



# Compassion as Commitment to Christian Life A Theological Response to the Challenge of *Evangelii Gaudium*

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Compassion as a response to pain and suffering is a primordial divine force that can bind us one to another and to the whole of creation. The modern context presented in the *Evangelii Gaudium*<sup>1</sup> becomes a challenge for an ongoing compassionate mission for today's Church grounded in the prophetic but compassionate ministry of Jesus. It is in this context that I find commitment to lead a compassionate life has its source in personal encounter with Jesus, the compassion of God made human. When one is compassionate, one does not decide, but rather surrenders control to another, and is sucked into the situation. One becomes so present to the moment that one is both chosen and choosing.

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<sup>1</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* is the first apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis, published on 24<sup>th</sup> November, 2013. Here after *EG* will be used to indicate *Evangelii Gaudium*.

## 1. Etymological Analysis of the Word ‘Compassion’

The word “compassion” has a distinguished ancestry, with French, Latin and Greek connections. In Greek, we trace the usage back to the related word for ‘suffering: *pathos* (πάθος). In Latin, we can see the root word *cum*, meaning ‘with’ and *passio*, or suffering, and *patio*, I suffer. So compassion means ‘to endure [something] with another person’, to put ourselves in somebody else’s shoes, to feel his/her pain as though it were our own, and to enter generously into her/his point of view.<sup>2</sup> In common usage, compassion is understood to be a sympathetic awareness of another’s distress, with a desire to alleviate it in some way. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the word first entered written English in the year 1340. It was not until 1561 that it was spelled “compassion.” For a very brief time, the word “compassion” was used as a verb “to compassionate, i.e., to join with in passion.” This verb became obsolete. The principle of compassion that lies at the heart of all religious ethical, and spiritual traditions, impels human beings to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

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## 2. Biblical Terminology of Compassion

The Scriptural vocabulary of compassion is richly nuanced. The Hebrew word for compassion is ‘*rachemin*’ which refers to the womb of Yahweh to express the deeply moving compassion

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<sup>2</sup>‘Compassion’ derives in part from the Latin *patiri* and the Greek *pathein*, meaning ‘to suffer, undergo or experience’ Cf. Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, (London: Random House, 2011).

of God.<sup>3</sup> There is no word in Greek for compassion. In all the twelve passages in the NT<sup>4</sup> where ‘to be moved with compassion’ occurs, the verb used to translate compassion in Greek is *splangchnizomai*, which comes from *splangchna* meaning bowels, entrails, the place where our most intimate and passionate emotions are located. So when the gospels speak about Jesus’ being moved with pity’, it meant Jesus’ being moved in his entrails, expressing something very deep flowing from the furthestmost depths of Jesus’ entrails and is not just one low sentiment of pity or sympathy.

Hence, theologically divine compassion is based on God’s covenant with human beings. A theology of compassion is a theology of empowerment and liberation that fully recognizes human dignity. The call to solidarity and the rooting of this solidarity in God’s own self in Trinity is intimately bound up with compassion and with what God has done for people through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The “compassion of God,” writes Rabbi Dresner, “points the ‘way’ for man and woman , for when a man or woman act compassionately, he/she is walking in the ‘way’ of the Lord. That is the meaning of *imitatio Dei*.<sup>5</sup> (Deut 11:22). Compassion is the very nature of God and this is revealed through Jesus Christ in whom is manifested God’s nature of suffering with humanity as the compassionate One.

### 3. Jesus: The Embodiment of God’s Compassion

In Jesus, God’s compassion became visible and tangible to us. Jesus not only said, “Be compassionate as your Father is

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<sup>3</sup> Henry J M Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*. (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 19. Indeed, compassion is such a deep, central, and powerful emotion in Jesus that it can only be described as a movement of the womb of God. There, all the divine tenderness and gentleness lie hidden.

<sup>4</sup> Mt 9:36; 15:32; 14:14; 15:32; 18: 27; 20:34; Mark 1:40-41; 6:34, 8:2; Lk 7:13; 10:33; 15:20.

<sup>5</sup>Samuel H Dresner, *Prayer, Humility, and Compassion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1957), 193.

compassionate,” but he also was the concrete embodiment of this divine compassion in our world. By entering into our world and becoming one of us, Jesus accepted humankind’s weakness and revealed to us God’s ineffable love. “Jesus identifies Himself with the poor and the oppressed, in order to show them an active and effective concern”.<sup>6</sup> Jesus’ response to all those who came to him with their suffering-the hungry, the blind, the widows, the public sinners, and those afflicted by leprosy- was to reveal the divine compassion that led God to enter our humanity. The mystery of the Incarnation empowers us and teaches us the virtues that generate life and compassionate love. God in Jesus becomes a ‘servant God’ who washes the feet of his disciples; He identifies Himself with every human suffering and completes His self-gifting love by dying on the cross. Even from the cross, He forgives those who crucified Him. In this way, we see in Jesus the fullness of God’s compassion.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the biblical words translated as “compassion” could be summarized under three basic truths: a) that compassion springs from the heart of God. Without God’s intervention, the world would not know compassion.

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b) Compassion manifests itself in God’s *steadfast love* and in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and in his suffering together with us and for our salvation, and c) that compassion is to be the hallmark of God’s people. The call to solidarity and the rooting of this solidarity in

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<sup>6</sup> George M Soares-Prabhu, “Jesus and the Poor,” in *Collected Writings of George M. Soares - Prabhu*, Vol. 4. ed. Francis X. D’Sa (Pune: JDV Theological Series, 2001), 176.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Joseph Prasad Pinto, OFM Cap, *Journey To Wholeness: Reflections for Life in Abundance* (Bombay: St. Pauls, 2006), 186.

God's own self in Trinity and in the person of Jesus can do great things for the Kingdom of God.

#### **4. Situating the Context: The Crisis of Communal Commitment**

Taking a few cues from the responses to *Evangelii Gaudium* from persons in different walks of life, we find that it is no surprise that the Catholic Church faces monumental challenges in today's milieu. Focusing on the contemporary issues presented in the *Evangelii Gaudium* this section describes the various problem issues under four significant headings: a) The great divide of our time b) Estrangement from others c) Spread of a throwaway Culture d) An era devoid of God-consciousness. In that case, what should be our response to the reality that is presented before us? Does the plight of the poor and the marginalized, touch us deeply, causing us in some way to feel their pain within ourselves? The central challenge of the contemporary world is how to turn communal commitment into solidarity with others, solidarity with the margins.

#### **5. Compassion: A Theological Praxis of Christian life**

The ultimate foundation of Christian's commitment to liberation can be found in the Trinity understood as mystery of communion among distinct persons. The Son was sent into the world in order to divinize human beings; moreover, the goal of the Trinity is to draw every human being to itself so that everyone may participate in its inner life. Therefore, compassion is a profound biblical word with a clear theological identity. Compassion is a ministry which for the Christian is entirely and uniquely rooted in Jesus Christ. As disciples with our identity hidden in Jesus, our compassion is a participation in his compassion. Compassion is the overflow of our life in Christ. Relationship with Jesus Christ is the necessary condition that

makes compassion possible for us. Growth in compassion is the fruit of our life in Christ.<sup>8</sup>

However, mission needs contemplation that can sustain the fervour and zeal of a Christian till the end. Pope Francis insists that evangelizers need “an interior space which can give a Christian meaning to commitment and activity”<sup>9</sup> Our cultural milieu poses challenges to the reform the Pope envisions. Is compassion, which is a part of what it means to be a Christian, possible for us? The current task is to interpret this demand of the new *kairos* in the light of the biblical and theological tradition and provide a conceptually coherent, systematic mediation between the context of globalization and the demand of its inherited faith.

### 5.1 Contemplation of the Divine

One of the main challenges that the Church is facing today is to instill God- consciousness. God is more to be experienced than to be intellectually known. Through contemplation we truly become whom we contemplate and whom we are all meant to be. For, whether we realize it or not, it is in God's love, and in our loving response in prayer and service, that we live and move and have our being.

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Purves, *The Search For Compassion: Spirituality and Ministry*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 56-57.

<sup>9</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* # 262.

## 5.2 Image of God and Compassion

Christian theology ponders over the meaning of human life in reference to God. The image of God has an irreducibly social expression within humanity.<sup>10</sup> It is a ‘relational’ image, reflected in the relationship between man and woman, in the primordial social bond that is the foundation of all other forms of social life. Only within an interpersonal community can the triune likeness be properly realised. If humans are made in the image of the Triune God, all that of the Trinity is also to be affirmed of the human person. We are to see the Trinity, in the words of Raimundo Panikkar, as “the ultimate paradigm of personal relationship.”<sup>11</sup>

John Macmurray rightly points out that, since mutuality is constitutive of the personal, it follows that ‘I’ need ‘you’ in order to be

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myself. “The authentic human is not egocentric but exocentric.”<sup>12</sup> To be a person after the image of God is therefore to be a person-in-relationship.

## 5.3 Universal openness and Preferential Option

Our preferential option for the poor derives from the biblical understanding of the *anawim*, the vulnerable ones who have

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<sup>10</sup> The Yahwist and Priestly accounts of creation in the Bible affirm that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God: “Let us make human in our image, after our likeness” (Gen 1:26).

<sup>11</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (New York/London 1973), xii-xiii. The understanding of Trinity and one’s religious experience influence each other bringing about a better understanding of the human relationship.

<sup>12</sup> John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (reprint, London: Humanity Books, 1998), 69. Macmurray does not connect the relational character of the human person with the doctrine of the Trinity.

only Yahweh for their protector. Christian faith is in Jesus, who became poor, and was always close to the poor. Here the Gospel is basic, and in the Gospel the Ministry of Jesus is basic, and the basic thrust of this ministry is to the poor, the 'anawim.' The ministry of Jesus excludes no one, but the authenticating sign of this is that the Good news is preached to the poor. Therefore, the universality of the Gospel is always the necessary condition for a preferential option for the poor, which in turn is the authenticating sign of the good news for all. Empowering the powerless is meant to make for an equitable distribution of power in our society. In the ultimate analysis the option we make for the poor must always reach out to the Kingdom and integrate its values into our strategies and struggles for the liberation of the oppressed.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, "the kingdom of God is meant for all humankind, all people are called to become members of it"<sup>14</sup>

In our option for the periphery we encounter the human face of God. "In taking the side of the periphery we are privileged to honour the dignity of the periphery, the poor, the marginalised and the exploited, and to recognise the presence and the operation of the life-giving Spirit of God."<sup>15</sup> Through "this we bring healing into the lives of the people of the margins and in the process we ourselves become healed".<sup>16</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

A Christian is embedded in Christ through baptism, empowered to fight for Christ through confirmation, and called upon to act in the world sharing the royal, prophetic and priestly

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<sup>13</sup> Heredia, "A Church that is Poor and for the Poor".

<sup>14</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical on "Christ the Redeemer", 7 December, 1990 ( Bombay : Pauline Publications, 1994), 14

<sup>15</sup> Mohan Doss, *Led By the Spirit: Mission, Spirituality and Formation* (DWS/ISPCK, 2008), 149.

<sup>16</sup> Jacob Kavunkal, "The Eucharist and Mission," *Jnana Deepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies* 8, no.2 (July 2005): 85.



role of Christ, and so, like Christ, to be compassionate to fellow humans, loving each and every one around him/her and indeed all humanity whose fundamental identity is enshrined in Jesus the perfect *Imago Dei*. From a Catholic theological perspective, all persons possess an intrinsic dignity and incalculable worth. Therefore compassionate care for people is part of the broader duty of keeping God's commandments. Compassion is part of what it means to be a Christian. In other words, compassion is one of the features of being "in Christ". 🌹

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- "Evangelizing, proclaiming Jesus, gives us joy. In contrast, egoism makes us bitter, sad, and depresses us. Evangelizing uplifts us." — Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*
  - "Being with" Christ does not mean isolating ourselves from others. Rather, it is a "being with" in order to go forth and encounter others." — Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*
  - "Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. She said: "We must be very proud of our vocation because it gives us the opportunity to serve Christ in the poor." — Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*
  - "Jesus is the Good Shepherd; he is our true treasure. Please, let us not erase Jesus from our lives! Let us ground our hearts ever more in him (see Luke" — Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*