Called to Compassion by Breege O’Neill rsm

In Manila some weeks ago a profound encounter was witnessed by thousands of people. Pope Francis was being welcomed by a young girl, Glyzelle Palomar, when she broke down and through her tears she asked the question: Why do children suffer”? Pope Francis did not respond with a theological lecture on the mystery of evil. Instead, visibly moved, he reached out and hugged Glyzelle, affirmed her tears, and then diverging from his prepared speech he responded from the heart saying, “Only when we are able to weep about the things that you lived can we understand something and answer something...... Today's world needs to weep,” he said. “The marginalized weep, those left aside weep, the scorned weep ... but those of us who lead a life more or less without needs, don't know how to weep..... Certain realities of life are only seen with eyes cleansed by tears”. This encounter between Glyzelle Palomar and Pope Francis personifies the essence of compassion – an ability to enter into the suffering of another and feel it as one’s own.

The word compassion, in Hebrew, “Rachamim”, which translates in English as ‘womb compassion’ was the name God used in revealing himself to Moses. “Yahweh, Yahweh, a God of tenderness and compassion, abounding in mercy and fidelity, showing kindness to a thousand generations” (Ex 34:6). The love overflowing with tenderness, compassion, protectiveness and forgiveness that binds a mother to her child mirrors this “Rachamim” of God. “Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you” (Is 49:15). Throughout the Scriptures, God repeatedly reveals to us the unconditional, compassionate nature of the “Rachamim” in God’s heart for each of us.

We look to Jesus, God-with-us, to show us the face of God. In Jesus, we see the embodiment of God’s compassion. “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate” (Lk.6:36). Compassion was evoked in Jesus himself, sometimes to the point of tears, when he came face to face with pain, sorrow, hunger, loneliness and bewilderment. “When he saw the crowds, he was moved with compassion to the depths of his being, for they were bewildered and dejected, like sheep who have no shepherd” (Mt 9:36). He witnessed the grief of Lazarus’s sisters, and “he wept with them.” The sight of the widow at Nain, following the body of her son out to burial, moved his heart (Lk 7:13). Jesus’s compassionate response gives expression to the Divine Compassion, which moved God to come among us as a self-emptying, servant God who heals our wounds and washes our feet.

Catherine McAuley knew God as the Compassionate One who loved her and provided for her. Through the events of her life, God gradually shaped Catherine into a woman overflowing with compassion. Her whole personality became a hospitable place of welcome for everyone she encountered. Catherine knew from her lived experience that what the
poor hold more precious than gold is “the kind word, the gentle compassionate look and the patient hearing of sorrows”. She brought to all her dealings with those on the margins of society, an inner quality of graciousness and combined it with tender compassion. Her ability to express God’s mercy and compassion as a soothing balm to the wounds of the poor, homeless, hungry, sick and dying, and her service to the unprotected and the uneducated became the founding charism of the Sisters of Mercy. To be known by the name Mercy is to publicly commit to become ever more compassionate.

Compassion is one of the most beautiful presences we bring to the world and true compassion is born from suffering. When I have felt deep pain I am able to be touched by the suffering of others. The capacity to be compassionate is deepened or blocked by our response to the painful experiences of life. Part of the essence of being human is the suffering that comes from hurts, losses, displacements and failures. Vulnerability is precarious. If left unattended, it can solidify into negativity and destructiveness. However, if attended to and integrated it becomes a door opening into compassion. Institutions too when disconnected from their founding purpose can become destructive, and in recent years many institutions have had to engage in the bleak journey of coming to terms with that reality. However, when individuals or institutions undertake this difficult process with sincerity and courage they are guided by grace into a more merciful, compassionate way of being and engaging.

How do we cultivate and nurture this merciful way of living?

Growth into this merciful, compassionate way is nurtured by contemplation, prayer, patience and compassionate action. Prayer and contemplation expand the heart into a world-embracing space of solidarity where all humanity can be touched with the compassionate love of God. Patience involves staying with, living through, being fully present to what is presenting itself in the here and now. Compassionate action draws us outward to stand in solidarity with all who are marginalised, persecuted, and endangered in the whole earth community, to comfort those who are bereft and without hope and to challenge all that causes misery and injustice. We do this, aware that all we have to give is the love we have received.

Compassion springs from the intimate inter-relationship of all things. We belong to one community of life. We are one with the world in all its beauty and suffering. Each individual choice and action in the universe affects the whole.

In her book Fields of Compassion, the theologian Judy Cannato states: “Making consistent choices out of ever growing awareness creates a spirit, a field of energy that catches others up and invites them in... Creating a field of kindness or care with intentionality produces an environment fecund with healing ...Life to the full is possible but not without our choosing it one small action at a time.”

As members of the global Mercy community, we contribute to a Field of Mercy, from which compassion and care flow in the universe. We join with all others who are committed to this manifestation. Each intentional compassionate action of ours contributes to the growth of this transformative groundswell of Mercy in our world.
What if in this Year of Consecrated Life, we were to consciously choose day by day and action by action to live compassionately and allow God’s energy of Rachamim to transform us and transform our world?

Questions Relating to Reflection on Compassion

What events in my life have enabled me to become more compassionate towards myself/towards others?

In what situations and towards whom have I/we found it difficult to respond with compassion?

What situations in our locality/world are calling us to a compassionate response at this time?

What does being compassionate towards the Earth involve for Sisters of Mercy?

Resources for Reflection on Compassion


Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystic Christianity: Encountering the Wisdom Jesus.* Tami Simon speaks with The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault, 12 February, 2014. Radio program (54:01)


Conversations with...Judy Cannato.’ Franciscan Sisters of the Poor. Vol 11, no 3, September 2010. (12 pps; PDF)

Ilia Delio O.S.F., *Compassion: Living in the Spirit of St Francis* (St Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2011) *Paperback


Susan Bridle, *Comprehensive Compassion: An Interview with Brian Swimme*. What is Enlightenment? (WIE) Magazine. Issue 19, 2003 (9 pps; PDF)

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