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Compassion

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Compassion

The root meaning of compassion is "to suffer with," as when we visit a sick person or stand by a friend who is having a hard time. If we accompany someone in his or her difficulties "with passion," we exemplify a variation on the basic meaning of compassion, which focuses on selflessness. Each of the two understandings of the word can help us as we reflect on our experiences of compassion as valuable gifts that we give and that we receive.

Most of us can recall a time when we were sick, and someone, a family member or a friend, though unable to heal us, took the time to be with us, and to appreciate our suffering as of concern to them. In a way, these people suffered a little because we were suffering. Love is like that, at one time sharing, even if to a small degree, our suffering, and also rejoicing with us in the good times. If we remember having benefitted from the compassion of others when we were in need, we know from such experiences that love is more than a nice feeling that comes to people when everything is as they would like it to be. Love and suffering are not mutually exclusive; rather, they often complement each other.

Passion is a word that we might use when describing our deeper desires, as when someone says that "my passion is music." Passion is closely associated with suffering; the word which we usually consider as describing a positive force in our lives comes to us from a Latin word that conveys the meaning, "suffer." When we are doing what we love to do and when we think and act from our most authentic desires, we pay little attention to inconveniences, challenges, and even failures, because we give ourselves so completely to our heart's desires. We do suffer, but even if we are aware of some hurt and loss, our absorbing interest is in the positive movement we choose in following our passion.

Our compassion for others, and theirs for us, follows the same law of love: When we care about one another, care counts for more than inconvenience. In small ways and in great, we bring what we have to others, and when we let ourselves think and act on behalf of others, our "passion" for such thoughts and deeds becomes manifest. We are most likely indifferent to whatever suffering is involved because of the priority of our concern for someone or for some persons in their needs. We are intuitively compassionate, without needing to think about it, because we too have experiences of pain and suffering.

Of all the forms of love, compassion would seem the least likely to attribute to God. But if we reflect on the suffering of Jesus Christ, a gracious mystery opens for our consideration. Whenever we turn to God in our suffering, we

are at that moment, and even beforehand, the objects of God's compassionate love. God, in Jesus, takes part fully in our suffering as well as in our joy.

Suffering does not represent some kind of failure on our part, or a glitch in the cosmic order of creation; suffering allows for the possibility of compassion, one for another, and always with and through the loving compassion of God.