



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 1

Many full-time volunteers were called to service through a desire to grow in compassion. Often, early in our service we thought compassion was about doing something for someone in need. But as we served, we found that compassion was less about *doing* and more about *being*. We are called to *be* compassion for one another.



This edition of *Staying Connected* is the first of two dealing with the theme of compassion. Within this edition we reflect on the compassion of Christ, compassion within discourse and ways to deal with compassion fatigue. We reflect on the balance of self-care and stretching ourselves to meet the needs of others. Our call to be compassion requires prayer, reflection and personal care.

Growing in the Compassion of Christ

Our sense of compassion is something we develop over time. We learn to have empathy for those who suffer in ways to which we can relate. Those of us who have experienced loss may feel the greatest compassion for others suffering loss. Our experience of pain, weakness or illness can bring empathy for others in pain, weakness or illness. Often, we feel the greatest sympathy for the innocence of the one who suffers. Yet, we know that our call to compassion leads us to reach out to those for whom we are not initially inclined to have compassion. We are called to open our hearts to compassion for the whole world, stretching ourselves to be as much like Christ as we are able. At the center of Jesus' suffering and death was the profound compassion He felt for humanity. We will spend our entire lives searching for how to best imitate Christ.

If there is any encouragement in Christ... any compassion and mercy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for one's own interests, but also for the interests of others.

- *Philippians 2: 1-4*

This quote from Philippians emphasizes Christ's humility. God took human form out of compassion. For us, humility means knowing that we are only human and do not have all the answers. In the words credited to Archbishop Oscar Romero, "We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own."

Often, our natural expectation for compassion leads us to feel we can never do enough to make change. But when we share another's burden, it is not our responsibility to make changes. Those changes will come, but they are not at the core of the compassionate life. We choose compassion because it is right and good for the one showing compassion as much as it is for those who suffer.

- During your time of service, to whom were you called upon to show compassion?
- What are your own feelings of anxiety, pain and suffering, and to whom can you reach out to because of this vulnerability?
- For whom do you find it hardest to have compassion?
- Humility means honestly appreciating oneself in strength and in weakness. In what ways can you strengthen humility?



Compassion within Conflict



“Dear God,
I am so afraid to open my clenched fists!
Who will I be when I have nothing left to hold on to?
Who will I be when I stand before you with empty hands?
Please help me to gradually open my hands....
Amen.”

— Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life*

In the United States today, we are seeing many instances of people entering into political and religious dialogue with the clenched fists that the Catholic spiritual writer Henri Nouwen found to be futile many years ago. It seems that the more hostile one can be to one's opponent, the more media attention that person can attract.

Political and religious differences can be threatening because they reflect the core of our values, priorities and decisions we make to guide our lives. As Christians, we look to the ways Jesus dealt with differences. Throughout the Gospels, there are a few important things Jesus models when He is in conflict.

First, Jesus never enters into conflict for selfish reasons. When He gets into a discussion or argument, it is because He is passionate about the message He wants to get across, for the sake of His audience. Jesus does not pick fights simply to draw attention to Himself or make His opponents look foolish. In fact, Jesus enters discussions out of compassion for all who are involved.

Second, Jesus has the humility to listen to other people. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus spends a lot of time talking, but He also spends a lot of time listening. And He is often listening to those people to whom others will not listen: prostitutes, adulterers, foreigners, and the sick, just to name a few. Jesus understands that real dialogue

is a two-way street. If He wants someone to change, then He needs to listen to why she is the way she is and try to understand without immediately passing judgment.

Finally, Jesus takes His time with conflicts. He does not rush to decisions, judgments, or violence. Many times, Jesus is met with people seeking immediate answers from Him. Instead of rushing to action, Jesus often takes time to pray, reflect, and talk with others. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He chastises His followers for reaching for their swords when He is arrested. Instead, He goes peacefully and talks with His accusers. If we compare this to our world today, we see a dramatic difference. In our 24-hour news cycle, complex situations are immediately broken down to sound bites which often distort the truth. Rumors spread at alarming speed, and misinformation is often acted upon before it can be corrected. Imagine the problems that could be avoided if we all followed Jesus' lead and took our time with problems, rather than rushing into speech or action.

In 2008, multi-faith scholar Karen Armstrong articulated a Charter for Compassion, believing that compassion is a key shared core value that people of many different religious traditions embrace in the spirit of the Golden Rule "*Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.*" In writing of the need for compassion in discourse, Armstrong states, "It is also necessary in

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Compassion Fatigue

“The world will not be changed, poor people will not receive their basic rights, militarism will not be stopped, trust will not be built between nations, justice will not arrive if tired, bleary eyed, depressed, burnt-out people are those trying to bring about change.”

- Jody Shearer, Mennonite Activist

If you are reading this article, odds are high that you are a person who cares deeply for others. Your feelings of compassion for God's creation and your fellow human beings called you to a journey of long-term service. During your time of service, you worked tirelessly on behalf of those less fortunate, often sacrificing your material and physical comfort. Even though your time of service has ended, you probably still practice compassion. Perhaps you have pursued a career in ministry or in a helping profession. Maybe you are caring for children, elderly parents, or sick relatives. You might volunteer for missions or ministries in your parish.

The practice of compassion is a vital part of the Christian life, and a wonderful source of joy and fulfillment. At the same time, caring for others is risky. When we truly open ourselves to another person, we welcome that person's struggles and pain into our own hearts. When they hurt, we hurt. When we cannot stop their hurt, or see their hurt increase, we may begin to despair. Writers and researchers in the helping professions coined the term “compassion fatigue” (or “secondary trauma”) to describe what happens when we become so consumed by another's pain that we begin to experience anger, apathy, sleeplessness, and other symptoms of major stress. It can be tempting to ignore or downplay these symptoms, particularly when we compare them to the pain of those we are helping. However, compassion fatigue is serious; it can leave us burned out and impair our ability to continue caring for others.

If you are someone who cares for others, you can take steps to prevent or recover from compassion fatigue:

-Be gentle with yourself. At times when your helping efforts feel inadequate, remind yourself that you are doing your very best with a difficult situation. Remember to pray, asking for God's help in your struggles. See the article “Growing in the Compassion of Christ,” also in this issue, for some valuable reflections on humility.

-Share your feelings. Express how you are feeling to God, a journal, a friend, and/or a counselor or clergy person. Giving voice to painful feelings and experiences is amazingly therapeutic.

-Take a break. Take at least a few minutes for yourself every day, avoid working overly long hours, and guard your allotted time off. Walking away from someone who is suffering, even for a few minutes, can feel selfish. If you need help prioritizing yourself, see the article on compassion for self in this issue.

-Ask for help. Human beings are not meant to complete difficult tasks alone. Sometimes, asking for help can feel like admitting defeat. Try not to think this way. Instead, recognize that part of offering the best care is knowing your limits and bringing in more help when it is needed.

Compassion for Self

Our lives are overrun with busyness, stress, and anxiety and in order to do positive work, we need to take a step back, breathe deeply, and find ways to help rest our minds, our bodies and our souls, if only for a few minutes, in order to be able to do good in our work and in our lives.

Here are just a few suggestions for ways to have compassion for self, to take care of yourself in order to be able to take care of others:

1. Breathe deeply.
2. Pray.
3. Experience nature.
4. Exercise.
5. Take a nap.
6. Catch up with an old friend.
7. Watch a movie.
8. Make your favorite meal.
9. Play a game.
10. Read a good book.





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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.”

Armstrong’s comments strike to the heart of Catholic social teaching, in which the dignity of the human person is held to be of paramount importance. Do you agree with Armstrong’s point that greater compassion in discourse is needed? If so, what changes in your own conversations with family, friends and co-workers need to take place?

**Organization Spotlight:
From Mission to Mission**

In this issue, we share thoughts on learning how to live the compassion that drove you to volunteer in your post-volunteer life. We also offer ideas about self-care and recovery from “compassion fatigue.” For more in-depth information about these topics, we highly recommend the resources of From Mission to Mission (www.missiontomission.org).

Since 1980, From Mission to Mission has offered services and resources to individuals and groups preparing for and returning from mission. On its website, you will find a variety of “former-friendly” publications and other resources. You will also see information on From Mission to Mission’s re-entry workshops, in which returned missionaries spend 3-10 days reflecting on their mission experience and learning how to integrate that experience into their everyday lives. Regardless of how long it has been since you served, the Pallotti Center encourages all former volunteers who are able to participate in one of these amazing and transformative experiences!

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

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Mission: Our goal is to promote lay volunteer service that challenges laity, clergy, and religious as 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, for more information.