

## THE BEST WAY TO FILL THE HOLE IN YOUR HEART IS WITH COMPASSION

The presenter for a two session retreat experience had been announced. I was overjoyed with the news since he, Fr. Michael Crosby, was both nationally known and someone whom I had met years ago. My admiration began then and continued to the present time. When I read that his topic was compassion, I wondered if I'd learn anything new or be truly interested. Loyalty to my parish and eagerness to see Michael again drew me to the presentations.

Loyalty was not the driving force for very long. I was quickly drawn into the topic as it became abundantly clear that we are all suffering from lack of compassion and are all prone to abusive behavior, behavior that creates a hole in our hearts. The problem is that we are not sufficiently aware of that fact. We are not attentive to our subtle ways of controlling people, of seeking power over them and not allowing freedom to reign in their lives. Too often, we fall prey to the horror of overpowering rather than empowering others. We become bullies, whether we are cognizant of it or not.

Surrounding ourselves with those who agree with our viewpoints, opinions, biases, prejudices only intensifies the abusive behavior. It can be seen in a raised eyebrow, a rolling of the eyes, a command to "lighten up" or "get a thicker skin." The words are said, actions are taken—or not taken—and the relationship is diminished, sometimes to the point of destruction. We add to the pain of the universe.

As Fr. Crosby spoke, identifying for his audience the various ways in which we can be coercive, manipulative, exploitive, and dominating people, heads nodded in agreement. Questions rose concerning situations, past and present, in which individuals had experienced all or most of the violent behavior he described. The hurt was palpable. The desire to mend relationships was equally touching. All present wished to be a part of their family, friends, groups. They did not want to be apart from them. The issue was, "How can this be accomplished?"

Quoting from Albert Einstein, Crosby reminded everyone that we are frequently deluded into thinking that we are separate from the rest of creation, rather than remembering that human beings are part of the whole universe. Einstein called it a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. He wrote, "This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

That alone is not enough. The crucial reality is phrased in Einstein's next sentence, "We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if humankind is to survive." If humankind is to survive, we need to think about everything in a substantially new manner. We need to be in the process of radical conversion, constantly and continually. We need to stop doing good things in a bad way.

The end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brings with it an opportunity for new resolutions. It's a chance for all of us to open our hearts and minds, first recognizing our own need to be healed and then embracing the healing process with others.

We can begin by asking ourselves the questions Crosby posed. How am I relating to others? How am I using my power? Am I an affirming force, a source of positive energy, in the universe or a negative one? Do I remember that correction must follow affirmation? When I offer correction without first affirming the other, I do nothing more, or less, than diminish them. The result is that they shut down, knowing in their heart that the correction has been delivered without care or compassion.

What can we do to change our behavior? The answer is both simple and challenging. We begin by active listening. I remember my very young nephew mouthing what he heard his parents saying, "Shut mouth. Hear me." Now, I'd repeat those words with a deep poignancy asking that the talking cease and the listening begin. Hear me. That's the cry of the poor, the poor ones that all of us are when we feel powerless and vulnerable.

We are asking to be understood, to be accepted in all our weaknesses as well as our strengths. We are also acknowledging our own role in creating the conflict in which we find ourselves. Compassion, caring, has entered the room of our hearts. The process of conversion can begin.

Reconciliation can happen. It need not be expressed in words, though words are good. Saying "I'm sorry" and asking for forgiveness is not a bad way to go. However, it is not the only way. Contrite actions are also effective.

What is important is to realize the power of forgiveness. As Crosby emphasized, "Not to forgive is to yield myself to the other's control and be locked into the sequence of tit for tat. Forgiveness frees the forgiver. It extracts the forgiver from the other person's nightmare of violence."

At this point, there was rustling among the listeners. So many had experienced the challenge of forgiveness. It is hard to forgive when one cannot forget the hurt that has been endured, the anger that remains. Crosby's response was to differentiate between hard feelings and hurt feelings. One can recall the hurt, but to retain the hardness will only result in a hardened heart. And, a hardened heart deadens the senses causing a fatal sclerosis. No one wants a hardened heart. Our desire is for hearts of flesh, hearts open to caring—both giving and receiving it.

Crosby noted that to be in God's reign, we need to be open-hearted people. We need to show up, pay attention, speak the truth in a nonviolent manner, and give up the need to control others. We need to make room for more and more, to bring others into our circle rather than to draw a circle to keep them out. This caring moves us to

compassion. Compassion then can mend the hole in our hearts that has kept us in unnecessary sorrow and unrelenting pain.

Sounds like a plan for 2011!

Fran Salone-Pelletier, A SECOND LOOK January 6, 2011

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