

**Compassion:
Christian Presence in Action**

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Senior Seminar
May 7, 1990**

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In the summer of 1989 I was touched by Christ's spirit of compassion in my life and work. As I worked at a homeless shelter, I came to understand compassionate living. Challenges faced me as I lived and worked with the homeless. Only through the grace of God was I able to face the anger, hatred, and bitterness vented on me by the oppressed people I lived with. I began to face the truth in the statement that Christ lives in all of us. Sometimes the Christ is suffering, joyful, laughing and /or crying. In this paper I will examine the tangible as well as intangible aspects of compassion.

Henri Nouwen is one author who has examined the many facets of compassion. He readily acknowledges that compassion is often in opposition to the nature of what we want to do and be. He also understands the necessity of living life in the fullness of God through pain and joy. Living compassionately is neither easy nor necessarily desirable. Compassion involves openness to prayer with God, living life as a prayer and a practice in patience.

Gustavo Gutierrez has also taken a "new" look at the contemporary implications of the Gospels are saying. In the Gospels we find the acts of compassion exemplified by Jesus and his disciple in an experiential theology. Where Henri Nouwen leaves off with necessary and perceptive depths of understanding the nature of compassion, Gutierrez takes the Gospels and applies it to today's experiences of suffering and injustice. By

focusing on the rich spirit of the poor, Gutierrez asks us to examine, in the light of the Gospels, the way we are conducting our lives. The compassionate acts in the Bible can correlate with God's grace acting in today's lifestyle if the Bible is viewed as a way of life relevant for the modern world.

Another perspective on the issue is provided by Peregrine Worsthorn who sees today's system of government encouraging striving for the top. Though we have ideals of equality, our society is set up for the national leaders to be merciless. In order to get to the top, the achiever learns how to use people in order to meet a desired goal. This system opposes compassion because the people in power have to look out for themselves. The person on top is continually in a position of competition with the neighbor in order to maintain his or her position.

Along a similar line of thought, Michael Novak has made claims that Christian ideals are made within a competitive setting. If competition is not a part of the life style led, Novak sees not only Christians but the rest of society becoming slack in their ways. He also perceives that Christians compete among themselves to see who can be the meekest. In addition to these thoughts, Novak sees God's gracious way to be separate from the rest of our lifestyle.

From these perspectives I hope to provide an idea of some of the opinions available. I have chosen to emphasize compassionate acts and

what I have found in the Gospel's call to Christians. Here we find acts of mercy by saints and "sinners". The love of God is guiding our compassionate acts and working through all people. Jesus' example of life is to be our guide. He unconditionally loved himself and his neighbors. Obedience to God, a disciplined life and prayerful action are incorporated in compassionate living. Our guide is obedience to God and following Christ's example.

I. Competition

A. Striving for the Top

Our current culture in the United States is permeated with competition. Many of the people in our culture are rushing about trying to get ahead, be on top and to have more money. A person who holds the idea of striving to get to the top and staying there is Peregrine Worsthorne, a British author. In Peregrinations: Selected Pieces and in "A Universe of Hospital Patience. Further Remarks on the British Condition," he describes his view of the current conditions of society. One set of commentary I have chosen from Worsthorne's argument is:

A genuine compassionate society, one that has succeeded in achieving the ideal of actually putting itself in the shoes of the unfortunate, will soon find itself marching in the direction of collective solutions inimical to individual freedom. . . . There is a real and awful danger of people actually beginning to identify with the world of

suffering. . . . No healthy society should allow itself to see the world through the eyes of the unfortunate, since the unfortunate have no great interest in perceiving, let alone exploiting, the highest value of civilization: individual freedom. Indeed, being for the most part those who have failed to make use of freedom, either because of fate or circumstances. . . they are likely to be the part of society least enamored of that supremely challenging ideal and most susceptible to all the temptations to undermine it (Worsthorne, Harpers, p. 38).

From this commentary the opinion of this author comes through. He sees a society based on compassion being sick and dangerous. The healthy society based on individual freedom indicates Worsthorne's value of the individual and the ability to succeed if free. If an individual suffers with the suffering of another, Worsthorne may consider them sick and dangerous. The suffering of others is something we should not identify with. .

In addition to having no ability to suffer with the poor, Worsthorne also describes some leadership characteristics. In order to get to the top today, a person must be single minded and set on the goal of attaining the top position. Ruthlessness, egocentricity, deceitfulness and ambition are the key characteristics needed in the climb to the top. If a person is striving for the top, single minded determination to attain the top position allows one to push aside and overtake rivals. Yet, in the top position one must not be excessively brazen about the ruthlessness involved in getting there and

staying there. Once this position is attained, the competition does not end. Someone is always waiting to take over the position. The demands made on the position never cease.

In positions of governmental authority, the personality characteristics required are not those of a saint, gently, kind, loving, but those of single-minded strivings to reach the top. Worsthorne goes on to say that "sinners make better rulers than saints" (Worsthorne, Peregrinations, p. 128). Therefore, when choosing between a saintly or less than saintly person to hold a position of high authority, the people will choose the less saintly person. The more popular authority figure is more useful and more likely to succeed if they are immoral.

Worsthorne continues by saying political simpletons like Plato set up hypothetical situations where the morally good are suited for power. In reality, Plato's way does not occur. The way of expressing one's self is based on competitive strivings for the top. The good person is not chosen to be a leader. The morally good leader is overcome by other figures competing with the leader.

Another claim is made by Worsthorne concerning ideal leaders. He sees them striving for a perfection which is unattainable by human standards. Making a heaven on earth through the government is not consistent with having a democracy. The more prudent leaders are those lacking compassion and delving in power. The way a leader is most

effective is if he or she is not morally good. At this point Worsthorne says,

Let us grow up. If we want to govern ourselves, then forget about building a heaven on earth. For that is a divine prerogative and nothing to do with democracy" (Worsthorne, Peregrinations, p. 128).

Attempting to build a heaven on earth has nothing to do with Worsthorne attitude.

By looking at current trends in today's government, Worsthorne sees patriotism being inspired by those who have the best education system, health services and services to the lame. But he looks to the past and sees that patriotism was inspired by the army's victory, the mighty British Empire and tunes of glory (Worsthorne, Peregrinations, p. 130). From previous comments made by Worsthorne, I understand him to say our way is sad because we no longer rejoice in the army's might.

My question to Worsthorne is why is it not equally if not more exciting to have good education systems, better health care systems and services to the lame? Is it so awful to be increasing our services to our fellow human beings instead of rejoicing in building murderous weapons? Even when people who are electricians ask for more pay in order to afford adequate housing, food and clothing for their family, Worsthorne says:

Take the electricians, for example, who can bring Britain to a stand still in a matter of days. Like a number of other working-class groups occupying positions of pivotal importance, they are very ordinary people from backgrounds which in no way train them for responsible behavior. To put the matter very

bluntly, they are the bottom dogs who accidentally find themselves with the whip-hand; "have-nots" with plenty of excuse to behave in a bloody-minded fashion, who are expected to behave with all the restraint and public spirit that even the "haves" have not always in the past been willing to show (Worsthorne, Peregrinations, p. 120).

The language used in this commentary implies, to me, that Worsthorne considers the electricians incapable of responsible action. Previously, Worsthorne alludes to the idea that those who are the most unjust are likely to rule. It appears to be difficult for Worsthorne to accept that the working class have different ideas about what is worth while and that these may be equally unjust or as just as those of the current authorities. In addition, he seems to allude to the idea that demands made by the working class are out of line. The electricians, "ordinary people," are considered to be irresponsible and incapable of behaving as the "haves" do. I propose that the electricians realize what the "haves" have done and do not like it. Why would they want the same system back? I would think their focus would be on serving the customer and the employees as well the "haves". In this way the whole system benefits.

As we look further at Worsthorne's argument to strive for the top and obtain individual freedom, we need to examine what else is being said. He also says that building a heaven on earth is a "divine purogative." But in striving for the top without attempting to make a "heaven on earth" or build a community abuses people in the lower class. Many people are

hungry and without clothing and shelter because those on top consume the resources. The structure resembles a pyramid. At the bottom lie the poor and hungry holding up the wealthy. The poor have no choice but to maintain the structure of the pyramid. But Worsthorne alludes that those who are poor could compete if they wanted to and get to the top. If they did, the pyramid would collapse into a heap. The wealthy would suffer along with the poor while a new structure may be built.

B. Competition

Similar to Worsthorne idea of striving for the top; Michael Novak proposes that competition is an important part of Christianity. In The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism, Novak proposes that competition and Christianity work together. When looking at the individual, Novak sees that Christians are competing against each other. In the Jewish and Christian tradition, the decision made by King David whether to betray his closest friend or not demonstrates a confrontation with the ability to say yes to grace or decline from it. The idea that there are winners and losers in this as well as other cases make competition high. . Novak sees that the divisions accent the competitive depths of the heart's striving. A question asked in Mark 8:36 says, "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?" Those who are a part of the Christian tradition need to take account of the competition residing in the

desire to save the soul.

In addition, Novak also says competition among Christians occurs as Christians compete to be meeker than one another. This implies that a Christian focus is on who is meeker than the other, not on the desire to become a humble servant of Christ. To further the point, Novak also alludes to the idea that men and women compete in order to have a better society. Rivalry, Novak says, teaches a person how to be pushed harder in order to attain self-realization and/or raise the standards of the society and the individual. Without competition, these improvements would not be made. The low standards incorporated with Novak's idea of noncompetitiveness would have us become less able to realize ourselves. Novak believes that competing, instead of being slack in our ways, will lead to improvements in all.

To further Novak's claim that we must compete among ourselves in society while we are Christians, he begins to talk about humanity's relationship to God. He separates the life of Grace from the life of this world. The life in the Spirit and the laws of the economy are placed in opposing positions. To illumine this point, Novak mentions that the prodigal son receives a celebration greater than the faithful son. He also says the workers receive the same wage regardless of what hour they arrived. The spirit of the person wishing to enter into God's ways may be with God for a long or short time while on earth. God does receive us no

matter when we decide to turn our lives over to God. But Novak contradicts himself when he says, "God rewards not the worldly success of man but his response to God's Word in his heart and deeds" (Novak, p. 345). In one sense we see Novak separating the world from the spiritual life. In another instance he says people respond to God by manifesting their understandings in deeds. With these instances I become confused about what Novak's message is concerning the way we live our lives. Throughout most of the essay I hear him saying that we are competing against one another to improve the self and society through competition. In the next instance, he implies listening to God's Word and carrying out the understanding of the Word in deeds.

If Novak is saying to carry out God's Word in our daily actions toward one another by competing against one another, I do not sympathize with his method. When competition against one another is the main impact of our actions, love and compassion become virtues to compete for not whether we are gracious or loving towards one another. God's grace and interaction among people is apparently ignored. Each person works toward individual success, without much regard for our neighbor's, aside from using one another for our own benefits. The neighbor only matters when they can contribute to my way of doing things. This idea contradicts what Christ has called us to do.

Yet, competition not only pushes for perfection but causes

subservience and poverty among many who are capable but do not always have the chance to compete. Competition in itself is a form of perfectionism of human beings. The desire to be the best demands continual striving. Therefore perfectionism is selfish because those who are not able to attain standards as high as others are left in poverty and degradation. Those who do compete and "succeed" often use others without caring about what happens to them. We need too ask ourselves if competition abuses others, can we say we are improving?

II. Compassion

A. Displacement--Nouwen

In the book Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life Henri Nouwen, Donald P. McNeil and Douglas A. Morrison have written, they talk about Christ's call to be compassionate as a Christian. In reviewing this book there are a few parts I would like to describe.

Displacement is a step in the way to becoming compassionate. Opening ourselves up to God is done more easily if we see ourselves in this world but not of it. Therefore we need to displace ourselves in order to understand who we are and what God has called us to do. Displacement allows us to recognize the brokenness in our life. By recognizing our

isolation and brokenness through displacement, we are able to enter into a community with a deeper understanding of one another. We are able to acquire solidarity in our brokenness because displacement enables us to realize our isolation and this drives us into community. Displacement involves distancing ourselves from the world so we do not become objects of interest or the most interesting and unique person of a community. This event does not evoke bitterness or apathy. Instead it allows us to become disciples of God's way. Our discipleship is based on our ability to displace ourselves in order to understand God's way more clearly and follow God's call. Stepping away from our accustomed lifestyles allows us to gain perspective on what is occurring around us. Through displacement we are more easily able to discern God's ways.

Jesus is an example of God's displacement. "God displaced himself so that nothing human would be alien to him and he could experience fully the brokenness of our condition" (Nouwen, p. 65). God, in Jesus, displaced himself and was able to unite with the sufferings and joys of our human lives. We may see that through displacement, union with our fellow man increases. By discovering our brokenness, we are able to discover the unity we have with God, ourselves and our surrounding. For displacement does not lead to removal and lack of understanding, but instills within us the ability to unify and form community with our fellow human beings. .

St. Francis of Assisi is an historical example of how displacement

can be lived. Nouwen cites that St. Francis of Assisi regarded each person he met, whether king or leper, as an important individual. St. Francis of Assisi treated all people as if they were royalty. Because of his displacement he was able to lovingly allow unity between himself and his fellow human being. A sense of humility instead of distinction permeates this attitude. In no way did Francis of Assisi desire to be unique or special of better but united with people in commonness.

In contrast to what the world displacement implies, it allows for unity, not separatism. Nouwen, also points out that by becoming displaced mentally, physically and emotionally we are able to accept our discipleship to God. Our ability to hear God's call and follow exemplifies our communication and discipleship with God. From here, Nouwen says that "then what seemed a reason for shame and embarrassment becomes instead the basis of community and what seemed to separate us from others becomes the basis of compassion" (Nouwen, p. 73). Instead of creating separateness, our differences are able to build a community. Our ability to realize our brokenness within, through displacement, enables us to build a community based on compassionate acts toward one another. In our ability to see the brokenness of our fellow human being, compassion is born and community is built.

The center of community becomes what God has called us together to do, not to exploit others with competitive or self bettering differences,

but to allow our differences to enable the Body of Christ to be whole (I Cor. 12:12-26).

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together (I Cor. 12:26).

In this manner, each person's talents and gifts become an essential part of the community. Through our displacement we are able to see our own brokenness and incompleteness. As a community seeing a common understanding of brokenness, we are able to compassionately understand one another's common need to be healed. Yet, displacement into community needs personal and communal practices of patience, prayer and action.

B. Patience--Nouwen

In this section we will look at each of the three components. To start with, we will look at how Nouwen, McNeil and Morrison describe patience. In studying the etymology of the word compassion, it could also be read as "*com-patience*. The words *passion* and *patience* both find their roots in the Latin word *pati* which means 'suffering' (Nouwen, p. 92). Yet our present ways in the United States avoid suffering and being patient. The sense of timing which comes from the understanding of patience is not based on clock time, unlike the current transportation system and our sense

of mobility. The climate of the timed transportation world inhibits and often prevents us from allowing ourselves to embrace the moment—whatever it may be. Impatiently we rush through our lives hoping to escape from the moment instead of embracing as much as we can from what is going on. Consequently the attitudes of hopelessness and uselessness tie into the desire to escape the present moment. Continual rushing inhibits our ability to displace ourselves and understand others.

The inability to understand our own sufferings and joys inhibits our ability to relate to others. By understanding controversial issues within ourselves, we are able to overcome fears and shameful memories. The sense of forgiveness without forgetting enables us to give up control and be influenced by others, but not without maintaining a sense of self. To be influenced by others opens us up to sincere criticism and change. The gift of self cleansing is given by God's grace instead of by conquering memories. Through God's grace, clock time passes away and a full experience of the moment is embraced from within and without. Patience comes when the fullness of the moment can be embraced. Actively we embrace the present situation with its joys and sufferings.

We know that in this moment everything is contained: the beginning, the middle and the end; the past, the present, and the future; the sorrow and the joy; the expectation and the realization; the searching and the finding (Nouwen, p. 98).

The richness expressed by the people who are patient enriches our lives. We sense that we are loved and cared about. In patient moments we are forgiven without forgetting what has happened to us. These moments manifest a prayer filled experience in patient action.

C. Prayer and Action--Nouwen

Tied closely to the attitude of patience is the practice of prayer. Through prayer, we open ourselves and are vulnerable to God. The Holy Spirit enters and transforms lives. The choice not to run from the present moment and be attentive through listening to people opens up our discernment to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Impatient impulses to become busy are disentangled and the Spirit of God is able to work in us through Jesus Christ.

Through our openness to the Spirit of God we are also opened to a sense of common suffering. Instead of fleeing or fighting in the world, compassionate prayer calls us to become involved in common sufferings and anxieties of the world by embracing it. Because of a patient attitude, living life as a prayer increases the intimate relationship we have with God. This relationship enables us to understand God to have love and compassion which embraces each person uniquely. From these understandings we are able to be present at each moment with a prayer filled and patient heart.

The discipline of prayer in solitude and prayer in community enables a person to be Spirit-filled. The Spirit opens us up to each other and enables us to interact patiently in God's presence. A prayerful and patient presence of the Spirit allows healing to take its course among our common brokenness. In Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life the authors say,

Prayer and action therefore, can never be seen as contradictory or mutually exclusive. Prayer without action grows into powerless pietism, and action without prayer degenerates into questionable manipulation. (Nouwen, pp. 116-117)

Thus, action is a form of prayer and a reflection on a state of being. By participating in this state of being with Christ, the actions which are done to console, comfort and heal work through people. Therefore, we act among the suffering because God acts among us. A friend of mine told me a story about a homeless baby. The baby's mother would not nor could not give the child the attention it needed. At one time my friend was able to hold the baby and comfort it. As my friend did so, he felt connected to the child and hopes that connection enables the baby to remember the love shared. These acts are not separate from prayer and worship but are the acts of prayer and worship. Being present to people is a ministry of Christ's compassionate ways manifested in what is acted out. Jesus and the disciples call for this way of living by revealing God's power and grace, not by showing power and might (Matt. 25:31-46)

For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead. (Jm. 2:26)

In return, our actions reveal that all things have been accomplished in Christ.

D. Confrontation--Nouwen

Our compassionate actions will be confrontation. Jesus and the prophets confronted the people they lived with, calling them to question. But this confrontation cannot be tainted with self-serving ideas of greed and power or the confrontation is not compassionate. This may be difficult due to with our self-serving nature. We deal with what is inwardly and outwardly a part of our environment (Nouwen, p. 125). Yet, confrontation is possible if we ask ourselves whether we can be confronted with what we are seeking to confront another with. Therefore when confrontational compassionate actions occur, it is done with grace.

Gratitude comes from the grace of God permeating mind, body and spirit. This brings a sense of peace and courage given by the Spirit. These "actions born out of gratefulness are not compulsive but free, not somber but joyful, not fanatical but liberating" (Nouwen, p. 126). In the presence of grace filled interactions, the healing presence of the Spirit of God is given to all participants. In an attitude of prayer, patient action is done with humility and servitude.

This is the deepest meaning of compassionate action
It is the grateful, free, and joyful expression of the great
encounter with the compassionate God. And it will be
fruitful even when we can see neither how or why:
In and through such action, we realize that indeed all
is grace and that our only possible response is gratitude
(Nouwen, p. 128-129).

E. God's Initial Action--Gutierrez

From Nouwen we move to Gustavo Gutierrez, a Liberation Theologian. In Gutierrez' book, We Drink from our own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People, he calls for an encounter with the Lord who demands social justice. In the processes considered by Gutierrez, the Lord initiates the interaction with a person. Here Gutierrez cites John 6:65 where Jesus says, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted to them by the Father." He also points to John 15:16 which says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." In this choosing, there is a sense of freedom given to the receiver by God. The person receiving the gift of love and life from the Spirit is free to become a part of God's witness in the world. By following in Christ's ways, one becomes Christ's disciple from the freedom given by the Lord. "Walking according to the Spirit" enables the follower to know Jesus' ways and follow him (Gutierrez, p. 55).

During the process of Gods choosing a person, all areas of life are

touched by this presence. To illustrate this better Gutierrez quotes Gustave who writes:

“Spirituality is like living water that springs up in the very depths of the experience of faith.” To drink from your own well is to live your own life in the Spirit of Jesus as you have encountered him in your concrete historical reality (Gutierrez, p. xiv).

As the development of God’s Spirit in you continues a contextual relationship with the Spirit takes place. As a person grows in the Spirit, an understanding of their call to discipleship increases. Not only are thoughts changed but actions and interactions among one another change.

Furthermore, Gutierrez mentions that because God first loved us, we are able to manifest this love. Nothing we have done merits this act of God’s love fulfilling us. As mentioned before, we receive the gift of being created and loved by God. All else around us is a manifestation of God’s gift. At this point we are able to communicate with our neighbor. Through the graciousness of God, we are able to experience our neighbor and “our approach to others is purified of any tendency to impose an alien will on this; it is disinterested and respectful of their personalities, their needs and aspirations” (Gutierrez, p. 112). By analyzing our neighbor’s situation, we are better able to give love and compassion to each other.

F. Action--Gutierrez

Giving love through the grace of God is the call for action present in Gutierrez' message. One of the Biblical references he relies on to illustrate God's choice of action comes from Matthew 25:31-46:

When the son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them, 'truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison

and did not minister to thee?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

This passage aligns us with one of the central issues of the Gospel. Christ has called us to be servants to the marginalized and persecuted by living with them. Those who ignore those who are societal outcasts face God in the end. Jesus Christ has also come to give the good news to the poor and freedom to the oppressed.

(Jesus) opened the book and found the place where it was written,
"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to
preach the good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release
to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of
the Lord." (Lk. 4:17-18)

The above passage reminds us that our actions toward each other, especially those mentioned in the passage, are actions which affect Christ. These actions are where we encounter God's works of love. Yet the actions are done out to the gift of the Lord's presence within us. For only through the saving grace of Christ will our hearts be changed and actions

remodified. Our response to God interacting with us is discipleship. Too often we may respond in surprise, asking "when did we see you hungry?" In response, Christ asks us to commit ourselves to feeding, clothing, educating, comforting, etc. those who need it. These tangible actions are given to a Spirit filled life.

In being converted by the Lord's grace, through an attitude of servant hood, we are led to examine our responsibility for injustice in society. Interactions with the poor call for an ability to see each other as equals. In poverty and depravation, hope-filled outlooks do not deny the horror of the conditions but allow the loving Spirit of Christ to become active and life giving in the world through action. Christ's love manifests itself in the midst of the love shown for each other. For example, a child or prostitute is loved no less because they are not the same. Expressing the love for each is different, but the "amount" of love is the same.

G. Reflection on Action--Gutierrez

Communion with God does not call for isolation but community. We experience God not only in moments of retreat from the world but while embracing the world with compassion. We need to interact with our fellow human beings. Often the confrontation in the community calls us to ask if we seek the speck in our neighbor's eye but not the beam in our own? What motivates our actions needs to be taken into account. Peter

Maurins, in his "Case for Utopia,"

says,

And every body would be what he ought to be
if everybody tried to be
what he wants the other fellow to be.
(Day, Loaves and Fishes, p. 27)

Too often strife occurs because we do not understand or question ourselves before confronting another. Thus, the interaction with the Lord calls us not only to interact with ourselves and not others, or to interact with others without knowing ourselves, but to know ourselves and allow this knowledge to enter into our interactions among others.

In order to act compassionately towards one another, Gutierrez notes that we need to reflect on our own interactions in the community. "But the fact is that the attitude of finding God in all things can be acquired only if we can activate a contemplative dimension in our lives" (Gutierrez, p. 110-111). The call to serve asks that we look at ourselves. It is necessary to incorporate reflection into our lives in order to gain perspective on events around us. Jesus often went away from the crowds to pray in solitude. When we see events in our life filled with Christ's presence and acknowledging Christ in everything we do, interactions among others and personal thoughts become tangible as well as ideal.

By allowing a basis of love and compassion to develop through Christ, we may begin to understand what carrying the cross means

through our interactions with the poor. The oppressed suffer for the sake of justice. Bearing hardships in life does not become simple endurance but incorporates accepting the suffering imposed by oppressors. Within oppressive situations the people also experience joy and grace. In addition to suffering, the justice being done to the poor who endure suffering under their oppressors fulfills prophetic promises.

For behold, I create new heavens
and a new earth;
and the former things shall not be
remembered
or come into mind.
But be glad and rejoice for ever
in that which I create;
for behold, I create Jerusalem a
rejoicing,
and her people a joy.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and be glad in my people;
no more shall be heard in the sound
of weeping
and the cry of distress.
No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not fill
out his days,
for the child shall die a hundred years
old,
and the sinner a hundred years old
shall be accursed.
They shall build houses and inhabit
them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat
their fruit.
They shall not build and another

inhabit;
they shall not plant and another
ear;
for like the days of a tree shall the
days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy
the work of their hands.
They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be the offspring of
the blessed of the Lord,
and their children with them.
(Is. 65:17-23)

From death and suffering, the knowledge that injustice will be overcome brings about joy and hope. An example of the joy given by God is lived by Jesus. The cup did not pass from him. He suffered through to his death so eternal life may be granted. As Christ's sufferings were not avoidable, neither are the sufferings of the poor. Yet, the joy given in moments of celebration contain Christ's life giving presence. Throughout the pain and suffering, God's gracious love interacts with us at the center of our lives. This enables an embracing of the present reality to occur the reality present to our situation, especially within the poor. Gutierrez appropriately uses a poem by Bishop Angelelli expressing the manifestation of the Lord's love interacting with the poor.

The mother country is bearing a child
amid blood and pain. . . .
The evenings are shedding tears
for that hope the child may be born
without hatred and with love.
My land is pregnant with life

III. Comments

Christ's loving actions in us do not call for us to be individuals competing against one another. Yet, Worsthorn and Novak dismiss the idea that not all people comply to individualism and climbing to the top. This climb is often self centered and self-serving. Our focus needs to be switched from self-seeking to serving others. One example brought to mind is about a retired business man who did financing for his own corporation. He said that the focus of the company used to be on how much it could get from the customer. As the man came to understand Christ's call to serve others the focus of the company's philosophy changed. Instead of being self-gratifying, it worked at serving the customer. Employees earned money and customers were being satisfied and the Body of Christ was being cared about. The profit was not as high but employees received what they needed. The benefits of our present ways do not serve all people. Therefore we must not forget to recognize the loss of focus of serving our neighbor. The loss of our focus on serving others hurt us.

Nouwen and Gutierrez recognize that serving others hurts us. They are able to realize that suffering is a part of life and we must face it. If we do not realize our brokenness and suffering, we are unable to understand

another's suffering. In compassionate acts, the understanding of our own suffering helps us be compassionate to another who is suffering. Our compassion towards another's suffering also enables us to allow the other to grow from their suffering at their own pace.

In addition, Nouwen and Gutierrez recognize that not all people are created equal. They have not asked us to treat all people equally. But they do recognize we have a responsibility to do what we can to aid in preserving the sanctity of human life. We are not to cast aside those who do not fit into our strivings. For those who are not as we may wish them to be are not exempt for God's love. Christ's asking us to love our neighbor as ourself is not a way easily followed. We need to accept a person where he or she is in their lives, today, and focus on their lives as valid and purposeful. In this manner we recognize the Christ in all people.

Compassion is not something that can be proven with rules or statistics. The attitude of compassion contains the recognition that Christ loves all people. It exists in the presence of a loving and compassionate God. This presence permeates a Christian life and transforms him/her into a compassionate person. Henri Nouwen has done an etymology on the word compassion. It brings meaning to the word and helps us understand some of its applications. Nouwen says,

There is a beautiful expression in the Gospels that appears only twelve times and is used exclusively in reference to Jesus or his Father. That expression is "to be moved with compassion." The Greek verb *splangchnizomai* reveals to

us the deep and powerful meaning of this expression. The *splangchna* are the entrails of the body, or as we might say today, the guts. They are the place where our most intimate and intense emotions are located. They are the center form which both passionate love and passionate hate grow. When the Gospel speaks about Jesus' compassion as is being moved in the entrails, they are expressing something very deep and mysterious. The compassion that Jesus felt was obviously quite different from superficial or passing feelings of sorrow or sympathy. Rather, it extended to the most vulnerable part of his being. It is related to the Hebrew word for compassion, *rachmim*, which refers to the womb of Yahweh. Indeed, compassion is such a deep, central and powerful emotion in Jesus that it can only be described as a movement of the womb of God. There, all the divine tenderness and gentleness lies hidden. There all feelings, emotions and passions are one in divine love. When Jesus was moved to compassion, the source of all life trembled, the ground of all love burst open, and the abyss of God's immense, inexhaustible, and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself. (Nouwen, p. 16-17).

Jesus knew us more intimately than we know ourselves. From deep within He could feel and understand our joy and suffering. Today the presence of Christ within us allows us to be compassionate toward one another. With an open heart we are able to witness Christ's presence among us.

As it was with Jesus who walked the streets, shores and countryside meeting people, he knew their heart, their "*splangchana*," the moment he met this. Yet, we often miss the Gospel message given to us today in Matthew 25:31-46. Dorothy Day, a Catholic worker, expresses the ability to see Christ in everyone today.

For a total Christian, the goad of duty is not needed--always prodding one to perform this or that good deed. It is not a duty to help Christ, it is a privilege. It is likely that Martha and Mary sat back and considered that they had done all that was expected of them--is it likely that Peter's mother-in-law grudgingly served the chicken she had meant to keep till Sunday because she thought it was her "duty"? She did it gladly; she would have served ten chickens if she had had them.

If that is the way they gave hospitality to Christ it is certain that it is the way it should be given. Not for the sake of humanity. Not because it might be Christ who stays with us, comes to see us, takes our time. Not because these people remind us of Christ, . . . but because they *are* Christ, asking us to find room for Him, exactly as He did at the first Christmas (Day, By Little and By Little p. 97).

The message is clear. When Jesus walked the earth he saw people with God's eyes and loved us. Today, as Christians, we witness the Spirit of Christ dwelling in all people. Christ is living among us in the homeless, in the grieving in the victims of rape, in the lives terrorized by war, in the alcoholic and drug addict, in the business executive, in the government leaders, in the students, in the teachers, . . . With the witness of Christ in us, we are able to relate to each other compassionately. As Nouwen mentioned earlier, we understand our brokenness and are able to build upon what gifts we have. We are able to serve others in our daily interactions by feeding the hungry, nursing the sick, visiting those in prison and suffering with them.

Because we relate to one another compassionately, we begin to

understand the power of being present to people. To begin with, an emptying of the self occurs. We are able to release ourselves to God and acknowledge our brokenness. Since we embrace suffering and brokenness, we are able to reach into the community and share in our sufferings. It is because of the understanding of our brokenness that we are able to be a part of a loving community. The acknowledgement of our sufferings enables us to understand another's expression of brokenness, though our experiences may be different. An empty and broken self does not stand for the lack of self or abandonment of who and what we are. Our emptiness opens us and enables us to have room for God's compassionate presence in us.

Being alive in the emptying of the self, in order to be open to God's intervention, presents itself in an attitude of prayer. This intervention occurs as we participate in our environment. Christ's self/myself are alive in the present moment revealing God's presence among us all. Everything we say and do becomes a prayer to God. Prayer's presence takes the tangible forms of conversation, laughter, tears and silence. By being present to all moments in an attitude of prayer, others are granted the grace of Being. The presence of Christ among us enables us to be instead of striving to become. Yet in our being, we unfold as petals on a flower and become a magnificent creation of the Creator. There are no longer anxious strivings being manifested. We are accepted by God and all has

been accomplished through Christ. From here we may understand that Novak and Worsthorne competitive strivings are actions for human perfection without the love of God. Instead of forcing ourselves to strive for the top at the expense of others, we are given a place in accordance with our talents. Any efforts to impress upon another what is best for them, or our desires to see the other perfect according to selfish standards do nothing for Christ. By being open and present to our surroundings, we understand the depths of our being. The movements of God enable a prayer filled presence to be in us.

Carl Mazza, a homeless shelter staff member, writes about a six or seven year old girl who was mute and severely deformed. He encountered her presence when he was at a refugee camp of El Salvadorans. She carried out her tasks in the camp, taking full responsibility in what she did. The community accepted her as a part of the camp. The refugees wished to return to their homeland, but had not received the proper aid. On the day they had planned to return to El Salvador, no transportation showed up. Instead of waiting, the angry and troubled people decided to march to headquarters in a village and ask for transportation. After arriving at the headquarters, the people were forced into a small, enclosed cement area.

It was on the first day, while I was staying with the refugees in their time of imprisonment, that I had my great learning experience. Suddenly, across the room, I spotted the young girl on the crutch. A chill went up and down my spine. She also had made the long walk down from the camp through the heat and the rain and past

the guns. Perhaps she walked part way, then was carried by others, I am not sure. . . As she struggled to walk, seemingly to weak and vulnerable, shifting here and there around that tiny prison, she was a pillar of the spirit and strength of God. I know it is true because she , like the others, was surrounded by heavily armed military guards. How could she cause such gear, I thought?

The most potent force on earth is the liberated human spirit.

(Mazza, "A Girl Like Jesus," Loaves and Fishes, pp. 1,5)

The presence of this girl and others in impoverished conditions caused fear among the military. She did nothing but ask for bread, clothes and a home. The presence of Christ in this girl may have evoked fear amidst the mighty but also enriched the courage of those with her asking for just treatment by the authorities. The recognition of Christ's presence in her brought strength to those around her. The presence of a liberated spirit increases joy and compassion but it does not increase the ease of life.

Because of the freeing grace of God, we can push aside other things to allow yourself to focus on another. But so often this is easier said than done. Continual distractions and business prevent us from allowing God's grace to flow from us. Yet, when a person approaches you and needs to say something, a total emptying of yourself needs to occur. For the time the conversation endures, the focus is on the other person. No longer do we have the impatient need to interject what is on our mind. We let go of the desire to manipulate and mold another into what we want

them to be and focus on the other person and what is important to them. We listen and hear with more than our ears. The heart of Christ is given to us. As we wear this heart with a patient presence, we are able to give with a heart filled with compassion. The other person knows we are with them and is comforted by Christ's presence shared among both of us. By wearing the heart given to us by Christ, we are able to bear all things given to us because Christ bears them with us. As a person tells a story about their life, one is able to suffer and rejoice with the person.

To live a compassionate life is to lead a life filled with joy and suffering. It contains a heart-filled with compassion enabling you to be present in the moment in Nouwen's prayer-filled attitude. With this attitude we are able to embrace the situation at hand and understand what we can through Christ's joy filled compassion.

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