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Compassion-A Reflection on the Christian Life
Image Books, Doubleday, New York 2005
ISBN 0-385-51752-1

Chapter 4



Community

No Individual Stardom

The main question of the second part of our reflections concerns discipleship. There are many ways to formulate this question: "How can we creatively respond to Jesus' call to be compassionate as your loving God is compassionate? How can we make God's compassion the basis and source of our lives? Where can God's compassionate presence become visible in our everyday lives? How is it possible for us, broken and sinful human beings, to follow Jesus Christ and thus become manifestations of God's compassion? What does it mean for us to enter into solidarity with other human beings and offer them obedient service?"

The message that comes to us in the New Testament is that the compassionate life is a life together. Compassion is not an individual character trait, a personal attitude, or a special talent, but a way of living together. When Paul exhorts the Christians of Philippi to live a compassionate life with the mind of Christ, he gives a concrete description of what he means: "Do nothing from

selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (Ph 2:3-4) NRSV. Moreover, Paul stresses that the compassionate life is a life in community: "If our life in Christ means anything to you, if love can persuade at all, or the Spirit that we have in common, or any tenderness and sympathy, then be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind" (Ph 2:1-2).

Precisely because we are so inclined to think in terms of individual greatness and personal heroism, it is important for us to reflect carefully on the fact that the compassionate life is community life. We witness to God's compassionate presence in the world by the way we live and work together. Those who were first converted by the Apostles revealed their conversion not by feats of individual stardom but by entering a new life in community: "The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. They went *as a body* to the Temple every day but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone" (Ac 2:44-47). God's compassion became evident in a radically new way of living, which so amazed and surprised outsiders that they said, "See how they love each other."

A compassionate life is a life in which fellowship with Christ reveals itself in a new fellowship among those who follow him. We tend so often to think of compassion as an individual accomplishment, that we easily lose sight of its essentially communal nature. By entering into fellowship with Jesus Christ, who emptied himself and became as we are and humbled himself by accepting death on the cross, we enter into a new relationship with each other. The new relationship with Christ and the new relationship with

each other can never be separated. It is not enough to say that a new relationship with Christ leads to a new relationship with each other. Rather, we must say that the mind of Christ is the mind that gathers us together in community; our life in community is the manifestation of the mind of Christ. As Paul says to the Romans,

Do not model yourselves on the behavior of the world around you, but let your behavior change, modeled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do.

(Rm 12:2)

Walking on the Same Path

To follow Christ means to relate to each other with the mind of Christ; that is, to relate to each other as Christ did to us—in servanthood and humility. Discipleship is walking together on the same path. While still living wholly *in* this world, we have discovered each other as companions on the same path and have formed a new community. While still subject to the power of the world and still deeply involved in the human struggle, we have become a new people with a new mind, a new way of seeing and hearing, and a new hope because of our common relationship with Christ. Compassion, then, can never be separated from community. Compassion always reveals itself in community, in a new way of being together. Relationship with Christ *is* relationship with our brothers and sisters. This is most powerfully expressed by Paul when he calls the Christian community the body of Christ.

The presence of Jesus Christ manifests itself to us in the life of the Christian community. It is in the Christian community that we can be open and receptive to the suffering of the world and offer

it a compassionate response. For where people come together in Christ's name, he is present as the compassionate Lord (see Mt 18:20). Jesus Christ is and remains the most radical manifestation of God's compassion.

The idea that God's compassion as it revealed itself in Jesus Christ is represented in time and space by the Christian community raises many difficult questions for us. In our society, compassion has lost its communal context and therefore has often degenerated into its opposite. We only need to examine some of the ways in which human suffering is presented to us today to come to a better understanding of the communal nature of compassion.

Bombarding the Senses

One of the most tragic events of our time is that we know more than ever before about the pains and sufferings of the world and yet are less and less able to respond to them. Radio, television, and newspapers allow us to follow from day to day—even from hour to hour—what is happening in the world. We hear about terrorism, armed conflicts and wars, assassinations, earthquakes, droughts and floods, famines and epidemics, concentration camps and torture chambers, and countless other forms of human suffering close to home or far away. Not only do we hear about them but also we are daily presented with pictures of starving babies, dying soldiers, burning houses, flooded villages, and wrecked cars. The news seems to have become an almost ceaseless litany of human suffering. The question is, do these highly sophisticated forms of communication and this increasing amount of information lead to a deeper solidarity and a greater compassion? It is very doubtful.

Can we really expect a compassionate response from the millions of individuals who read the paper during breakfast, listen to the radio on the way to work, and watch television after return-

ing home tired from their work in offices or factories? Can we reasonably expect compassion from the many isolated individuals who are constantly being reminded in the privacy of their homes or cars of the vast extent of human suffering?

There appears to be a general assumption that it is good for people to be exposed to the pain and suffering of the world. Not only do newspapers and news broadcasts seem to act on this assumption but also most organizations whose main concern is to help suffering people. Charitable institutions often send letters describing the miserable conditions in different parts of the world and enclose photographs of people whose humanity is hardly recognizable. In so doing, they hope to motivate the receiver to send money for relief projects.

We might ask, however, whether mass communication directed to millions of people who experience themselves as small, insignificant, powerless individuals does not in fact do more harm than good. When there is no community that can mediate between world needs and personal responses, the burden of the world can only be a crushing burden. When the pains of the world are presented to people who are already overwhelmed by the problems in their small circle of family or friends, how can we hope for a creative response? What we can expect is the opposite of compassion: numbness and anger.

Massive exposure to human misery often leads to psychic numbness. Our minds cannot tolerate being constantly reminded of things which interfere with what we are doing at the moment. When we have to open our store in the morning, go about our business, prepare our classes, or talk to our fellow workers, we cannot be filled with the collective misery of the world. If we let the full content of newscasts enter into our innermost selves, we would become so overwhelmed by the absurdities of existence that we would become paralyzed. If we try to absorb all that is reported

by the paper, radio, or television and all that bombards us on computers and cell phones, we would never get any work done. Our continued effectiveness requires a mental filtering system by which we can moderate the impact of the daily news.

But there is more. Exposure to human misery on a mass scale can lead not only to psychic numbness but also to hostility. This might seem strange, but when we look more closely at the human response to disturbing information, we realize that confrontation with human pain often creates anger instead of care, irritation instead of sympathy, and even fury instead of compassion. Human suffering, which comes to us in a way and on a scale that makes identification practically impossible, frequently evokes strong negative feelings. Often, some of the lowest human drives are brought into the open by a confrontation with miserable-looking people. In the most horrendous way, this was the case in the Nazi, Vietnamese, and Chilean concentration camps, where torture and cruelty seemed easier the worse the prisoners looked. When we are no longer able to recognize suffering persons as fellow human beings, their pain evokes more disgust and anger than compassion. It is therefore no wonder that the diary of Anne Frank did more for the understanding of human misery than many of the films showing long lines of hungry faces, dark buildings with ominous chimneys, and heaps of naked, emaciated human corpses. Anne Frank we can understand; piles of human flesh only make us sick.

How can we account for this psychic numbness and anger? Numbness and anger are the reactions of the person who says, "When I can't do anything about it anyhow, why do you bother me with it!" Confronted with human pain and at the same time reminded of our powerlessness, we feel offended to the very core of our being and fall back on our defenses of numbness and anger. If compassion means entering into solidarity with human beings who are suffering, then the increasing presentation of human suf-

fering by the news media does not serve to evoke compassion. Those who know most about what goes on in the world—those who devote much attention to computers, newspapers, radio, and television—are not necessarily the most compassionate people.

Responding compassionately to what the media present to us is made even more difficult by its "neutrality." The evening news offers a good example. Whatever the news correspondent announces—war, murder, floods, the weather, and the football scores—is reported with the same ritualized tone of voice and facial expression. Moreover, there is an almost liturgical order to the litany of events: first the great news items about national and international conflicts, then the more homey accidents, then the stock market and the weather, then a short word of "wisdom," and finally something light or funny. All of this is regularly interrupted by smiling people urging us to buy products of dubious necessity. The whole "service" is so distant and aloof that the most obvious response is to invest no more energy in it than in brushing your teeth before going to bed.

Therefore, the question is, how can we see the suffering in our world and be moved to compassion as Jesus was moved when he saw a great crowd of people without food (Mt 14:14)? This question has become very urgent at a time when we see so much and are moved so little.

Community as Mediator

The Christian community mediates between the suffering of the world and our individual responses to this suffering. Since the Christian community is the living presence of the mediating Christ, it enables us to be fully aware of the painful condition of the human family without being paralyzed by this awareness. In the Christian community, we can keep our eyes and ears open to

all that happens without being numbed by technological overstimulation or angered by the experience of powerlessness. In the Christian community, we can know about hunger, oppression, torture, and the nuclear threat without giving into a fatalistic resignation and withdrawing into a preoccupation with personal survival. In the Christian community, we can fully recognize the condition of our society without panicking.

This was convincingly illustrated by Joe Marino, an American theology student who traveled to Calcutta to experience living and working among the poor. The Missionary Brothers of Charity offered him hospitality. There, surrounded by indescribable human misery, he discovered the mediating power of community. In his diary he writes:

One night I had a long talk with Brother Jesulão. He told me that if a brother is not able to work with his fellow brothers and live with them peaceably, then he is always asked to leave . . . even if he is an excellent worker among the poor . . . Two nights later I walked with Brother Willy and he said that to live with his fellow brothers is his first priority. He is always challenged to love the brothers. He stated that if he cannot love the brothers with whom he lives, how can he love those in the street.⁹

In the Christian community we gather in the name of Christ and thus experience him in the midst of a suffering world. There our old, weak minds, which are unable fully to perceive the pains of the world, are transformed into the mind of Christ, to whom nothing human is alien. In community, we are no longer a mass of helpless individuals, but are transformed into one people of God. In community, our fears and anger are transformed by God's unconditional love, and we become gentle manifestations of God's

boundless compassion. In community, our lives become compassionate lives because in the way we live and work together, God's compassion becomes present in the midst of a broken world.

Here the deepest meaning of the compassionate life reveals itself. By our life together, we become participants in the divine compassion. Through this participation, we can take on the yoke and burden of Christ—which is all human pain in every time and place—while realizing that his yoke is easy and his burden light (Mt 11:30).

As long as we depend on our own limited resources, the world will frighten us and we will try to avoid the painful spots. But once we have become participants in God's compassion, we can enter deeply into the most hidden corners of the world and perform the same works Christ did; indeed, we may perform even greater works (Jn 14:12)!

Wherever true Christian community is formed, compassion *happens* in the world. The energy that radiated from the early Christian communities was indeed divine energy that had a transforming influence on all who were touched by it. That same energy continues to show itself wherever people come together in Christ's name and take on his yoke in humbleness and gentleness of heart (Mt 11:29). This is true not only of Benedict and Scholastica and their followers or Francis and Clare and their brothers and sisters, but also whenever men and women let go of their old, anxious ways of thinking and find each other in the mind of Christ.

Since it is in community that God's compassion reveals itself, solidarity, servanthood, and obedience are also the main characteristics of our life together. Solidarity can hardly be an individual accomplishment. It is difficult for us as individuals to enter into the pains and sufferings of our fellow human beings. But in the community gathered in Christ's name, there is an unlimited space into which strangers from different places with very different stories can

enter and experience God's compassionate presence. It is a great mystery that compassion often becomes real for people not simply because of the deeds of one hospitable individual, but because of an intangible atmosphere resulting from a common life. Certain parishes, prayer groups, households, homes, houses, convents, or monasteries have a true healing influence that can make both members and their guests feel understood, accepted, cared for, and loved. The kindness of the individual people often seems more a manifestation of this healing environment than the cause of it.

Servanthood too is a quality of the community. Our individual ability to serve is quite limited. We might be able to help a few people for a while, but to respond in servanthood to all people all the time is not a realistic human aspiration. As soon as we speak in terms of *we*, however, the picture changes. As a community we can transcend our individual limitations and become a concrete realization of the self-emptying way of Christ. This communal realization can then find a specific expression in the daily work of the individual members. Some people work well with teenagers, others with the elderly, others with hospital patients, and others with prisoners. As individuals we cannot be everything to everyone, but as a community we can indeed serve a great variety of needs. Moreover, by the constant support and encouragement of the community we find it possible to remain faithful to our commitment to service.

Finally, we must recognize that obedience, as an attentive listening to God, is very much a communal vocation. It is precisely by constant prayer and meditation that the community remains alert and open to the needs of the world. Left to ourselves, we might easily begin to idolize our particular form or style of ministry and so turn our service into a personal hobby. But when we come together regularly to listen to the word of God and the presence of God in our midst, we stay alert to the guiding voice and move away from the comfortable places to unknown territories.

When we perceive obedience as primarily a characteristic of the community itself, relationships between different members of a community can become much more gentle. We also realize then that together we want to discern God's will for us and make our service a response to God's compassionate presence in our midst.

Thus, God's solidarity, servanthood, and obedience, revealed to us in the life of Jesus Christ, are the marks of the compassionate life lived in community. In and through the community they can slowly become a real and integral part of our individual lives.

A Sense of Belonging

At this point, the question arises, "How can we build community? What do we have to do to make community happen?" But perhaps such questions come from an anxious heart and are less practical and helpful than they appear to be. It seems better to raise the more contemplative question, "Where do we see community occurring?" Once we have become sensitive to the reality of community in our midst, we may find it easier to discover the most appropriate starting point for its growth and development. It makes more sense to sow seeds in soil in which we have already seen something grow than to stand around worrying about how to make the soil fertile.

An illustration from the life of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton might be helpful here. One of the most influential social critics of the sixties, Merton read very few newspapers and never watched television or listened to the radio. Nevertheless, his response to the needs of the world was a compassionate one. Merton could listen to the events of his time and in his solitude discern how to be of obedient service to his fellow human beings. What is important here is to realize that Merton's knowledge of the suffering of the world came not from the media but from letters written by

friends for whom particular events had personal significance. To these friends a response was possible. When information about human suffering comes to us through a person who can be embraced, it is humanized. Letters bring life back to a human dimension. In Merton's case, letters came from all over the world and from the most diverse groups of people. They came from monasteries and convents on different continents, from young people wondering what to do with their lives, from novelists such as James Baldwin and Evelyn Waugh, from scholars such as Jacques Maritain and Jean Leclercq, from poets and prophets, from religious, nonreligious, and antireligious people, from cardinals and bishops, from Christians and Buddhists, and from many, many poor people whose names will never be known. In these letters, Merton saw the world with its pains and its joys. He was drawn into a real community of living people with real faces, real tears, and real smiles. Once in a while Merton invited some of his friends to the Abbey, and together they prayed, spoke about the pain of the world, and tried to give each other new hope and new strength. These small retreats proved to be highly significant for those who lived a very active and often dangerous life. They were offered strong mutual support. Many people known today for their courage and perseverance found their inspiration in these experiences of community.

This is just one example to illustrate the importance of community in the compassionate life. Letters and retreats are ways of being in community, but there are many other ways. It is important to keep ourselves from thinking about community only in terms of living together in one house, or sharing meals and prayers, or doing projects together. These might well be true expressions of community, but community is a much deeper reality. People who live together do not necessarily live in community, and those who live alone do not necessarily live without it. Physical nearness or distance is secondary. The primary quality of community is a deep

sense of being gathered by God. When Francis Xavier traveled alone across many continents to preach the Gospel, he found strength in the sure knowledge that he belonged to a community that supported him with a deep sense of care and unceasing prayer. And many Christians who show great perseverance in hard and lonely tasks find their strength in the deep bond with the community in whose name they do their work.

Here we touch one of the most critical areas of the Christian life today. Many very generous Christians find themselves increasingly tired and dispirited not so much because the work is hard or the success slight, but because they feel isolated, unsupported, and left alone. People who say, "I wonder if anyone cares what I am doing. I wonder if my superior, my friends at home, or the people who sent me ever think about me, ever pray for me, ever consider me part of their lives," are in real spiritual danger. We are able to do many hard things, tolerate many conflicts, overcome many obstacles, and persevere under many pressures, but when we no longer experience ourselves as part of a caring, supporting, praying community, we quickly lose faith. This is because faith in God's compassionate presence can never be separated from experiencing God's presence in the community to which we belong. The crises in the lives of many caring Christians today are closely connected with deep feelings of not belonging. Without a sense of being sent by a caring community, a compassionate life cannot last long and quickly degenerates into a life marked by numbness and anger. This is not simply a psychological observation, but a theological truth, because apart from a vital relationship with a caring community a vital relationship with Christ is not possible.

Now we must look more closely at the dynamics of community life. We will do so by speaking about the two poles of a mature community life in which God's compassion can become visible: displacement and togetherness.