

## PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

## Compassion: Concern from the Heart

In the previous two Lenten meditations we focused our thoughts on Prayer as call to action and reflection and on Forgiveness as the love that sets free. In both we invoked the experience of Jesus as supreme model. In both we explored the wisdom of his dual invitation: one at the onset of his public ministry, "Come and see!" and the other during the course of that same ministry, "Come, follow me." (Jn. 1:39 and Mt. 16:24).



Our reflections this time will key in on the compassionate dimension of Jesus' ministry of teaching and caring.

One feature of the Savior's life which always strike home to me is the amount of time and care that He spent with the rejects and outcasts of society. To his self-righteous critics who challenged his priorities and proportions of ministry (to use contemporary terms), he responded: "It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners." (Mk. 2:17) His enemies were so offended by his failure to meet their standards of propriety and respectability that they branded him "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." (Mt. 11:19) Yet, for all the hurdles such an approach created, Jesus persisted. And he points out to the stunned bystanders: "Tax collectors and prostitutes are marking their way into the kingdom of God before you." (Mt. 21:31) What other instrument for such unexpected conversions was there, except his compassion?

No less impressive is the long chronicle of healings which the gospel writers depict. The time and place and ailment and need differed in each case, but one constant theme runs through the entire ministry of healing: Jesus' heartfelt care. Whether the person in need was crippled, blind, deaf, or otherwise uncared for, the Savior responded with a personal touch that revealed the sensitivity of his heart as much as the power of his hand.

On several occasions when the short-tempered disciples proposed that the large gathering be directly dismissed, it was Jesus' compassion that met the varied needs of the hour. On the one hand, "as he stepped ashore and saw a large crowd, he took pity on them and healed their sick." (Mt. 14:14) On the other hand, he pointed out to his followers: "I feel sorry for all these people; they have been with me for three days now and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them off hungry, they might collapse on the way." (Mt. 15:32) This is a touching portrayal on the surface. Its inner significance should not evade us: theology becomes all the more credible as it is accompanied by compassion, the kingdom of God becomes easier to enter if clarity of teaching is enriched by compassion of heart.

One remarkable gospel incident that deserves long

and loving reflection is the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman. She appeals desperately, as only a mother can do, for her ailing daughter. Note how she identifies with the situation: "Sir, Son of David, take pity on me." The embarrassed disciples plead with Jesus to grant her the request, "because she is shouting after us." (Mt. 15:23) All of us are familiar with this proposed behavior: offer the gift, but nothing beyond it. After a preliminary silence, Jesus explains with some indifference that his mission does not include persons from the region of Tyre and Sidon. Undaunted, she repeats: "Lord, help me!" And after hiding behind a convenient proverb, "it is not right for the table food of the children to be given to the family pets," Jesus realizes that because he cared enough to linger, he had made himself vulnerable to her incisive retort. "But even the house pets," she reminds him, "are allowed to lap up the crumbs that fall from the family table."

If there is any gospel story in which Jesus is out-manuevered, this is it: Jesus cared enough to share some concerns about his mission and how these related to her request. That moment of dialogue; seemingly empty of compassion on his part, gave her an ideal opportunity. And she turned his cold, theologically efficient explanation into a sincere tribute: "Woman, you have great faith." Even more, her resourcefulness drew from him the answer to her prayer: "Let your wish be granted." (Mt. 15:28) Her shrewdness was surpassed only by his radical compassion.

There are many other examples of the tenderness of Jesus, but we will resist the temptation to identify them here. It would be valuable, however, to show that, parallel to his action, was the way he taught the value of compassion.

Do we need to be reminded of the basic thrust in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11ff)? It is so easy to get distracted and focus upon the utter irresponsibility of the wayward son, or to get angry at the self-righteousness of the dutiful son. Neither is the basic point of the teaching. Jesus is ultimately calling attention to the incredible compassion of the father in the story. And the point at issue is not how bad one son is or how predictably faithful the other is. The parable is meant to dramatize the unutterable — even reckless love of the father, who knows so well the difference between the living death of his wandering son and authentic living. Since the gospel text does not contain the title of the parable, I propose it be renamed the story of the prodigal father, and for the reasons just offered.

One may add the deep lesson of compassion which Jesus conveyed in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The details so familiar to all of us need not be repeated here. However, when Jesus asked his questioner which of the three bypassers had proved himself neighbor to the dying man in the roadway, the lawyer gave the perfect answer. "The one who took pity on him," he answered. And Jesus' parting advice, "Do likewise," indicated that practical compassion,

not necessarily theological expertise or even temple service, equips one best to respond to a neighbor in need.

The gospel parables, especially those recorded by Luke, highlight the special significance which compassion has in the teaching of Jesus. One might recall, among others, the lost sheep (Lk. 15:4-7), the lost drachma (Lk. 15:8-10), the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:1ff). But then this is not surprising since the creator of these marvelous teaching devices is himself the embodiment of the mercy of God. The Savior was not only a superb creator of parable, he was in addition the perfect example of the Father's mercy.

Little wonder, he could extend the most challenging of invitations to all who would follow him: "Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart." (Mt. 11:29)

Let us complete our reflections by a brief self-examination on this basic Christian value of compassion.

First, the underlying paradox of Christian discipleship is this: one loses what one keeps, for one's self, one retains what one is willing to give away. This is the divine seeming contradiction offered to anyone who lives by God's call. Compassion is a further confirmation of this paradox, for to the extent that we share this gift of compassion we will remain in full possession of its blessings.

Second, Calvary may be seen as evil's triumphant hour, or as God's victory over human sinfulness. However, at the heart of that mystery there pulses the compassion of the Savior, who died as he had lived — sharing to the point of utter self-forgetfulness his compassion of heart. Are we ready to give, as (even if not as much as) Jesus gave?

Third, the new commandment of love offered us by Jesus is often depicted as an act of will — a posture of acceptance of the other. Rather, the new commandment is an attitude of compassionate outreach, a heartfelt expression of concern. On this account, Cardinal Ple once defined Christianity as "the religion of the heart." Are we living our Christian commitment in these terms?

Finally, our Christian experience may be too heavily geared towards theological consistency, ecclesiastical propriety, or even social respectability. Such preoccupations may allow us to forget that gospel compassion will sometimes call us to cut through sinful appearances and forms and deal with the inner reality of the person so hidden. Only compassion will often allow us to look beyond the face and form of sin, to search out the God's given identity that is struggling to emerge. Are we ready for such discernment?

How well are we measuring up? May this Lent deepen your relationship to Christ.

## Law Must Display Christ

Pope Paul recently delivered an address at the conclusion of the International Congress of Canon Law. Following are excerpts from his speech.

As we said four years ago to the members of the Sacred Roman Rota, "if the canon laws have Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, as their foundation and are therefore signs and means of salvation, all this is to be attributed to the Holy Spirit, who imparts to them their meaning and their force. These laws must, therefore, be such as manifest the life of the Spirit, produce the fruits of the Spirit and display the image of Christ. For this reason too they constitute a hierarchical law, a bond of communion, a missionary law, a means of grace, an authentic Church law.



Consequently, canon law, as well as being a kind of visible manifestation of communion, to such an extent that without it communion itself cannot be really effective, is also a vital and effective means by which the Church may carry out her mission.

It is indeed within this general framework of reality that the pastoral function of canon law is to be considered; "for it is by its very nature a pastoral law since it is a manifestation of and a means of fulfilling

the Church's apostolic function, as well as being a constitutive element of the Church of the Incarnate Word." And this pastoral reality — leaving aside distorted and erroneous uses of the term — is nothing other than the salvific work of the Church which is founded upon the salvific will of God.

God has entrusted this task to the Church, in which he carries it out, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the continuation of the paschal and eschatological work of Christ.

The Church therefore exists for this sole reason that it be a kind of sacrament — that is to say, an effective sign — by which men are brought into union with God. So everything in the Church has this end in view; and this is the supreme end of the whole Church order. That is why all authority, every function and duty that is exercised in the Church turns out to be a service or function that is pastoral, that is to say, "the habitual and daily care of the sheep."

On a previous occasion we had this to say: "The Church's institutions, while it is granted that they are open to improvement, must aim at the communication of divine grace, and, according to the gift and task of each individual, must promote the good of the faithful, which is the primary purpose of the Church. And this social aim, namely the salvation of souls, must be held to be the supreme goal of institutions and legislation."

From this it follows that "there cannot be truly

effective pastoral action if this is not protected by a sound structure of juridical statutes."

However, the pastoral character of canon law by no means consists in this consideration alone; since indeed the redemptive mediation entrusted to the Church must also take account of the concrete conditions in which men live — their social and cultural background, their spatial and temporal milieu, to use the current expression. And of course law by its very nature "is concerned only with what is general."

The pastoral requirement, therefore, is taken care of in canon law through the exercise of equity, which has been superbly defined as "justice tempered by the sweetness of mercy." For it is equity in canon law that guides the application of regulations to concrete cases — where one must have one's attention constantly focussed on the salvation of soul — and it is transformed into gentleness, mercy, pastoral charity, which does not demand the rigid application of the law but seeks the genuine good of the faithful. This indeed is the guiding spirit of canon law and it can easily be seen in the very wide faculties that are granted to pastors and to judges to be used at their discretion. And concerning the revision of the Code and the following principle or directive norm is of great importance: "In the laws of the Code of Canon Law there should shine forth the spirit of charity, temperance, humanity and moderation; and these are all supernatural virtues which distinguish our laws from all human or profane law."