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Compassion

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Compassion

Compassion is not a word that shows up very often in politics or world affairs. Yet, we certainly want all those who exercise authority over us to be understanding of our perspectives and to respect our feelings. We do not appreciate being confronted with an explicit or implicit attitude that someone else's way is "the only way." Though we cannot change how others think or behave, we can develop our own understanding and exercise of compassion through reflection upon our experiences.

We are busy persons, even if our present occupations do not have specific job-descriptions or titles. We cannot carefully monitor all the interactions with people that take place in our conversations as well as in our thoughts. But we can think about them afterwards, and note the effects upon us of at least the more significant events that have occurred recently, especially the manner in which we related with others. Most likely, we have not been consciously observing ourselves at each and every moment, but the feelings we had about our participation remain with us and can be accessed, at least in part, if we pause and reflect for even a short period of time.

Because compassion comes from the heart, what we realize through our considerations leads us to appreciate our spirituality as it is made manifest. We can observe, for example, the effects upon us when we have thought or acted compassionately and also when we did not. Though we can be held accountable in human society for being courteous, no one can require that we feel with them, or otherwise enter into solidarity with them, accepting them as they are. Whenever we are compassionate, we participate freely in a spiritual movement that fosters unity among people rather than division.

We find in our experience a positive complementarity, whereby compassion for someone else follows naturally when we have come to the point of acknowledging and accepting our own limitations. Becoming more compassionate persons is desirable and appropriate; as we grow in this quality of relating with others, we not only benefit others by our caring attitude, but we gain something for ourselves as well. Treating others as we ourselves want to be treated deeply satisfies us.

If we reflect on God's compassion for us as we confront our mortality, incompleteness, and less-than-perfect manner of relating with a world we cannot control, we find it easier to relate well with others who are different in many particulars, but who are just like us in our lack of absolute mastery over the circumstances of our lives. When we are aware of how we struggle with our own limitations, we are capable of accepting the same in others.

God was under no obligation to think and feel as we do, but in the person of Jesus Christ, God chose definitively to treat each of us with personal, abiding compassion. Becoming more compassionate with others is a fitting response to the way God treats us: pleasing to God and at the same time humanizing for us. Our humanity is, after all, made in the image and likeness of God.