

Compassion is the Key to Service

Mother Theresa tells us this story:

One night, a man came to our house to tell me that a Hindu family, a family of eight children, had not eaten anything for days.

They had nothing to eat.

I took enough rice for a meal and went to their house. I could see the hungry faces, the children with their bulging eyes. The sight could not have been more dramatic!

The mother took the rice from my hands, divided it in half and went out. When she came back a little later, I asked her: "Where did you go? What did you do?"

She answered, "They are also hungry."

"They" were the people next door, a Muslim family with the same number of children to feed and who did not have any food either.

That mother was aware of the situation. She had the courage and the love to share her meager portion of rice with others. In spite of her circumstances, I think she felt very happy to share with her neighbors the little I had taken her.

In order not to take away her happiness, I did not take her any more rice that night. I took her some more the following day.

Where does that kind of compassion come from? What is the source? Perhaps, a better question is how can we teach compassion to our children? How can we protect them from secular relativism and caution them against rash judgment? How do we teach them the wisdom of hating the sin while loving the sinner? These are the questions I am asked by parents and teachers. These are the sophisticated concepts our children are grappling to understand.

Though our Federal and state governments are emphasizing service for young people, service without a genuine understanding of *why* we serve makes the idea nothing more than an obligation. This changes, though, when service is an opportunity to display compassion through which we see Christ in others.

So, how do we teach this concept to our children? There are two essential ingredients for success in teaching compassion: simplicity and modeling. Compassion begins at home with the family. Recognizing that one has had a bad day and listening to the venting that comes from having such a day is a wonderful and caring way of displaying compassion. It is from our family that we have our foundation for compassion. Blessed John Paul II said, "As the family goes, so goes the nation, and so goes the whole world in which we live." So, this essence of compassion is quietly introduced in our youngest children as they learn to interact with their family members.

One simple way to learn compassion is through sharing. Anyone who has ever watched very young children at play can see that sharing is not a natural instinct. Sharing is a practice that needs to be developed, with repetition-- and the degree of repetition that will suffice depends on the temperament of the child. The following excerpt from Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows* embodies sharing in the descriptive allegory:

There are two seas in Palestine. One is fresh, and fish are in it. Splashes of green adorn its banks. Trees spread their branches over it and stretch out their thirsty roots to sip of its healing waters.

...The River Jordan makes this sea with sparkling water from the hills. So it laughs in the sunshine. And men build their houses near to it, and birds their nests; and every kind of life is happier because it is there.

The River Jordan flows on south into another sea.

Here is no splash of fish, no fluttering leaf, no song of birds, no children's laughter. Travelers choose another route, unless on urgent business. The air hangs heavy above its water, and neither man nor beast nor fowl will drink.

What makes this mighty difference in these neighbor seas? Not the River Jordan. It empties the same good water into both. Not the soil in which they lay; not in the country round about.

This is the difference. The Sea of Galilee receives but does not keep the Jordan. For every drop that flows into it another drop flows out. The giving and receiving go on in equal measure.

The other sea is shrewder, hoarding its income jealously. It will not be tempted into any generous impulse. Every drop it gets, it keeps.

The Sea of Galilee gives and lives. This other sea gives nothing. It is named the Dead.

There are two kinds of people in this world. There are two seas in Palestine.

Sharing is a part of compassion that is learned early in life. There are, however, other facets of compassion that children learn as they grow. These are best taught by modeling. Our children are watching everything we do. Our reactions to news stories, gossip, sporting events, test grades, and neighborhood activities are all being quietly filed away in their minds. This information is a child's paradigm for his own interaction as he or she progresses through life. How then do we keep our children engaged in understanding the many facets of compassion as they grow?

Experts overwhelmingly cite exposure to others as the principal-training device. This can take place in a variety of ways and venues. It can be as simple as taking care of a younger child who needs some help eating his dinner. Compassion can also be fostered by doing an anonymous good deed, writing a thank-you note, taking out the trash, or making someone's bed. If even more adventurous, then look around to find larger projects for your adolescent. Cleaning up a park in your neighborhood, volunteering in a senior citizens' center, reading to someone who cannot, or building a house for Habitat for Humanity can offer wonderful "classrooms of compassion". The essential ingredient, which must permeate one's words and actions, is love.

With teenagers, it is especially important to reinforce that this life is "not all about them." Developmentally, teens are trying to gain a better understanding of who they are. Too much time spent looking inward, however, can be harmful. It is often cited, as an indicator that can even be a precursor to depression. What is a particularly difficult endeavor as society is encouraging our kids (and our adults) to think first and foremost of themselves. For instance, an egocentrically-minded society that names its most popular gadgets for the individual (I-Tunes, I-Phones, You Tube, I-Pad, My Space, I-Cloud) is begging our kids to fixate on themselves. The Catholic Church has continued the quest to fight against this secular focus on oneself. On October 8, Pope Francis, while discussing this globalization of indifference said, "The culture of comfort makes us think only of ourselves, it makes us live in soap bubbles which, however lovely, are insubstantial; they offer a fleeting and empty illusion which results in indifference to others."