

compassion

Living in the Spirit of St. Francis

ILIA DELIO, O.S.F.

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| I am sitting in the Denver International Airport sipping coffee at a McDonald's located in one of the main terminal squares. I am pondering the meaning of compassion as I watch numerous people pass by, each with a destination privy only to a few, if anyone at all. I am awed by the human face, each one unique and expressive, each person belonging to someone and to something. The human person is a mini-universe, each with his or her own Big Bang history walking into a future created simply by being alive. But strangely, no one is looking at anyone else, or if they are, like me, they are doing so stealthily so as not to be noticed.

The prevalence of anonymity marks our culture today; hence the desire for some people to be identified either by dress, tattoos, or sculptured hair. We are wired together on the Internet, on our Droids, iPhones, and video screens, but face to face we are like marble statues. What keeps us together and apart simultaneously? Why do we fear being humanly related to one another? I am sitting at McDonald's fully aware of this corporation's participation in the industrialization of food and its use of synthetic elements to create consumer food products. McDonald's typifies the radical disconnect in the food economy; humans disconnected from the economy of food are humans disconnected from the economy of life.

It is late and shops are beginning to close as the flights take off for their destinations. My flight has been cancelled so I have the privilege of time, watching the airport workers arrive on their night shifts to clean the terminals, the carpets and chairs occupied by the millions of people who have passed through the airport this day. The workers are not white Anglo Saxons but foreign born. They arrive around midnight and will work until the sun begins to rise. Had my flight not been cancelled I would not have known of this world of the airport worker. We live in such private worlds with private concerns and private dreams, it is no wonder we fear the immigrant and stranger intruding on our private property. We hardly know our neighbor's struggles and sometimes we barely know our own.

There is much talk these days about immigration and welcoming the stranger into our midst. We fear what will happen to our families and communities if we allow too many strangers into our comfortable lives, insensitive at times to the fact that they too are seeking food, family, and friends. The evangelist John wrote "there is no fear in love, but perfect love cast out fear" (1 John 4:18). Love transforms, the medievalists said, because love unites. Love seeks the good of the other. Compassion is the feeling of love that rends the veil of the stranger and unites one human to another, heart to heart.

The Jesuit mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin described the human species in evolution toward the fullness of unity in love. He was concerned about the increasing pressures of human life due to overpopulation, war, and human conflict, and saw that humanity was becoming increasingly fragmented. In his view, neither escapism nor existential despair can further the evolutionary process. Rather, the way forward is a new spirituality by which humans around the globe can unite to become one mind and one heart in love, a new *ultrahumanity* united in love.

Compassion is a thread that binds together the deepest centers of life beyond the borders of race, gender, religion, tribe, or creature. Donald McNeill and others write:

The word *compassion* is derived from the Latin words *pati* and *cum*, which together mean “to suffer with.” Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.¹

We are at a critical threshold today in our earthly life where we either must overcome our fears and evolve to a new level of love, or undergo the slow death that underlies fragmentation. What will unite this earthly community? What will join human hearts together despite our different colors, languages, cultures, and religions?

Compassion is the river that overflows into the ocean of love that has no end; it crosses all borders to embrace the suffering of another. Here I think we can learn from Francis of Assisi, that great medieval saint who, in his own time, broke down the barriers between rich and poor and made the love of God available to all.

The key to Francis’ transformation into love, his secret of making wholes out of the scattered fragments of life, was compassion. He learned compassion as the art of healing broken hearts by collecting the tears of the forgotten, the frightened, and the lonely in his hands and holding the wounded as his kin. Francis entered the world of the stranger and made the stranger into a brother. He learned to love

what was weak and fragile, and he learned to care for what the world discarded.

As I watch individual persons scurry around the airport looking for spouses, holding on to their children, with their eyes looking intently at terminal signs and flight schedules, I think our greatest fear is our deepest desire: to love and to be loved. We long to be for another and to give ourselves nobly to another, but we fear the cost of love. Deep within we yearn for wholeness in love, but to become more whole in love we must accept our weaknesses and transcend our limits of separation in order to unite in love. We long for oneness of heart, mind and soul, but we fear the demands of unity. Sometimes I think we choose to be alone because it is safe. To be comfortable in our isolation is our greatest poverty.

Compassion transcends isolation because the choice to be for another is the rejection of being alone. The compassionate person recognizes the other as part of oneself in a way that is mystical and ineffable. It is not a rational caring for another but a deep identification with the other as brother and sister. Francis was recognized as a new Christ through his gift of compassion. He exchanged his private, comfortable life for the life of a poor brother, seeing in the suffering of others something of his own life.

What is compassion and how does it emerge in the human heart? What moves one to compassion? Can we learn compassion as a way of life? Can we let go of our fears to love more deeply? These are some of the questions that guide this little book on compassion pondered in an airport. It is not meant to be a great study or a comprehensive analysis of a virtue but an exploration into what expands the human heart for another—ultimately what unites.