to stop comparing our situation to the suffering of others. For example, North American attempts to understand the preferential option for the poor go so far as to dangerously romanticize poverty and oppression. The dark side of this can be a lack of empathy with people close to home. In the resulting calculus of pain, the pain of people of color counts more than the pain of people of northern European descent; the pain of those who have lived in poverty counts more than the pain of those who have always had enough to eat. The pain of those with little formal education counts more than the pain of those who have had educational opportunities. The pain of women counts more than the pain of men. The pain of gays and

*Only
if we take the risk
to lament
fully . . .*

lesbians counts more than the pain of heterosexual people. The pain of lay people counts more than the pain of those in the clerical state.

I believe that the solidarity that makes compassion possible can only come from taking our own wounds seriously. Only if we take the risk to lament fully, to approach God with nothing held back, will we be able to experience the intimacy with God that leads to hope and thanksgiving in the midst of what otherwise seems unbearable. The model of lament assures us that we need not be afraid of getting stuck in our own pain, in the traps of righteous anger that fuel vengeance in Northern Ireland and Bosnia.

Internal Hemorrhaging

If we lament, we can let God hold us, so that we can let go and forgive. Given my upbringing and circumstances, one of the difficult things for me has been realizing what the wounds and losses in my life have been. It was a real eye-opener to me to have the person who was accompanying me through a divorce say, "I want you to imagine that you are (in) intensive care after a near-fatal auto accident." I resisted that image for a few months, but came to sense its rightness.

In my life and in the situations where I've ministered, the wounds are often not visible, even to those who carry them. We know there's something wrong, but the symptoms are vague. There's massive trauma, but the damage and blood loss is internal. It may be abuse or failed relationships. It may be a lack of unconditional love or people with whom dreams are shared.

Wounds That Cannot Be Healed

Honoring each others' wounds does not necessarily lead to healing. This is the case with wounds inflicted by structural and institutional limitations and sins. Acknowledging such wounds, exposing them to light and air, even makes the pain worse in spite of all available consolation. Although there are times when one wishes such wounds would prove fatal, there is another possibility that makes them bearable -- transformation.

I know it is possible for wounds that cannot be healed to be transformed into sources of compassion. Who I am and much of what I have to give are not seen or are not welcome in the church. As a

result, I am becoming more and more sensitive to others who are not seen or excluded because of age, education, or spirituality.

Connecting with Jesus' Alienation

We took the passion from the gospel of Matthew with us as we walked the stations of the cross last Lent at St. Barnabas. What struck me in this account was the meanness and derision and verbal cruelty that Jesus endured from those who turned his preaching against him.

In my own situation, I have found consolation in the suffering Jesus experienced throughout his ministry. Jesus is a model for me when I need to hold my ground but continue to treat my opponents with respect.

How do we respond to Catholics active in our parishes who are not able to welcome people with HIV and AIDS or who cannot accept what the church teaches on issues like capital punishment or abortion or the rights of immigrants? Instead of reacting with frustration and labeling them as "cafeteria Catholics," I believe it is more helpful to shift focus and ask the question: What is underneath this selective alienation? What painful experience, what situation has led to fear and lack of openness? Over and over, I've watched my colleagues assume that what is needed is more education when the resistance has more to do with unacknowledged and untreated wounds. As much as compassion calls us to take suffering seriously, it calls us to look at persons and see the strength and beauty of their spirit. We may need to gently assist that spirit to unfurl its wings and soar, but gentle assistance may be all we need to provide.

Beyond Like Ministering to Like

The flourishing of peer ministries in our time is a work of the Spirit. The sower continues to be expansive, since so many of these blossoms and fruits are outside the walls of the gardens and orchards we have carefully cultivated!

Whatever the burden, loss or addiction, whatever the process, many have been able to respond to an invitation from others who have "been there." The discovery of God's presence in failure, especially in failed relationships -- when we were lost you loved us more than ever -- is even more fundamental than the freedom that

comes from acknowledging and accepting our hurts, our limitations and sins. The challenge to forgive our abusers and to ask for forgiveness from those we have abused frees us to embrace God who wants to bring us close and carry us into the future. In accompanying others, we continued to be reconciled.

*In accompanying others,
we continue
to be
reconciled.*

The longer I serve as a tribunal advocate, the more I sense that each person's story is unique. My own experience of divorce and the annulment process got me into this ministry, but I often feel that honoring the experiences of those I serve demands that I admit how different our stories are.

Staying connected with my particular experiences of having been far off and brought near and staying connected with the ways in which I am still far off is the source of whatever I can do to bring others near. What I am claiming is that honoring our own wounds, healed and unable to be healed, enables us to authentically and compassionately respond to the call of the blood and to be present in situations very different from our own.

Seeing with the Eyes of Jesus

Compassion is a commitment to seeing with the eyes of Jesus, seeing with the heart of Jesus. It is not necessarily a dramatic call that leads us to journey far from home, though that may be. It is a commitment to keeping our eyes and hearts open to the people we pass on the street or hear about on the news. It is a refusal to accept exploitation and poverty and isolation and abuse and deprivation and discarding of people as the inevitable human condition. It is a commitment to prayer and presence, as individuals and communities, as well as action.

The images of Jesus having dinner with his friends, of inviting his disciples to rest after their missionary journey, allowed me to understand what opening my heart requires. I don't need to justify the good things in my life, I need to be grateful for them and use

them responsibly. Jesus didn't heal everyone either. For me, part of the courage demanded from a commitment to compassion is connected with suffering that I cannot do anything about. When I am feeling overwhelmed, I call to mind one of the last scenes from *Schindler's List*. As he was saying good-bye, his workers quoted the Talmud: "Whoever saves one person saves the whole world." I would amend this to, "Whoever tries to save one person saves the whole world."



For Reflection

But if we open our hearts, how can we bear it? What wound in you is bleeding now?

How can we go out to dinner with our friends and home to our warm and dry beds? How can we take vacations? How can we save for retirement or the education of our children? How dare I spend money on voice lessons?

What attitudes of compassion do you act out in my relationships? What is my most challenging relationship in which you are called to be compassionate?

What has been your experience when someone else has been compassionate to or with you? What is the difference for you between compassion and pity, empathy and sympathy?

What does "honoring wounds" mean to you?

Compassion

Masks Many Faces

By Madeleine Kisner, ASC

In the face of a mother at the birth of her babe.

In the face of a husband or wife, bending over
the bedside of a loved one.

In the face of a nurse, ministering to the needs
of the suffering.

In the face of a doctor who recommends rest and
comfort for his patients.

In the face of a young man at the bedside
of his dying friend, stricken with AIDS.

In the face of a prison caregiver, comforting
the inmates with loving words and tender embraces.

In the face of a priest whose words, "Go in peace,"
reinstates a penitent's life.

In the face of a war buddy gazing tearfully into
the eyes of his dying comrade.

In the face of Jesus Who turned a loving look at His
distressed Apostle.

Put on a heart of compassion . . . love . . . which binds
everything together in perfect harmony.

Col, 3, 12-14



COMPASSION

By Angela Marie Houska, ASC

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “I like the silent Church before the service begins better than any preaching.” Just like this saying, I would like to express that the meditative moment afforded to readers on *compassion* right before they begin reading this article will probably be more powerful than any words written as a result of my reflection. This is why I write this article about compassion; to afford persons the time to reflect on it and come to their own creative integration about it.

Compassion as Presence

In the different leadership roles that I have assumed in the Church and the ASC community, I believe that compassion has always been central to my ministry. It is a disciplined and liberating stance that reveals the message of God’s love to the persons among whom I minister. It is a presence. Compassion exists in a presence. When a compassionate presence crosses our path, we feel an interior movement. We sense a total acceptance. We recognize that this presence has communicated with our authentic self which is at the core of our being. It is as the psalmist prays, “deep calling unto deep.” It has a transformative power. It is empowering! It is at the heart of our Precious Blood spirituality.

I recall an incident many years ago when in the fervor of a dramatic moment I used a symbol explaining to the novices what it means to be an Adorer of the Blood of Christ. I had in my hands two wooden paddles between which were nestled a bunch of grapes. I

announced that the action I was about to take best described what it meant to live our charism. I squeezed the two paddles together as the juice from the grapes flowed freely and abundantly. Being compassionate is a lot like that. However, it is not necessarily the action of grapes crushing. It is the kind of love that would do this for others. It is a disciplined and liberating love.

A Profile of Compassionate Presence

A compassionate presence is the world's richest energy source. Yet so many of our societal structures and systems try to stifle it. This is true because a compassionate presence gets in the way of preserving the status quo and it gets in the way of amassing fortunes. When one practices compassion, it has a way of shaking the system and bringing justice to oppressive situations. Persons begin to ask unsettling questions and disturbing ripples are felt through the whole community or organization. Compassionate persons are good at being with persons; they also empower people by helping them find solutions for their pain.

In this article I would like to profile the characteristics of the compassionate presence. I will build this profile by describing three characteristics that I feel are essential. A compassionate presence is one who listens, cares, and reconciles.

Compassionate Listening

Persons who are compassionate have a great capacity to *listen* and to be present. They offer one of the greatest services to others by being able to listen. They listen long enough to understand and not make any assumptions; they listen while suspending judgment. The basic school curriculum offers skills in reading, writing, and speaking. But the skill that you use the most in your life, listening, is barely touched. We are not taught how to listen. I have always found it interesting that God has given us one mouth and two ears. I think this means that we should listen twice as much as we speak.

Often we are too willing to give advice and solutions that are not appropriate. Persons who know how to listen are able to listen to themselves.

They are in touch with themselves but are not caught up with their own agenda. They have an ongoing dialogue with their own

fears, repressed longings, evaded decisions, hidden aspirations and are not afraid to get close to their own pain and hurt. They understand that they are worth more than the results of their own efforts. They stand in reverence before persons and this world. All the hatred, love, cruelty, joy and fear can be found in their own heart, and the funeral bell never tolls without tolling in some way for them also. It is the fact of being comfortable and knowledgeable about themselves that determines the degree to which they can listen to others.

This self-acceptance and knowledge builds an awareness that allows them to listen with a special sensitivity -- a sensitivity that has the ability to see and hear persons with an insight that looks beyond the present moment to their future greatness. Jesus imaged this kind of listening when he saw the woman of love in Mary Magdalen, the welcoming heart of Zacchaeus, the beauty beneath the leprosy, the warmth and evangelizing spirit of the Samaritan woman, and the openness of the thief on the cross.

In order to listen, a compassionate presence preserves the silence within and amid all the noise. It is important to them to carve out ample time during the day for contemplation and time for quiet. It is during these quiet times that we can receive enlightenment on the many solutions which are needed during our periods of involvement. It is in the time of contemplation that the wholeness of whatever may be is revealed. It helps to let go of the desire to possess and control. They begin to understand how important at times it is to wait in silence and befriend the dark. All of these elements comprise a listening heart, and a compassionate presence to those encountered.

*A compassionate presence
preserves
the silence within
and amid all the noise.*

Caring Endurance

Another characteristic of a compassionate presence is to know how to *care*. The word care finds its roots in the Gothic word "*kara*" which means lament. The basic meaning of care is to grieve, to

experience sorrow, to cry out with. The ability to truly be with someone in whatever emotional state or situation is at the heart of caring.

In order to stand at this juncture of pain, a caring presence must possess the art of endurance. This endurance is molded by the understanding that joy and pain are born out of the same place. It is an endurance that understands the human spirit, explodes in joy in proportion that it endures pain and suffering. It can face pain, allow it to wash over it, and not wallow in it. It allows the pain to take on new meaning and a divine mystical force. It is an endurance that allows God to breakthrough; to endure the desert, the loneliness, the injustice and allow God's word to break through and bring hope. It

*An intense listening
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to all the mystery
of the other.*

is an endurance that cannot afford the luxury of nursing a lot of hurt and resentment. It does not cling to things that are not essential. It is an endurance that can let go of the structures, the mindsets, the props, the persons that made the way easier. Endurance does not cling compulsively to something be-

cause it is afraid of the alternative. Endurance accepts its identity from the One who is the giver of all life. Endurance believes that no matter how hard the death, how severe the sacrifice, no matter how much dirt and stones are thrown against the tomb -- Easter happens! Endurance can make a commitment because it is grounded and anchored in a belief that God is faithful.

One who endures can forgive anyone anything. There is nothing that can impede an ability to endure than an unwillingness to forgive. Perhaps there is no greater opportunity to forgive than in relationships. The effort, the pain, the ecstasy that comes from giving one's self in friendship to someone makes of them a compassionate person. They are always being led to understand the other through an intense listening that creates a vulnerability and openness to all the mystery of the other. They can truly learn the art of initiating and yielding as they become more intimate.

Being in relationship constantly surrenders them to a loving action. As they enter human relationships, engage in personal friendships, and meet pain and problems head-on, they animate change both in themselves and in others. In the apprenticeship and experience of an intimate relationship one gains the wisdom to be a caring presence for others. It also opens one up to other relationships and the numerous opportunities for loving. It can lead them to image an unconditional love. Just as Christ's love compelled him to shed his blood for all without exception, so is our love when we care. This kind of love doesn't exclude anyone, not even the enemy. It is a love that gives all and proclaims that blood is not cheap, but precious.

A Reconciling Presence

The final characteristic of a compassionate person is that they are open to the One who *reconciles*. One of the most poignant images of a compassionate presence was captured in the movie, *Dead Man Walking*. Movie actress Susan Sarandon portrayed S. Helen Prejean, CSJ, as a compassionate person who was able to stand in the midst of conflicting emotions and values. She was able to break down the barriers between herself of the guilty and the victimized. She was able to share the pain of both the guilty and the victimized. She ministered to all concerned.

Compassion requires us to go where it hurts, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish -- to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears, to celebrate with the joyous, to laugh with those who are happy. It requires that we give up dividing lines and relinquish distinctions. The heart is not free when it is judging and comparing.

All are truly equal. This kind of caring calls for conversion. When we align ourselves with the person of Jesus, we recognize that compassion and not competition is our main motivation in life. Freed from this competitive hunger, one can enter fully and unconditionally into the sufferings and joys of others.

Whether we are looking at discrimination, violence, or ecological problems, creativity lies at the heart of reconciliation and healing. If we want to empower person, if we truly care, then we need to create an environment in which their power of expression can be fueled. This will bring forth a creativity that enables them to see connections. This is the paradox of the cross. The cross is about making connec-

tions; putting together the horizontal and vertical of our lives. Making connections that other persons may miss, putting together diametrically opposite elements to create a new form. This will bring about a new creation. This is in fact what prophets are all about.

The reconciling stance has a healthy attitude toward death. Looking at death and coming to terms with it helps one set goals which are more realistic and fulfilling. It helps us deal with unresolved issues or losses. We must reconcile the meaning of death in our lives. There are many separations and losses in life. It is reenacted in every simple leave-taking and homecoming. Only those who know the reconciliation that come at death, can confidently be reconciled.

The Mystery of Compassionate Community

Equally important in life are mystery, ambiguity, illogic, contradiction, paradox, and transcendence. Since the world is at times fragmented, displaced, and uprooted, nothing is more important than the witness of true community and the release of the individual gifts within that community.

It takes courage to create, and so we need the support and encouragement of others. One listens, cares, and reconciles within community. The compassionate presence brings to the awareness of the group that they are being gathered by God. Every time strangers are welcomed, the naked are clothed, the sick and prisoners are visited, a new heaven and a new earth can be seen. A compassionate presence reverences the earth and all its creatures.

This profile of compassion is what our founders and foundresses lived. It was the kind of love that would shed blood for others. It was a love so strong that it reached out to ones in need until those arms were stretched out on a cross. It wasn't so much the act of dying or shedding of blood but rather the love with which it was done. Our founders and foundresses were attracted to this kind of love. A love that would do anything to develop and empower others. This love was translated to us in human terms through a *compassionate presence*: a presence that listens, cares and reconciles.

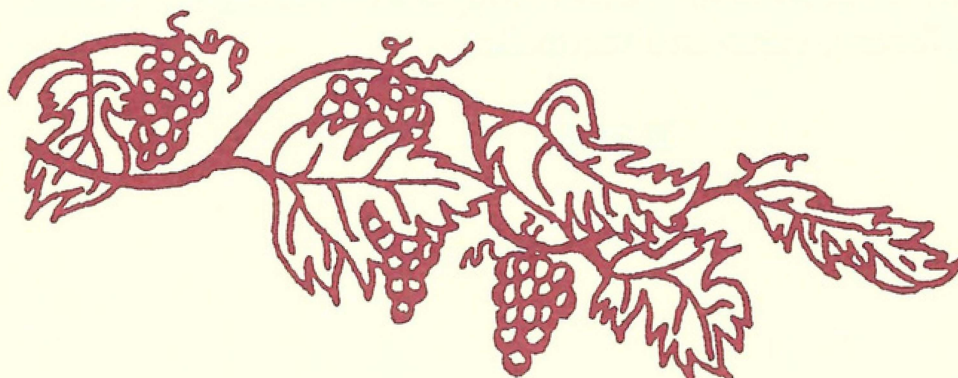


For Reflection

What motivates a person to the action of compassion? What comprises a compassionate presence for you?

How do persons with whom we minister see us as a compassionate presence? Can we receive compassion as a gift from another?

How do you experience the *compassionate presence* at the heart of Precious Blood Spirituality? How does this affect your ministry?



A Biblical Understanding of Compassion

By Patrick Sena, CPPS

You have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, and the spirits of the just made perfect, and Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel.

(Heb 12; 22-24)

Compassionate Priesthood

Certainly to begin an overview of compassion in the Bible there is perhaps nowhere better to begin than with this passage from Hebrews. For here the blood of Christ which speaks so eloquently completely changes violence and revenge into compassion and understanding. According to Gn 4, 10 Abel's blood having been shed out of envy by his brother Cain had cried out from the ground for vengeance. The innocent blood of Abel cried out for revenge; the innocent blood of Christ cries out for compassion.

Within the context of his priesthood, it is said of Jesus:

“that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest before God to expiate the sins of the people.” (Heb 2, 17)

The Greek *eleemon* which is translated merciful is an adjective derived from *eleos* which is the word which translates the Hebrew *hesed*. Within these Greek and Hebrew words we can come to an understanding of compassion in the Bible especially because the word is predicated of Jesus' priesthood. Jesus' life, activity, words, redeeming death, and continual intercession on our behalf all speak of his compassionate kindness.

Compassion in the Hebrew Testament

The term *hesed* denotes an attitude on the part of human creation or on the part of God which arises out of a mutual relationship. This attitude of trust and fidelity is expected from the other in this relationship, and the other pledges to give it. Thus the mutual relationship of *hesed* is found among relatives and friends, masters and subjects, hosts and guests and others who are in a covenanted relationship. *Hesed* is the central content to any covenant relationship. And in a certain sense since a covenant relationship spells out the duties and obligations of those covenanted, the relationship becomes one of justice, rights, and obligations.

At the same time *hesed* denotes help and loving kindness and is often associated with peace. (Ps 85, 11) Sometimes, the term is translated by another Greek term, *dikaiosune* which is translated as justice or righteousness. (Gn 19, 19)

In biblical usage the *hesed* always refers to God's faithful and merciful help. Something which one can expect because God has promised it. The concepts of God's compassion and the covenant go together. It denotes the expression of loving (Ps 69, 17), for God gives love (Dt 13, 18) as gracious activity. Thus terms associated with mercy or compassion are love, justice, and peace which all stem from relationships. The Psalmist states:

“And for their sake, God was mindful of their covenant and relented, in God's abundant kindness, and God won for them compassion from all who held them captive.” (Ps 106, 45-46)

Associated with the covenant is the Hebrew word *emeth* meaning kindness:

“Understand, then, that the Lord, your God, is God indeed, the faithful God who keeps the merciful covenant down to the thousandth generation toward those who love God and keep these commandments.” (Dt 7, 9)

Thus the relationship of God with the people was always that of compassion. The God known to these Scriptures was not a terrifying God, but a loving and compassionate one toward the people.

The compassion, however, was especially marked as regards the marginalized among the Israelites. The people themselves were constantly reminded of this. The Covenant Code found in Exodus protects the poor. Debtors sold into slavery were to be liberated without compensation after six years.

(Ex 21, 2) Every sixth year the fields were to be left fallow so that the poor could eat what grew there. (Ex 23, 10) Widows were to be protected by laws which prohibited any form of injustice. (Ex 22, 22; Dt 24, 17).

The Hebrew prophets repeatedly call out for compassion for the poor and downtrodden. Greed and trampling of the rights of the poor call forth punishment. (Am 8, 4-8) Jonah proclaims God's love for the pagan Ninevites in that God is compassionate and spares them. (Jon 4, 9-11) Micah proclaims God's compassion in forgiving the people. (Mic 7, 18-20)

It is within this covenanted relationship of God and people, and the people to one another, that the New Testament is bold to call Jesus the “merciful and faithful high priest before God.” (Heb 2, 17)

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Compassion of Jesus Our High Priest

Because he himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” (Heb 2, 18). Jesus is the compassionate high priest because he understands suffering and the totality of the human condition. He had to become like us in every way in order to become that compassionate high priest. (Heb 2, 17)

In the first century CE, the high priesthood of Judaism was being bought and sold to the highest bidder as is testified to by the Jewish writer Flavius Josephus. Piety and compassion were not marks of that priesthood, but rather power and pomp.

Jesus became the compassionate high priest through his suffering and death and is presented to us as the norm for compassion in our dealings with one another. The passion of Jesus is presented as a prerequisite condition for Christ’s priesthood because Christ becomes a priest through his glorious exaltation. The passion became the first stage in Christ’s priesthood which issues forth in the glory of perfect compassion and faithfulness. Just as in the Hebrew Testament the word compassion speaks of relationships, Jesus relates to human creation in its suffering condition. Christ sustained human sorrows in order that there might be a complete relationship of compassion between him and us. In the Hebrew Testament God had declared himself as compassionate and faithful and placed a demand on his people. They were enjoined to “keep the commandments I am giving you today.” (Ex 34, 11)

Jesus became the compassionate high priest in order to forgive the sins of the people. (Heb 2, 17) The removal of sins is understood to be an act of mercy and loving kindness. This act of compassion on the part of Christ is ongoing and omnipresent. He does so now from his enthronement at the right hand of the God. Christ’s compassion is couched in terms of service, for “he is able to help those who are being tested.” (Heb 2, 18)

The author of Hebrews goes on to speak of the fact that Christ learned obedience

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through what he suffered, he was perfected in that suffering, i.e., consecrated, and “became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” (Heb 5, 9) He was consecrated a new creation, a new human person. Christ is our compassionate high priest who,

“sits at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle that the Lord, not humans, set up.” (Heb 8, 1-2)

Christ has become the merciful high priest because he has entered into the heavenly sanctuary through his own blood of sacrifice, thus securing eternal redemption. (Heb 9, 12)

The blood of Christ speaks more eloquently than the blood of Abel, for it always speaks of compassion. (Heb 12, 24) As Christians we have confidence because of Christ’s blood to enter into the sanctuary of heaven, to enter into the sanctuary of the eucharist, to enter into the sanctuary of the ecclesial community. (Heb 10, 19) Because Christ’s blood empowers us, “we must consider how to rouse one another to love and good works.” (Heb 10, 24)

Thus, compassion is proposed to us through the Hebrew Testament understanding of covenantal relationships and by the New Testament understanding of Christ’s blood. Christ’s blood is the heart and content of the new covenant. (Heb 9, 11-22)

New Testament writers understood the demands of compassion. The Epistle of James gives us a good description of religion which is marked by compassion. True faith demands good works of compassion in order to be alive (2:17). Elsewhere in the New Testament we have the compassionate activity of Christ illustrated from his public life: healings, words of consolation, forgiveness, and the instructions to his disciples.

Defining Our Humanity

There is an anecdote told of Margaret Meade, the famous anthropologist. One of her students one day asked her what would be the first indication of civilization in any given culture. The student expected an answer of perhaps an earthen piece of pottery to indicate that food was being stored or even a fish hook that

people were fishing to eke out a living. Instead Margaret Meade replied that a healed femur would be the first indication of civilization.

Why? Because in order to have the leg bone heal, someone else would have had to have provided food and shelter and all bodily needs for the injured one. This would have been a sign of compassion. And this would be the first indication of civilization in any given culture.

Certainly the people of the Bible were civilized, for one of the hallmarks of biblical religion is compassion. Jesus is described in terms of compassion. Jesus poured out his blood and healed our wounds.



For Reflection

How can each of us be a compassionate and priestly people? How can we relate and be with the marginalized of our world in a priestly way?

What other aspects of the person of Jesus have you found to be compassionate? Share any particular biblical stories of compassion that appeal strongly to you and why.

What other words and ideas do you experience with the word *compassion*?

Margaret Meade shares her idea of the first signs of civilization. What do you think would be the first signs of Christianity?



*Comfort, O comfort my people
says your God,
and
speak tenderly to the heart of Jerusalem.*

Isaiah 40, 1-2