



In the previous three reflections we discussed community, consciousness and cellbacy. This reflection will focus on the invitation to compassion.

Carl Gustav Jung, the famous Swiss psychiatrist wrote,

*'What I do unto the least of my brethren that I do unto Christ. But what if I should discover that the least among them all, the poorest of all beggars, the most impudent of all the offenders, the very enemy himself – that these are within me, and that I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness – that I myself am the enemy who must be loved – what then?'*

What he was getting at was that compassion can only develop when we have compassion for ourselves. How can our hearts open to others if we cannot have our hearts open to our own difficulties and failures? Love of others requires that we first love ourselves and accept ourselves.

As Pema Chodron says, 'Compassion for others begins with kindness to ourselves.' She goes on to stress that the first step towards real compassion is to develop unconditional compassion for our own wounds. This compassion, she points out, does not come from wanting to help out those who are less fortunate than ourselves, but from realising that we are all part of the one family of humanity and we share the vulnerability of all beings.

Compassion is not an easy response to those who are weak and vulnerable. Often we wish to flee from suffering or to find an easy cure for it. In a sense compassion requires us as Henri Nouwen says: 'to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, and to weep with those in tears.' In a sense compassion breaks our hearts and yet the breaking of our hearts is also the moment when our hearts are opened to a wider reality.

The story of the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew's gospel has this phrase: 'When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd; he had compassion on them, and healed their sick.' (Mt. 14:13). The three-fold action of seeing, having compassion, and healing highlights three aspects of compassion that are worth considering: awareness, empathy and engagement.

Awareness means that our eyes are opened to a wider reality, and especially to the reality of poverty and suffering that surrounds us. How often we can fail to see the plight of people made poor when we live separated from them, and never encounter them on a personal basis! As a result, we can simply become blind to their situation, and continue living a life that contrasts starkly from the lives of those at the margins of society. With awareness however, a change occurs. Jean Vanier comments: 'Once in contact with the poor, once touching them, establishing a loving and trusting relationship with them, the mystery unveils itself.' In this way we see the world through a different lens.

Empathy enables us to feel with and for others. It allows our hearts to be opened to reveal, as Vanier says, 'the sources of living water within us.' Empathy involves the ability to feel what the other person is experiencing and to connect with the other person on an emotional level. The phrase 'walking in the shoes of your brother or sister for a mile' captures the idea of being able to come close to those who suffer or who are deprived.



Jesus took action when he saw the crowd was hungry. We too are challenged to move into action, and to engage in practical ways to respond to the needs of the poor. Awareness and empathy can move our emotions, but it is only when we respond in concrete action that true compassion becomes real.

It is worth remembering that as we respond with compassion to the poor, we in turn are transformed. Vanier says that poor people have a mysterious power; in their weakness they are able to open hardened hearts and reveal the sources of living water within. So, as we grow in compassion, we discover a love and joy that only comes with giving. And such compassion is also directed to our love and care for our planet, our common home.

The current situation of thousands of refugees fleeing from Syria, and seeking to find a shelter in Europe challenges us to open our hearts to these people. Pope Francis is inviting religious communities and parishes in Europe to offer hospitality to a displaced family, and has welcomed two families to stay in the Vatican! Compassion in action!

Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Sí* also urges us to be conscious of our duty to respect the earth as our 'common home' and to care for the very life of the earth. He prays, 'Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty. Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one.' Although he doesn't use the word compassion, he focuses on the idea of respect and care for the earth and for all aspects of the earth community.

This word "compassion" is, according to Leonardo Boff, better understood if we take the Buddhist perspective of compassion that encompasses two dimensions. The first is to respect each living being and to entirely renounce the desire to possess them (detachment). The second is to care for them, to be together with them in all moments, in happiness and sadness, and, in particular, to not allow them to suffer alone. In this approach, he is reflecting the spirit of the Earth Charter.

Finally, it can be important to remember that compassion includes the people with whom we live. We can, at times, be unaware of the sufferings of those in our communities and families and live indifferent to the plight. The call of the Nairobi Chapter is to invite us to form communities of compassion. The compassionate community invites each member to be aware of how the others are experiencing community life, and how some may be suffering silently and feel unsupported. In this way we offer to the world an example of compassion that even reaches out to the whole Earth community and creates the climate for a new world order. But only if we are compassionate to ourselves!

I tell you this to break your heart,  
by which I mean only that it break open,  
and never close again to the rest of the world.

~ Mary Oliver