



Compassion

Catherine McAuley's main source of inspiration was the life and teachings of Jesus, found in the gospels. In the original Rule and Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy, Catherine described mercy as "the principal path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following Him". Clare Augustine Moore, one of the early sisters and a talented artist, created an illuminated manuscript of the Rule. Below is an illustration of her calligraphy and her decoration of the word MERCY. Within the letter "M", Clare has painted two scenes from the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37): one showing two people walking on their way, the other showing someone helping an injured person.



Detail from Clare Augustine Moore's illuminated manuscript of the Rule used with permission. All rights reserved.

The parable presents two separate travellers who see a person lying half dead on the road and who pass by on the other side. In contrast, a third traveller, a Samaritan, sees the injured one and is “moved with compassion”. In the original Greek language of the gospels, the verb utilised and translated here as “moved with compassion” is related to the word for entrails or gut. Its use in the parable conveys the understanding that the Samaritan is moved to the very depths of his being, and this impels him to respond. Drawing on the resources and/or healing properties of his animal, oil, wine and the innkeeper, he can make an extravagant and life-giving response. Clare Augustine Moore’s art presents a compassionate response as a prime example of mercy.

Within the Hebrew Scriptures, there are several descriptions of God as compassionate and merciful (eg. Exodus 34:6; Psalm 106:45). The Hebrew word for compassion is related to the word for womb. As in the Greek, the Hebrew implies that compassion and mercy come from the inner depths of one’s being. The God of mercy is portrayed as a God of womb-compassion and love.

In his writings, Pope Francis reveals his understanding that compassion is at the essence of God: “Our God is a God of compassion”; and “Compassion is the language of God”. In relation to our own response to the pain of another, Francis reminds us that compassion evokes action:

“Compassion is not a simple feeling of pity: this is superficial”; and “compassion is like the lens of the heart: it makes us truly understand the magnitude [of another’s suffering]”

(Daily Meditations, September 17, 2019)

Francis’ words evoke the portrayal of the Samaritan in the parable who sees through the “lens of the heart”. The Samaritan is impelled to life-giving action while the other two travellers, not seeing as he does, are not.

With a deep understanding of God’s compassion, and following the example of Jesus in the gospels, Catherine McAuley placed compassion at the heart of her response to all in need. In the same way, compassion must be at the core of our Mercy ministries today, impelling us to respond to the pain of our world in life-giving ways. Furthermore, like the Samaritan, we can enlist the help of others to expand our potential to respond.

1

Reflecting

In your quiet space, become present to the moment.

Concentrate on your breathing, welcoming the energy you breathe in and farewelling the tension you breathe out ...

Bring to mind the most compassionate person you know, someone who is at ease with others and can feel their pain. Picture their eyes, notice their hands, recall their facial expressions, listen to their voice.

- ▶ What does compassion look, feel and sound like?

At times, we can be our own fiercest critics, placing impossible burdens on ourselves.

- ▶ Are there any aspects of your life calling out to you to be compassionate to yourself? Notice if anything comes to the surface and be grateful for this gift of awareness.
- ▶ Hear yourself speak with compassion about this aspect of your life.

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2

Connecting

There is a gift to be discovered when we spend time with our wisdom figures and the characters in our sacred texts. As you read the reflection on Compassion, note any words or phrases which speak to you.

- ▶ Why is this word or phrase significant for you?

You are invited to engage with the following texts:

Luke 10:25-37

Luke 15:11-32

- ▶ Which of the images, characters or insights could provide guidance as you strive to become more compassionate? What encouragement do the texts offer you?

3

Responding

Compassion looks beyond the surface, connecting with the heartfelt hopes and dreams of the other and affirming our interconnection with all creation.

- ▶ If compassion were the norm rather than the exception in your interactions with all who share our common home, what would be different in your daily life?
- ▶ How does your ministry respond “through the lens of the heart” to those whose hopes and dreams are being shattered?



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4

Re-imagining

- ▶ As you reflect on your life, especially on your own experience of suffering, how has your understanding of Compassion evolved? What would you tell your 15-year-old self about compassion?
- ▶ What does compassionate, merciful leadership look like? What sustains such leadership?
- ▶ Within your sphere of influence, what formative opportunities can you offer which enable compassionate, merciful leadership to become or remain a life-giving element of your organisation’s culture?

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