



STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

ALEXANDER T. POCETTO, O.S.F.S., PH.D.

Senior Salesian Scholar

Compassionate Love & Salesian Spirituality

**A compassionate love is a unifying and transforming force
that makes us connect with others and become image makers as God is an image maker.**

The image of God that was uppermost in the minds of the Ancient Israelites was that of a God of compassion. In fact, the name Yahweh itself signified for them that God was essentially compassion since this was the way in which they primarily experienced his presence and power in their midst. God reveals himself to Moses on Mount Sinai as a compassionate God: "Yahweh. . . is a merciful[a God of tenderness, *raham*] and gracious [*hanum*] God, slow to anger and rich in kindness [mercy, *hesed*] and fidelity [*emet*] continuing his kindness for a thousand generations. . ." (Ex. 34:6). Despite the many infidelities of both priests and people, the Book of Chronicles tells us that "God had compassion on his people. . . ." calling them back time and time again, "early and often," whenever they strayed from him. Paul sings the praises of the richness of God's mercy (compassion) by bringing us "back to life with Christ when we were dead to sin" out of love for us. (Eph. 2, 4). Following in the same vein, John assures us and comforts us with the thought of how much God loves us by coming not as a judge ready to condemn us but rather as a Lover, Healer and Savior in the person of Jesus, urging us to look up to him as the Ancient Israelites looked up to the brazen serpent that Moses held high and were healed of their poisonous snake bites. In sending his only Son to save us, he exercised *hesed*, the same benevolent love (or compassion) with which he created the world and humankind.

We all, no doubt, have our own images of compassion that move us to reach out to others in an ecstasy of good works. Several years ago, my youngest sister was afflicted with a severe case of shingles that attacked her ear and nervous system so that it partially paralyzed and distorted the right side of her face. In addition to the humiliating disfigurement, the pain she experienced for several weeks was excruciating. My mother, who was in her middle eighties at the time, said to me with all the force of a mother's love, "I wish that I could take her illness on me." No doubt, she acutely felt the pain and the humiliation that my sister was suffering and would have

willingly taken this pain and humiliation upon herself, if that indeed were possible. My mother's remark made a very deep impression on me and is one of the images of compassion that I carry around with me and that will stay with me for the rest of my days.

Several years ago a priest in the Arlington diocese was believed to have experienced the stigmata. There have been numerous attempts in the past to try to explain this phenomenon. It was puzzling to St. Francis de Sales, who tells us that he thought long and hard about how the stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi came about. He finally decided that this phenomenon comes about through the unifying and transforming power of love, of benevolent love. He tells us that "love has a wonderful power to sharpen the imagination so that it can penetrate beyond itself;" (*Treatise*, vol. 1, p. 250) it can give us the power of self-transcendence and new and previously unimagined ways to view ourselves and others. In the case of St. Francis of Assisi, de Sales states that this saint was so much in love with Jesus and meditated on his sufferings that his imagination fired by love was able to make him identify with Christ in his passion, not in the sense that he was merely imagining Christ's suffering because people could see the physical effects of the wounds in his hands, feet and side, but rather because it was the result of his imagination under the influence of an ardent and burning love. Through a compassionate love, he actually suffered along with Christ whose passion Pascal tells us continues in suffering humanity.

It is through the love of compassion that St. Francis de Sales gives us a deeper understanding and appreciation of the phenomenon of the stigmata. He tells us, "We do not desire compassion because of the pain it brings our hearts, but rather because such pain unites us and associates us with our beloved who is in pain." Therein lies the power of compassion; it is the power "to be with". De Sales stresses the unifying and transforming power of the love of compassion and makes us better understand its nature. Compassion makes us reach out in love so that we readily identify with those who suffer, and we become like them. It makes us experience what they are experiencing but not merely for the sake of the experience or the pain, but so that we will be moved to alleviate their suffering and pain or at least to help them bear with it and make sense out of it.

His insights on how to practice real poverty in the midst of riches is an excellent example of the power of compassionate love:

Love the poor and love poverty, for it is by such love that you become truly poor. As the Scripture says, we become like the things we love [Hosea 9:10]. Love makes lovers equal. "Who is weak and I am not weak?" says St. Paul, and he might have also said, "Who is poor and I am not poor with him?" for love made him like those he loved. (*Devout Life*, III, ch. 15, "How to Practice Genuine Poverty Although Really Rich", p. 165)

Compassionate love exemplifies our solidarity with others and especially makes us realize our common human vulnerability, our mutual interdependence and our need to be with those who are suffering. It makes us see the interconnectedness of our lives. Our saint stresses this in the same passage on how to be poor despite the fact that we may be materially wealthy:

If you love the poor you will share their poverty and be poor like them. If you love the poor, be often with them. Be glad to see them in your own home and to visit with them in theirs. Be glad to talk to them and be pleased to have them near you in church, on the street, and elsewhere. (*Loc. cit.*)

For the poor, we can readily substitute others that are on the fringes of society or who are suffering from physical or mental pain.

There is a German proverb which says that a sorrow shared is halved and a joy shared is doubled. (Cf. M. Fox, *A Spirituality Named Compassion*, p. 3) St. Francis de Sales would say that we share other people's sorrow through commiseration or compassion and their joy through the love of complacence. (Cf. *Treatise on the Love of God*, vol. 1, pp. 243-245) The power of compassion, which causes us be present with and to others in their suffering, is again stressed by De Sales when he explains:

Compassion, sympathy, and commiseration, or pity is simply an affection that makes us share the sufferings and sorrows of one we love and draw the misery he endures into our own heart. . . . It is love that produces both effects [commiseration and complacence] by the power it has of uniting the heart that loves with the thing loved, thus enabling friends to have both good things and evil in common. (*Treatise* , vol. 1, 243)

Although in the French language of De Sales' day compassion is equated with pity, we must be careful, however, in our language to distinguish between the two. A nun who works with AIDS patients made a good distinction between compassion and pity. She explained that pity makes us sympathize with one who is suffering but from a distance; it does not really engage our hearts and our will the way that compassion does. The love of compassion gives us the ability to identify with the person we love and makes us appreciate what struggles, difficulties, suffering and hardships others are enduring or can experience. This is why compassionate people are slow to judge and condemn others because they can always make allowances for the pressures and the pain that others might be experiencing. They know what it means to walk a mile in someone else's moccasins, to use a well-known Native American expression. The story of Jesus' disciples plucking the grain on the Sabbath illustrates the connection between compassion and condemnation. In reply to the Pharisees' criticism of the disciples' behavior, Jesus says, "If you understood the meaning of the text, 'It is mercy (compassion) I desire and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned these innocent men" (Mt. 12, 7). Jesus is echoing here what the prophet Hosea tells us. (Cf. Hosea. 6, 6).

Jesus is the perfect image of divine compassion. He is characterized as "a merciful [compassionate] and faithful high priest" (Hebrews. 2:17) who shared the misery of those he came to save. This is why all of his actions made present on earth the divine compassion. It is the evangelist Luke who stresses the divine compassion as revealed in Jesus' actions. Luke emphasizes that Jesus preferred the company of the poor and did not hesitate to associate with those whom the religious people of his day considered to be sinners like tax collectors. In fact, he chose one of them to be an apostle. The compassion that he exhibited in a general way to hungry and exhausted crowds by feeding them takes on in Luke a more personal face. He shows a

special concern for the "only son" of a widow (Luke. 7,13) and for a father (Jairus), who weepingly implored him to cure his dying daughter. Toward women and foreigners, he exhibits a special compassionate love. If Jesus showed compassion toward all, especially the most desperate, we can readily understand why the afflicted addressed him as they would address God himself by crying out, "Lord, have mercy!" [*Kyrie eleison!*"] (Mt. 15, 22 - the Canaanite woman interceding for her daughter who was possessed and 17, 15 - A man imploring Jesus to cure his demented son: "Lord, take pity on my son!"]

Where the gospel of Matthew has Jesus requiring his disciples to "Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect", Luke sees this perfection as consisting in compassion and has Jesus saying to his followers: "Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate" (6, 36). Jesus wanted to paint the face of divine compassion not only by his actions but also by his preaching. In contrast to the pettiness of the Pharisees who wanted to exclude sinners from the heavenly kingdom, Jesus proclaims the good news of God's infinite mercy and compassion, which recalls the image of God so vividly portrayed in the Old Testament. Those who rejoice the heart of God are not the ones who consider themselves to be righteous but rather repentant sinners whom Jesus compares to lost sheep or a lost coin. The father is on the lookout for the return of his prodigal son, and when he is still a long way off "is moved with compassion" and doesn't wait for his son to come to him but runs out to meet him. (Cf. Luke. 15, 20)

Our encounters with the merciful and compassionate God, especially in the person of Jesus, are seen by St. Francis de Sales as very intimate contacts. The Benedictine Gilbert Générard, whose course on the exposition of the *Canticle of Canticles* de Sales took when he was a student in Paris, views the sacraments as embraces of Christ in interpreting the verse "His right arm upholds me and his left embraces he." (2, 6). This, no doubt, influenced our saint when he describes the sacraments, the inspirations and sensible consolations that we receive as kisses or embraces from Christ. Our response to God's compassionate love for us are also described as kisses or embraces:

Let us then kiss the Savior who grants us these delights. To kiss him is to obey him, keep his commandments, do his will, and follow his desires, in brief to embrace him with tender obedience and fidelity. (*Devout Life*, IV , ch. 13)

The experience of these embraces and kisses of Christ can be very powerful and engaging so that we become strongly attached to them and seek the consolations of God rather than the God of consolation as de Sales expresses it. The danger in this experience is that we might get too attached to these feelings and not translate them into action by a compassionate love. We must remind ourselves that image-making is a divine activity. (Cf. R. Zawilla, "Icon(s), Iconography" in the *New Dictionary. of Catholic Spirituality*, p. 520). By the love of compassion, de Sales tells us that we create God's image in others: "Man has been created to the likeness of God. So the love of neighbor leads us to love in him the resemblance and image of God, that is to say, that we help to make this image and this resemblance more and more perfect" (OEA, 8, 148)

We become who we are by acting and by loving like God the Creator, God the Image-maker. This sublime idea is admirably summed up by Louis Lavelle in a short but very penetrating essay on our saint. "It has to be said. . . that by loving we continue to cooperate with the very act of

creation" (*Quatre saints*, p. 191ff), and especially by compassionate love. Once we have been "inspired" by this image of God, we become capable of "inspiring" or of "breathing" it into other persons by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Once we allow our imagination to be inspired and motivated by the Holy Spirit, we will find creative ways to alleviate the sufferings and burdens of others.

Someone has suggested that the images of God from the Old Testament have to be reborn in us as they were reborn in Christ. It is the Holy Spirit that brings about this rebirth. The gospel images of compassionate love can make an impact on our world today partly by the lives of individuals who incarnate them, so to speak. People like Mother Theresa combing the teeming streets of Calcutta for the cast-offs of society or like a Maximilian Kolbe in a Nazi concentration camp giving his life for a fellow prisoner have captured the imaginations of people throughout the world. "But perhaps the witness of groups of people living in unity and love and serving the needy around us may make Christ visible even more clearly than the witness of outstanding individuals. People are symbols to each other, and people by their very being and existence can speak powerfully of the presence of Christ within them" (C. Bryant, "Images and the Psyche, *The Way*, p. 90-91). To put it in another way, a Salesian way, I would say that we are images of God, of the compassionate God and hence powerful images of the compassionate God to each other.
