

You Feel it in the Gut: Compassion

One day, I visited the late Senator Hubert Humphrey to ask him about compassion in politics. I had gone to see him because I believed him to be one of the most caring people in the political arena. We began to discuss compassion in politics, he then went to his desk and grabbed a pencil with a small eraser at its end and said:...look at this pencil. Just as the eraser is a very small part of this pencil and is used only when you make a mistake, so compassion is only called upon when things get out of hand. The main part of life is competition; only the eraser is compassion. It is sad to say but in politics compassion is just part of the competition.

These are the words of the late Henri Nouwen, considered one of the most prolific Catholic spiritual writers of our time. Upon casual observation and closer scrutiny of world and local events we may be forced to admit that Senator Humphrey was right. But does that mean that this is the way it must always be? What about Christian leadership in the world? Don't we make a difference? Or, are we condemned to the vagaries of power politics and the *competition*? Even in our personal lives, are we condemned to the struggle for survival, or does the Christian option call us to something else?

Jesus was moved with compassion for the crowd. The word that is used in the Scripture refers to Jesus feeling a deep pain in his guts! This is the place where the deep emotions are felt. What we are being told is that Jesus felt empathy for the crowd; he put himself in their shoes as it were. He chose to share in their suffering, perplexity, anxiety and sorrow in life. He chose to enter into their quest to know peace, security and love. As Pope Benedict reminds us in his new encyclical letter, Jesus is the human face of God turned toward us and that face is charity and compassion. It is a face that reveals that God knows our suffering and chooses to be with us to help us understand that we need not be afraid of life or death.

This brings us to what constitutes Christian leadership; what does it mean to shepherd the people of God? Clearly, it is about compassion and charity for the individual and for the society as a whole. This is borne of the knowledge that much of the disordered behavior of people and nations are a result of disordered emotions and understanding in people and nations. It is borne of the knowledge that each one of us is in need of the alms of our own compassion in our distortions as well. This is often discovered in times of prayer when we are purposefully alone with our Lord or with our community, resting with him and listening to his word. While rules and regulations are important they are not the essence of our faith lives; faith hope and charity constitute the foundation of Christian living. But these three theological virtues, as they are called, are to be made real in the concrete way Christians live in the world. This is what brings so many to faith: it gives them the concrete experience of God in the midst of their struggles in life.

Jeremiah in his day brought the Lord's word to his people telling them of what leadership was to consist of in Judah. Some kings listened and it went well with them. But others turned a deaf ear. Compassion for them, justice for them, charity for them, was

the smallest part of the pencil. When leadership and society accept such a state of affairs exile cannot be far off. Where our politics and our daily relationships lack compassion we detect deep within a profound unease that something is dreadfully wrong. Life becomes a struggle to survive rather than banquet of thanksgiving that leads to sharing with all. Fear trumps love and conflict seems to be everywhere. This was captured so well in a speech given by the late President John F. Kennedy when he stated:

To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required—not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

Jesus felt compassion for the crowd, I ask myself, do I?