



Introduction: Compassionate Heart

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“A Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion” (Lk 10:33). We now continue with the second theme in the fourth segment of Mercy Global Presence – *Integration*. In March, we completed the first theme – “Contemplative Seeing.” Before we move to the second theme, “A Compassionate Heart,” let us recall some of the diverse voices and images from the first theme.

Mary Katherine Doyle rsm, using images of sequoia trees, described contemplative seeing. She told us, “It is a gift to see beyond the first level of sight, to see beyond appearances into the heart of what is perceived. Contemplative seeing does that. It leads us beyond the surface into meaning. It moves us into the revelatory moment of sight. It is the experience of living sacramentality.” Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poetry gave Jo O’Donovan rsm the inspiration she needed, “Hopkins invites us to a contemplative seeing of earth and our place in it, a seeing with our feet on the ground and a ‘faith with eyes wide open.’ *The Windhover* invites us to seeing and hearing with the whole self. With the little kestrel, we are inserted into the noble passion of creation that mimes variously the Creator’s own passion in Christ.” Michelle Gorman rsm also looked to poets to speak to us, “Contemplative seeing is the willingness to sit in the dark and let the truth reveal itself to my inner and outer eyes without my need to control the outcome – to let the truth “dawn” on me – and, in that dawning, to be transformed.”

In the midst of this pandemic time, Maria Teresa Retana rsm found comfort, “We face hurdles and overcome whatever crosses us in taking the path of “Mercy” which our loving God calls us to tread with everyone in our care. This time of “pause” is an invitation from God to look at our lives, to see and believe that what matters most is to trust fully in God’s divine providence. As a *Misericordian*, I continue to be the voice that echoes the Mercy of God to His people.” Using the works of artists, Valda Dickinson rsm led us in a deeply reflective prayer, “Contemplative Seeing: The opening of Eyes from Sight to Insight.” She helped us fall into deep stillness as she led us through “Visio Divina,” allowing God to speak to us through images.

Now we begin our second theme, “A Compassionate Heart.” We find our inspiration and our invitation to a compassionate heart in the words of the first creation story, “God created humankind in God’s image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them” (Gen 1:27). This invitation is reinforced in Jesus’ words in Luke, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:35-36). We were created in God’s image, to act in God’s image. And the single most dominant image of God in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament is that of the Compassionate One.

When Moses asks God for God’s name, this is God’s response, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation” (Ex 34:6-7). This is the most quoted verse in the Old Testament – in the Torah, in the history books, in the Psalms and in the writings. God speaks to us in Isaiah, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (Is 49:15). In several places, God’s title is the Merciful One: “And the people of the Lord Most High offered their prayers before the Merciful One” (Sir 50:19), and “God, the mercifully compassionate One, being compassionate, forgave

their iniquity, and did not destroy them” (Ps 78:38). A version of that title is used in the New Testament, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation” (2 Cor 1:3).

Compassion and mercy are so constitutive of who God is and who we are as those made in God’s image that there are several words used to show the nuances. In Hebrew in the Old Testament, among the many words are three most commonly used: *hesed* = covenant love between God and the chosen people, steadfast love, loving kindness; *rahamim* = womb-love, compassion, mercy; and *hanan* = grace or favour. In Greek in the New Testament are four words: *eleos* = mercy; *splagchna* = compassion; *oiktirmos* = sympathy; and *charis* = grace or favour. The two words which reflect the intimate, deeply personal nature of compassion are *rahamim* and *splagchna*.

Rabbi Soetendorp has said, “The teaching of compassion, the exercise of the soul, will open the heart. And then nothing will be impossible.” Before we look specifically at a compassionate heart, let us take a few moments to consider what “heart” means in the Scriptures. The Hebrew word for heart is *leb*, and the Greek word is *kardia*. The word is used over one thousand times, the most common anthropological term used in the Scriptures. In biblical times, the heart refers holistically to the inner part of a person; to a person’s will, mind, consciousness, emotions, and understanding; a person’s moral character and determination; and the location of knowledge, memory, and reflection. In 1 Sam 16:7, we see how that is all summarized, “The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

The complexity and holistic understanding of “heart” is reflected in the following examples taken from both Testaments:

- ✓ Hannah prayed and said, ‘My heart exults in the Lord.’ (1 Sam 2:1)
- ✓ I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit. (Ps 77:6)
- ✓ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart. (Matt 11:29)
- ✓ Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. (Lk 2:19)
- ✓ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. (Col 3:15)
- ✓ God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and largeness of heart as vast as the sand on the seashore. . . He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. 1 Kgs 4:29, 33)
- ✓ Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. (Prov 4:23)
- ✓ Love the Lord your God with all your heart. (Matt 22:37)
- ✓ The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his heart. (1 Kgs 10:24)
- ✓ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord. (Jer 29:13-14)
- ✓ I have found David, son of Jesse, to be a man after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes. (Acts 13:22)
- ✓ But thanks be to God who put in the heart of Titus the same eagerness for you that I myself have. (2 Cor 8:16)

Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us, “Let us fill our hearts with our own compassion – towards ourselves and towards all living beings.” In two hymns in the first chapters of Luke’s Gospel which we know as the *Magnificat* and the *Benedictus*, we see the sense of a compassionate heart linking the Old Testament with the New Testament. In the *Magnificat*, Mary cries, “God’s mercy is from

generation to generation. . . You have helped your servant Israel, in remembrance of your mercy, according to the promise you made to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah and to their descendants forever” (Lk 1:47-55). And in the *Benedictus*, Zechariah gives us the words which we use in our Morning Prayer, “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Lk 1:78-79).

Perhaps the most frequent phrase in the Gospels is “Jesus was moved with or filled with compassion.” Elaine Wainwright rsm says, “The three synoptic gospels tell the story of Jesus, the fleshly/earthly one, as that of a prophet of justice and mercy. He is moved with compassion in the face of illness and death in the community (Matt 20:34; Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13), of their hunger (Matt 14:14; 15:32//Mark 6:34; 8:2) and their being ‘harassed and helpless’ (Matt 9:36). In each of these texts, the verb used is [*splagchnizoma*] which means to be moved in one’s gut, one’s entrails.”

In the Gospel miracle stories, we hear the words over and over:

- ✓ A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, ‘If you choose, you can make me clean.’ Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’ (Mk 1:40-41)
- ✓ Jesus called his disciples to him and said, ‘I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.’ (Matt 15:32)
- ✓ He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’ (Lk 7:13)

Made in God’s image, we are called to be compassionate as God is and as Jesus is:

- ✓ Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. (Matt 5:7)
- ✓ Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners. (Matt 9:13-14)
- ✓ As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. (Col 3:12)

Elizabeth Johnson csj summarizes the invitation to compassion, flowing from the Resurrection, “The Resurrection made Jesus present to the disciples in an entirely new way, enabling them to take the liberating message of the compassionate God to the ends of the Earth and to all of creation. And through the early church’s recorded memories of the crucified and risen Christ, this understanding of the cross as an expression of the compassion and mercy of God spread throughout the world.”

Compassion is threaded through the blessings given in the letters of the New Testament. The writer of the first letter to Timothy (1:2) writes, “To Timothy, my loyal child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.” In the second letter of John (1:3) we read, “Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Son of the Father, in truth and in love.” And in the letter of Jude (1:1-2), we hear, “To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ: May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.”

Howard Gray sj, who was among the first to call attention to the contemplative seeing and compassionate heart present in the parable of the Good Samaritan, says that having a compassionate heart means, “allowing the heart to be touched profoundly by identifying with the nameless ones, allowing our vision to change us.”

We conclude our reflections on a compassionate heart by referring to two sources of energy for global attention to the absolute need for compassion. In her *Field of Compassion*, Judy Cannato writes: “Compassion changes everything. Compassion heals. Compassion mends the broken and restores what has been lost. Compassion draws together those who have been estranged or never even dreamed they were connected. Compassion pulls us out of ourselves and into the heart of another, placing us on holy ground where we instinctively take off our shoes and walk in reverence. Compassion springs out of vulnerability and triumphs in unity.”

On November 12, 2009, the *Charter for Compassion*, created through the efforts and leadership of *TED.com* and Karen Armstrong, was made public. It has been signed by millions of people and organizations, including Pope Benedict XVI. It has been translated into more than one hundred languages. It can be found at www.charterforcompassion.org. It is copied below:

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

We conclude our reflections with words from Joan Chittister osb on the *Charter for Compassion*: “In a world where force is too often the response to differences of opinion, culture and ideas of the divine, compassion is its one universal antidote. This Charter gives spiritual voices the opportunity to unite in this most authentic cry for peace.”