



# Staying Connected



a publication designed for alumni of Catholic full-time volunteer programs

brought to you by the St. Vincent Pallotti Center

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## Staying Connected to... Compassion, part 2

Our previous edition of *Staying Connected* introduced the concept of compassion and some of compassion's facets. Compassion is more than feeling bad for someone else or even doing something for another. Compassion is an approach to living that takes the needs of the other to heart.



This edition of *Staying Connected* concludes our two-part series on compassion. We discuss situations in which our response calls on our compassion resources, particularly in the family and in our relationship with the environment. We examine what it means to see the world through a lens of compassion. And we touch on the role of compassion in discernment. Like all virtues, compassion is not something we either have or do not have. It is like a muscle to exercise, practice and grow..

### Seeing Through a Lens of Compassion



In 2005, the late novelist David Foster Wallace delivered the commencement address at Kenyon College in Ohio. In his speech, Wallace takes

the popular notion that a liberal arts education teaches students "how to think" and looks at its implications for everyday life. He suggests that an essential step to leading a meaningful life is to recognize that we choose where to focus our thoughts. More importantly, we can (and should) question the "default settings" in our thinking which tell us things like "I am the absolute centre of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence."

To illustrate his point, Wallace talks about the "boredom, routine and petty frustration" which are inevitable aspects of adult life. He asks his audience to imagine themselves at the end of a typical work day, tired and hungry, visiting a supermarket to buy food for dinner. In vivid detail, he describes the traffic on the crowded highways, the malfunctioning shopping carts, the long checkout lines, and the slow drive home through more traffic. He describes the irritated, impatient thoughts which are all-too-common during such times: "the certainty that situations like this are really all about me. About

MY hungriness and MY fatigue and MY desire to just get home." He ruminates on "how annoying and rude it is that people are talking loudly on cell phones in the middle of the line," how frustrated one can feel seeing so many "huge, stupid, lane-blocking SUV's... burning their wasteful, selfish, 40-gallon tanks of gas" driven by "inconsiderate and aggressive drivers." He notes how quickly such thoughts can broaden to include "how our children's children will despise us for wasting all the future's fuel, and probably screwing up the climate, and how spoiled and stupid and selfish and disgusting we all are."

Then, Wallace presents some alternative ways of thinking about the same situation. He considers that some of the people in SUV's may be survivors of bad auto accidents who only feel safe driving larger vehicles, or that a woman being rude in a checkout line may be exhausted from staying up all night with a terminally ill relative, or the simple "likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket's checkout line is just as bored and frustrated as I am." He asserts that, although it can be hard work, we all have the choice to reject our self-centeredness and consider other possibilities. He advises his listeners that, if they can discipline their thoughts in this way, they can "experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred."

*Continued on page 2...*

# Compassion for the Environment

Too often in our daily lives we forget to take time to appreciate all that is around us- to give thanks for the natural world that has been given to us. It is easy for us to focus on our own lives, our family and friends, our jobs and clients. Sometimes it is important for us to take a step back and stand in awe at our natural environment. Take the time to breathe the air, touch the grass, smell the lilacs, and appreciate the beautiful Earth, which God has given us.

On a deeper level, Catholic Social Teaching reminds us of the importance of caring for the Earth. We believe that there are certain themes drawn from Catholic Social Teaching which call us to live a more sustainable and Earth-centered life. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops is an excellent source for information regarding compassion for the environment. In the article "Catholic Social Teaching and Environmental Ethics," the themes of Catholic Social Teaching in terms of the environment are spelled out:

- "God-centered and sacramental view of the universe, which grounds human accountability for the fate of the earth;
- consistent respect for human life, which extends to respect for all creation;
- world view affirming the ethical significance of global interdependence and the common good;
- an ethics of solidarity promoting cooperation and a just structure of sharing in the world community;
- an understanding of the universal purpose of created things, which requires equitable use of the earth's resources;
- an option for the poor, which gives passion to the quest for an equitable and sustainable world;
- a conception of authentic development, which offers a direction for progress that respects human dignity and the limits of material growth."



In the papal encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Sociilis (The Social Concerns of the Church)* 1987, Pope John Paul II talks about how there is a new form of solidarity in which one needs "to lose oneself for the sake of the other instead of exploiting (others)." In doing this, we in the United States need to be more aware of our over consumption and how consumption affects those in the developing world. We need to work with those in developing nations in order to create a more sustainable and equal distribution of our Earth's resources so we all might be able to live healthier lives.

The information about the environment and Catholic Social Teaching can be found on the USCCB website. <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/bishopsstatement.shtml#3>

We can make small decisions that will have great impact on those with whom we are called to be in community, even though we may never meet them. Here are a few ways we can do this:

- Buy fair trade coffee and chocolate. By spending a little more money on the products we give farmers a just wage.
- Be more aware of our water consumption: turn off the faucet when we're brushing our teeth and when we're soaping up and shampooing in the shower. Not only are you saving water for fish and other animals, you are helping to prevent more burden on wastewater treatment plants, which opens up more of the fresh water supply.
- Take public transportation, walk or ride your bike (if possible). We need to work to lessen our dependency on oil which can cause great ecological damage, as we saw in the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico last year.

In being more aware of the decisions we make and how they impact our neighbors, we in turn become more respectful to the Earth. When we make smarter choices about our consumption, we are supporting the environment, doing a small part to make our world more livable for future generations, and helping create a more sustainable place to live. Both the Earth and our world community benefit when we take the time to make more informed choices.

*Lens of Compassion continued from page 1...*

In his speech, Wallace lays out a choice we all make many times every day: the choice to view the world either through a lens of self-centeredness or a lens of compassion. This choice is also a choice between despair and hope. In the first scenario, Wallace's anger at the wasteful SUV's may be justified, but it is the type of anger which leads to crippling despair rather than meaningful action. When, instead, we look at the world through a lens of compassion, we are able to make meaningful connections with our fellow human beings and imagine creative solutions to our shared problems.

When you decided to volunteer, you may have been motivated by a desire to reach out in compassion and expand your awareness. As a volunteer, you were probably exposed to one proof after another that others face challenges far greater than yours. Maintaining that awareness once your service is completed can be very challenging, but it is an essential step in staying connected to and honoring your volunteer experience. So, the next time you find yourself tempted by self-centered thinking, take some time to reflect on Wallace's words and imagine how you might view your situation through a lens of compassion. Also, when you have the opportunity, help others develop their own compassionate ways of thinking. Reaching out to others in compassion is one of the surest paths from despair to hope.

## Compassion in the Family

Sometimes the hardest place to exercise compassion is within our family of origin. In the family, we encounter the people who have known us longest and most deeply. They have seen us at our best and at our worst. Sadly, in many families the painful memories endure longer than the happy ones. We are all familiar with the many jokes that comedians tell about spending the holidays surrounded (or is it smothered?) by family members. There must be some universal truths about family life that make those jokes seem funny to so many of us.

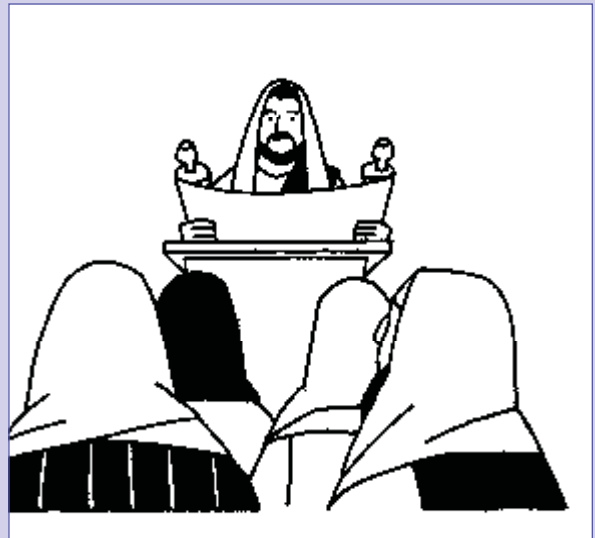
We might think of compassion as something we should show to strangers or people in need, but we actually have the most opportunities to show and receive compassion with those people that we see all the time, such as family members, co-workers, neighbors and fellow parishioners. When we learn to be more compassionate at home, it becomes easier to be compassionate in the wider world.

Even Jesus struggled to give and receive compassion with His family members and the other people of His hometown of Nazareth. In Mark's Gospel, we read this account:

*He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.*

*Mark 6:1-6*

In this story, Jesus and those He loves struggle to understand one another. Jesus' family and friends do not understand His calling; Jesus does not understand why they are not more supportive. As former volunteers, this may be a story you can relate to: Jesus leaves His hometown and family to pursue His educational and theological ambitions, to seek out a community, and to do service work and travel around the country. These are all noble callings, and Jesus might expect His loved ones to be more proud of Him. At the same time, Jesus' loved ones have just causes for concern. They may be hurt that Jesus is choosing to leave them, confused by some of His teachings, or afraid for His safety. In this story, both Jesus and His loved ones are called to show compassion and understanding to one another in order to maintain their relationships.



Over the course of our lives, we are likely to find ourselves on both sides of this Biblical story. There will be times when we have to leave the places and people we know in order to become who we are called to be. There will also be times when we let go of people we love in order to let them become who they are called to be. In both of these times, we can take comfort in the fact that Jesus shares in our struggles. We can also call on compassion to help us grow in our relationships and move forward.

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**The St. Vincent Pallotti Center  
for Apostolic Development**

415 Michigan Ave. NE  
Washington, DC 20017

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## Where Compassion and Discernment Meet

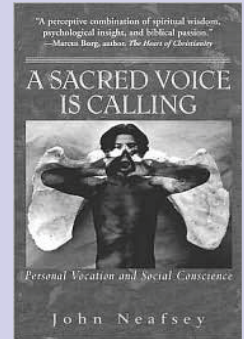
Healthy compassion can guide each of us in our interpersonal relationships and in our service to others. We can allow compassion another role as well. It can help to guide each of us in discernment of our personal vocations.

In his book *A Sacred Voice is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*, John Neafsey writes about the personal call each person strives to hear and act upon. The book is rich with wisdom sources and perspectives from Christian spirituality, psychology, and other faith traditions. Neafsey poses the question of how to listen to the "still, small voice of the Spirit." He juxtaposes the voice found in each conscience with the booming sounds of conformity and convention. Our compassion can help us identify that quiet voice and make it more audible.

Neafsey reminds his reader that authentic calling unites three things: joy, talent and service. Each aspect requires special attention. Joy is more than happiness. It is the underlying rightness of an action or relationship. Talent requires honest knowledge of oneself and one's skills. It requires the balance of pride and humility, the willingness to make mistakes and learn along the way. Service is the action that comes with the realization that we do not live for ourselves but for the good of the whole.

When joy, talent and service come together our hearts are alive and we find our calling. As we find ourselves excited for something we discern a call. In this discernment we can take a moment to reflect on that action in light of compassion. We can identify how our joy and talent serve the greater good giving us the opportunity to act with compassion in our life vocation. Compassion serves as the mirror to reflect on the authenticity of a vocation.

- Over the years, what relationships and actions have given you the greatest joy?
- How have you come to learn your talents? What risks have you taken to invest in them?
- As you have discerned your life's vocation, what have been the role of service and compassion?
- When have joy, talent and service come together for you?
- What actions can you take to listen to the still, small voice of the Spirit instead of conformity and convention?



**Staying Connected: Assisting in the continuing formation of former lay volunteers.**

The St. Vincent Pallotti Center for Apostolic Development **Authors and Editors:** Alicia Brooks, Michael Goggin, Molly Linehan and Monica Thom **Production Editor:** Molly Linehan  
**E-mail:** [stayingconnected@pallotticenter.org](mailto:stayingconnected@pallotticenter.org) **Website:** [www.pallotticenter.org](http://www.pallotticenter.org)

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**Mission:** Our goal is to promote lay volunteer service that challenges laity, clergy, and religious to work together in the mission of the Church, and to support lay volunteers *before, during and after* their term of service.

**Inspiration:** The Center takes inspiration from Saint Vincent Pallotti (1795-1850), who believed passionately in the laity, in each person as being an image of God and as called to be missionary. Please visit our website, [www.pallotticenter.org](http://www.pallotticenter.org), for more information.