

The Developing Heart¹

Michael A. Conway

FINDING YOUR PATH

The task of finding the path that is unique to you in life is very important. No one can do this for you. It is possible to help – or better enable – another, but you cannot, and ought not, take over this task for another person. This is something to be discovered in life for each one of us, and there is a reason behind this quest. We have to search out and discover our own identity. This journey of finding one’s self is in many ways the most important journey that you make in life and determines more than anything else a whole series of things for you such as the quality of your life, the depth of your relationships, and the freedom that you achieve in terms of expressing yourself in your life. Thomas Merton puts it in terms of each person working out one’s own personal salvation. Each individual is responsible for living his or her life and in that sense ‘finding himself or herself.’² Merton warns that if you do not take up this task, ‘shifting this responsibility to somebody else,’ then you will fail to find out the *meaning* of your own life.

One could characterize the breadth and depth of this journey as the discovery of ‘who you are in God.’ It is to come to know yourself and your place in creation from within the horizon of faith: the only horizon that is, finally, adequate to human desire. It is that infinity from within which the human spirit can breathe in the fullness of its own flourishing. Near me at home I can see Croagh Patrick in the distance: it is a perfect pyramid that is as impressive on the horizon as the pyramids of Giza! But when you are close to the mountain, you do not see this; it is simply a bulk of mountain among others. To appreciate the power of this mountain

1 This is an abridged version of a paper delivered in the Diocesan Pastoral Centre, *Arus de Brúin*, Newtownsmith, Galway, 24 September 2016, as a contribution to a series of reflections for the Year of Mercy. It should be read as a continuation of Michael A. Conway, ‘The Underdeveloped Heart,’ *The Furrow*, 67 (2016): 259-265.

2 See Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (Boston: Shambhala, 2005), xii.

Michael A. Conway is a priest of the Diocese of Galway. He is Professor of Faith and Culture at St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

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in terms of human imagination, you need to see it from a distance in its larger setting. And in a sense, this is true of us: we can only really understand the human condition if the framework that we employ is adequate to its dignity, its integrity, and its infinity.

This is not, however, to denigrate or belittle in any way the important understandings that can be achieved, and work that can be done, in more closed and finite frameworks, such as in support groups, education groups, therapy, meditation, mindfulness groups, etc. In a real way, this greater journey of discovering yourself in God embraces, transforms, and perfects the natural self-realization that is equally necessary for our wellbeing. However, it raises everything to a new level and enhances our natural self-realization, which to some extent, in any case, it always presupposes, only to accompany and eventually transcend. This journey of discovering yourself in God is marked by a fundamental openness in your life, so that newness of life is always a real possibility and a task.

JOURNEY OF FAITH: MIND AND HEART

This journey of faith and belief is intimately connected to *the heart*. Indeed the verb for believing in Latin, *credo* (from which we get the English *creed* and *credit*), comes from the proto-Indo-European word *kḗr*, which means heart. And the Irish *credim* has this same origin. To believe, to have faith, is to have your heart in something. The most personal and exciting journey that you can make in terms of your heart is the journey of faith. Here mind and heart work together as you journey into your God. They are, if you like, your privileged guides. Together, they enable you to find and chart your unique path through life. Just as two eyes give you perspective in landscapes, your mind and heart working in tandem allow you that perspective, which you need to find your own way.

A major feature for our personal journey in this deeper sense is recognizing clearly that we are more than what goes on in our minds.³ You are always more than what you think you are! Chesterton says that this is true not only for human persons, but for the whole cosmos: ‘Everywhere in things there is this element of the quiet and incalculable.’⁴ Our ideas are important, vital even, but they are not everything; not even for, or in, a given moment. One way of paying attention to a more wholesome understanding of our person is to recognize and promote this complementarity of mind and heart. Working in harmony, the head and the heart allow the singularity that is your person to emerge, and in this you discover your innate freedom, your dignity, and your authentic self in our world (which is always unique to you). And a key insight in this

3 I have already developed this insight in Conway, ‘The Underdeveloped Heart.’

4 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 87.

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task is acknowledging that we ought to be growing and developing not just on the level of the mind, but also at the level of the heart. Growth is about your whole person. It is this that brings a deep inner peace to life and permits us to come home to ourselves; and this no matter what might be our external circumstance.

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We are undoubtedly fascinated by the idea of growth and change; but growth and change are not easy. This was brought home to me recently by the huge interest in the television programme, *Operation Transformation*. It became hugely popular as audiences watched participants (who became household names) change how they cared for themselves and their health through diet and physical exercise. Now I believe that just as you can care for the body in terms of your physical health, and educate the mind in terms of keeping it alert, informed, and enriched, so too you can *develop* the heart to insure that it grows and expands so as to give your person a real substantial connection in concrete life – to yourself, to others, to the world, and to God. There is a ‘fullness’ in having a developed heart that can be known only through experience. It can never be adequately described, precisely because it is not a matter of the mind alone; a developed heart is, rather, a way of being-present-in-the-world.

I believe that it is vital to have a heart that is active and developing if you wish to flourish as a human being, to continue to grow throughout life, to have at all times a sense of expectation in terms of the possibilities of life, right into ripe old age (if you are gifted with such a span of life). The image that I have is that of a volcano at the centre of your person. If it is dormant, then you are asleep in terms of your own possibilities, in terms of the quality of the life that you lead, and in terms of how you relate to others. We can so easily exist on the surface of life, unaware of our own depths and, indeed, the depths of those around us. If, however, the heart is alive and active, then it opens possibilities and powers for us that automatically enhance the quality of our living and the intensity of our relationships. I also believe that it is through our hearts that we are most in tune with God working in and through us. St. Paul, for example, often says that the heart is the dwelling place of God (2 Cor 1:22; Ephesians 3:17; Rom 5:5).

What might it look like to have a developed heart? How might it influence your way of being in this world? What impact might it have on others? I would like now to explore very briefly a number of facets or characteristics of a developed heart that reflect

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something of its power (in the best sense) and its impact on others.⁵ Necessarily, what I have to say is fragmentary and would require greater development.

FROM COMPETITION TO COMPASSION

In a marvellous work on compassion or mercy, Henri Nouwen makes the observation that ‘competition and compassion exclude each other.’⁶ This I think is the key insight in understanding what is a developed heart: compassion or mercy is the mark of a heart that is growing. There are, if you like, two fundamental ways of being in our world, and they depend on whether or not you allow your heart to play an essential role in life.

For one way, you stand back from your world; you calculate your place in it; and in doing so you give priority in an exclusive way to the strategies of the mind. In particular, you repress or ignore the promptings of the heart (and these are sometimes expressed through feelings). On this path, the law of interaction with the world and with others becomes the basic dynamic of competition. This translates into putting the self before the other (in all its forms). And in so many ways, it is reasonable: it is the truth, but not the whole truth. I look out for myself and my concerns, first, and if I have any energy left over, it is only then that I may offer it to the other. When this is your fundamental stance in life, then *the meaning of life* is about becoming the most powerful person that you can become in whatever field that is important to you (and this includes in religious and Church life). It is a kind of ‘natural selection,’ where the most powerful triumphs at a cost to others, often the most vulnerable. *Meaning* is invested in getting ahead and to some degree in leaving others behind, or, at least, only turning to them from your surplus. It subordinates others and alienates them, at the very least from one’s self. They are always over there, and you are always here. It creates a boundary, a wall, or an exclusion zone. This protective strategy of the competitive self is an economy that is built on individual human achievement.

5 In terms of the heart, it is important to state that what I’m exploring here is not to be understood as some kind of sentimental openness to everything and everyone. This would, in fact, be highly destructive for yourself and for others. There is always an important dimension of prudence, of wisdom, and of sound judgement in the face of life and its challenges. And these themselves are based on the intuitions of the heart. A developed heart enhances life; it does not take from it.

6 For this paper, I am using ‘mercy’ and ‘compassion’ interchangeably. See Henri Nouwen, *Ministry and Spirituality: Compassion* (transcript), 24. I am quoting from an unpublished, typed transcript of a course given by Nouwen at the *Gregorian University*, Rome, February – May 1978. It would serve as the foundation for a later joint publication: Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, and Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1982).

It rhymes exceptionally well with a capitalist mind-set and is now widespread in our culture.⁷

The great delusion of the competitive self is the assumption that we are all individuals, isolated like atoms from one another and from the world. This is what permits us, then, to stand apart and be totally indifferent to others. They are on the television; they are not in my room. It means, further, that we see ourselves coming together and interacting with each other only when we wish to do so and only on our own terms; we assume that we are absolutely free to say yes or no. We have no intrinsic responsibility for others or for our world; and we easily let ourselves off the hook when it comes to taking any such responsibility. But this illusion is slowly being exposed in vulnerable places as we come to realize that *what* we do and *how* we do it, in fact, has ramifications for others and for the world that we share. The environment, for example, is no longer a place that can survive if we continue along this path of indifference to it. The refugee crisis in Europe tells us directly that we cannot ignore others with impunity. Another part of this same illusion is that we see ourselves achieving our identity on our own so that we assume that we are what we achieve alone. We ignore what we have received from others or that the world and life itself puts so much at our disposal by way of talent, or health, or wealth, or social security, or stable background, or good education, etc. These are not accidents: they have been given; and they are blessings! In multiple ways we are who and what we are because we have received and continue to receive, often generously, from the world, from life, and from others.

Over against this path of competition, there is another fundamental way of being in the world. If you choose to allow your heart to play a central role in life, if you listen to your life in that more complete way, then, gradually, your life will respond to the law of compassion. *Fundamentally, this is being ready and able to see the self in relation to others, and to put the self, appropriately, at the service of others.*⁸ And when this is basic to your stance in the world, then the *meaning of life* is in the contribution that you make to *our common humanity*. Meaning is not in getting ahead at either a cost to others or in leaving them behind, but in going forward, in making progress, and bringing with you anyone and everyone who might wish to accompany you in whatever way

7 Even the very popular enterprise of setting up altruistic ‘Foundations’ (by those who are exceptionally wealthy) belongs in the final analysis to this way of seeing things.

8 I am using the notion of heart here in line with my discussion in the earlier *Furrow* article (see Conway, ‘The Underdeveloped Heart’). It is of note that the Latin *miseriordia*, which can be translated as compassion or mercy, is a compound of *misereri*, ‘to pity,’ and *cor*, the word for heart.

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that might be appropriate for them and for you. The dynamic is fundamentally different. The image that I have to capture this is that of a skein of wild geese, where the one who leads the group is working (hard!) for everyone, and each one benefits from this endeavour. In the place of the dynamics of a competitive *group*, you have the dynamics of a developing *body*. The finger doesn't grow independently of the hand, or the leg, etc. Everything is coordinated and moves in harmony for the better of everyone. St. Paul understood the Church to be structured in this way, like a body, he said, where each person has a specific place with a specific charism for the good of all. He used an extraordinary expression to name this, calling it the body of Christ. Thus, for example, in 1 Cor 12: 27 he writes: 'Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.' When compassion is fundamental to your stance in life, then your contribution to life is enriching not just for yourself, but for everyone.

THE COMPASSIONATE HEART

We take it for granted that compassion is our response to human suffering. We identify being human with being compassionate. Whether it is a matter of responding to the mother with children who has lost her partner, the family that has lost its home, the refugee who has to flee because of war, the neighbour who has just being diagnosed with cancer, etc. We hope, even believe, that our response will be a compassionate one whenever we meet such situations. We like to think of ourselves as being compassionate, but, in reality, it is not so; *we are not naturally compassionate*. This is so because compassion in its fullest sense costs us: it is easy to mimic compassion, when it has no consequences for the self; when it is an optional extra, so to speak. But when it has demanding implications for the self, then it calls an entirely new dynamic into play. It is only then that you can really speak about compassion.

In its richest expression, compassion is not about reaching out to others in generosity as a flow from those who have to those who have not in a kind of downward direction that leaves the differential intact. In compassion there is real disturbance of the self. It is, in fact, *a transformative journey* that moves in the direction from power to poverty. The word itself comes from the Latin *cum* and *pator* and might be translated as 'to suffer with,' or, better, to co-suffer: it means to share in, to some degree, the pain and suffering of another, to accompany them in their pain, not as an outsider and a stranger, but as an insider and a neighbour. And this costs the self, in time, in emotional energy, and, even, in resources. Compassion is, therefore, a deeply personal response to a calling: it calls on us to invest our freedom, and it requires us to give of ourselves

for the sake of the other. It is a journey that is freely chosen from power to poverty; it cannot be forced by another or even by the self. Much of life is lived in the other direction: we go, or at least we strive to go, from poverty to power. The element of freedom is essential here. Otherwise, it could be abusive of the self. It cannot be foisted upon us in any manner, including the manipulation of a moralizing discourse. We must choose to respond from the depths of our own freedom. Compassion is not a declaration of sympathy for someone else, but a reaching out and being present to and with someone: it is a person-to-person encounter, a heart-to-heart.

THE HEART AND SOLIDARITY

Whereas the mind separates and isolates, the heart draws together and unifies. It is the organ of solidarity: it spontaneously realizes that we belong together and, therefore, tends to join us together and strives towards unity. The opposite of compassion is indifference, which creates distance and, eventually, division. It also fosters the sentiment of fear: fear of the other, fear of the future, and fear, even, of the self. Through the dynamic of compassion, the heart is directed to ‘togetherness,’ to unity, and to community in a real, living, supportive sense. It is really our hearts that bring us together. And even if compassion is not natural, it can grow in us, and this is one crucial way that the heart grows and develops. You can become a compassionate person; but, usually, if not always, this requires a real conversion (of mind). It means that as your heart grows, your life takes on a whole new horizon, a new set of values, and a different colour. The poet William Thompson Bacon observes in one of his poems that ‘all our actions take their hues from the complexion of the heart, as landscapes their variety from light.’⁹

Compassion is an essential mark – perhaps the only real sign – of Christian community and living. If compassion is not at the heart of a community, then, really, it cannot claim to be Christian. It is, rather, a group of another kind. Compassion is creative and it is redemptive in the sense that new life always flows from the compassionate encounter. In the competitive encounter, there is an exchange: whereby one gains and the other loses. This is not so with compassion: in the compassionate encounter both persons grow and are nourished in the exchange. It preserves both lives fully; it does not countenance any hierarchy of one life over another. Compassion, intrinsically, unites us and, thereby, creates and sustains community. And it does this, importantly, not by

9 William Thompson Bacon, ‘Thoughts in Solitude,’ in *Poems* (Boston: Weeks and Jordan, 1837), 16. This quotation is more often mistakenly attributed to the philosopher Francis Bacon or even to the homonymous artist.

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destroying difference (and creating uniformity), but by creating solidarity. It promotes life, on both sides of difference.

A community that is grounded in compassion is always ready and willing to extend its boundaries, to include the other, and to welcome the stranger. This can be done responsibly only through conversation, connection and companionship. These conversations take place within and on the boundary of any such community. When we erect walls and close doors we undermine something of our own integrity and reduce our interaction with others to the law of the competitive life. When you build a wall to keep ‘others’ out, you build a second wall through your own heart. For the Dalai Lama, ‘Compassion is not religious business, it is human business, it is not luxury, it is essential for our own peace and mental stability, it is essential for human survival.’¹⁰ In a similar vein Pope Francis remarks: ‘Mercy is the true force that can save humanity.’¹¹

THE HEART AND HUMAN DARKNESS

It is very important to underline that being compassionate (as I’m exploring it) is not in any way a matter of seeking out suffering as an end in itself. That would be highly dysfunctional and has nothing to do with compassion in its healthy form. Neither is an overbearing mawkishness in the face of the tragedies of life. Healthy compassion is about recognising and realizing that my humanity is a shared humanity, and that, as such, another’s vulnerability is, in a sense, my vulnerability too because of that shared humanity. I am, therefore, prepared to *honour my own humanity as a shared humanity*, where another’s suffering or pain is recognized to be a concern of mine. Henry Nouwen states it well when he observes: ‘It is of crucial importance to see the Christian life as a life that witnesses to the compassionate God by servanthood, and not as a life in which we go morbidly after suffering and pain.’¹² It is vital never to glorify or romanticize poverty or another’s suffering; on the contrary, there is a responsibility on us together to do whatever is possible in alleviating it.

When it comes to the darkest places of the human condition, it is only a *developed* heart that can really withstand the intensity of human pain so as to be a healing presence there. And, really, you should not go there, so to speak, unless you know, clearly, that your heart has such a capacity. The more developed that your heart is, the more robust and the more resilient that you are in the face of the tragedies of our common humanity. You become capable (with the help of grace) of withstanding, and even of inhabiting,

10 Dalai Lama on Twitter, 13 March 2015 (accessed 22 September, 2016).

11 Pope Francis, *The Joy of Discipleship: Reflections from Pope Francis on Walking with Christ* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2016), 38.

12 Nouwen, *Ministry and Spirituality: Compassion*, 40.

the darkness of our world; and, without being overwhelmed by it, *you can simply become a redemptive presence there*. In this way God can work among us. A well-developed heart rejects no one because it has no need to reject anyone. It can gently accompany others in their vulnerability, in their distress, in their pain, in their abjection, in their destruction (without, for all that, being in any way naïve as to the devastation to which they may be responding). The developed heart, so-to-speak, is self-insulated from the need to reject, from the despair of succumbing, and from the desire to determine the future. And it is not influenced or inflected by a disabling fear. Even in dangerous situations it can maintain a healthy, calm and wise equilibrium. What all this amounts to is affirming that to be a powerful healing presence in terms of our shared humanity, you need to have good clear head and a vibrant developed heart.

It is only those who have healthy developed hearts in this sense, who can really be effective in terms of healing the darkness of the human condition. In difficult and socially challenging situations: such as centres that deal with addiction, prisons, neglected urban residential areas with significant community problems, in scenarios of family breakdown, of serious dysfunction around young people, etc., it is they who are the most effective in finding a path to healing and in enabling that healing. Precisely because of their own developed humanity, they can withstand and accompany the darkness, the dysfunction, and the dread that invades and colonizes so much of human life.

This is not, however, in any way, to denigrate the value of competent minds that search out solutions in dealing with difficult human situations. Strategies, organisations, planning, especially at communal, regional, and political levels, are extremely important; but this does not accompany directly the pain of human life in a healing encounter. Giving, for example, a young teenager ‘community service’ to deal with the issue of delinquency may be an excellent response, but, on its own, it will not heal his or her heart, if it has been seriously damaged by life’s experiences. Social policy, political action, and juridical declarations can only go so far (and this, in every sense, such as resources, etc). They solve problems (which is a good thing); but they do not heal human beings. This can only be achieved through the companionship of the heart; and to provide that, one needs a developed or, at least, a developing heart. We desperately need such developed hearts in our culture: we need hearts that can readily and without rancour accompany those trapped in cycles of low self-esteem, violence, addiction, delinquency, homelessness, and so on. And we need it, too, of course, in our ordinary human exchanges.

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It is worth remarking that if your heart has been seriously wounded through your family of origin, by a relationship, by an addiction, by poor health, and so on, it is vital that you find, and learn to find, the path towards healing of that woundedness for yourself. All healing is inherently spiritual in the sense that it involves your whole person. All healing is a matter of body, mind, and spirit. And it is through the spirit that the heart is eminently healed. And sometimes it is most important that you attend to your own journey of healing before you reach out to another's. But sometimes, it is in attending to the other that your own heart is healed. Compassion brings us closer too to the vulnerability of our neighbour, and, in doing so, brings us equally closer to our own vulnerability and brokenness. Yet this very journey is always, already, a healing one. All human beings are vulnerable; indeed, the most awe-inspiring form of vulnerability, the one that we most often repress in our culture, is our vulnerability to the divine. It terrifies most of us. Yet, the more that we acknowledge, accept, and search to assuage our own vulnerability the closer we come to others, and the closer we are to our God. And these go hand-in-hand.

THE EXPANSION OF THE SELF

God's compassion is revealed to us as a kind of paradox that totally inverts the dynamic of competition and power-over-others. We see this eminently in the person of Jesus who, as it says in Philippians 2:6-8, 'emptied himself and took the form of a servant.' It means that for the Christian mind and heart we are redeemed or freed by someone who became powerless; we find our strength in someone who willingly became weak; we find life through someone who surrendered radically and totally to death; and we find a leader in someone who became a servant. These inversions are not irrational contradictions, but, rather, permit us to penetrate deeper into the fabric of life. They lead to fullness, not to emptiness: that is their promise. And all of this can be known only through experience. It is not a process of the mind; rather, it is a journey of your whole person, mind and heart. It surrenders or gives up the luxury of distance from and of power-over others. It is a path of self-emptying, of making space, and of walking humbly. It is not responding to the underprivileged from a place of privilege; it is not a gesture of sympathy, or of piety, or of virtue, or of benevolence towards the less fortunate (however praiseworthy all these might be). Rather it is a real journey into the depths of our shared humanity to be with others and to make place freely and responsibly for them. In short, it is a way of being-in-the-world. The crucial insight is that you cannot return to where you were at the outset of the journey. It is to risk surrendering and trusting your

life to whomsoever might call to you. It requires a certain humility in the face of the immensity of life. In the letter of St Peter we read: 'wrap yourselves in humility to be servants of each other' (Peter 5:5).

Although it might appear to be contradictory, it is important to affirm that this is not a depletion of your self; rather, *it is an expansion of the self*. It is an expansion, however, that cannot be forced. The journey itself is a gift. It cannot be demanded by anyone. It requires a development and a maturity of heart that permits one to inhabit confidently and in great peace the breadth and the depth of the human condition. It is the full realization that in giving, you do, indeed, receive (see Luke 6:38). Your life is genuinely enriched in terms of fulfilment and in terms of density of meaning. It is a choice for the depths of life over the shallower waters of aggressive competition, of unbridled consumption, and of unfettered individualism. It is the initial, apparent risk that goes with taking up such a journey in life that is daunting. Once you begin to realize its truth, you would not want to go back.

Not only that, but also this journey is an expression of your own journey into God and not simply an expression of your desire to change or alleviate the situation of others. And, indeed, it is worth paying attention for a moment to the opposite direction, where the very desire to reach out to others may, itself, be an expression of our most intimate relationship with God: these two relationships, with God and with our neighbour, cannot (because of the incarnation) be considered independently of one another. This is why a non-believer may lead a deeply rich (and even spiritual) interior life without there ever being any explicit acknowledgement of God.

DEVELOPED HEART AS GIFT

Directly or indirectly, the call to compassion always comes from the outside, from somebody else, from the Other. It is the *response* to this call that is rooted in the self. All compassion has an enormous capacity to be redemptive, to be healing. This is particularly so when it is rooted and lived out in grace (i.e. in a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ). The compassionate self responds in a nurturing way to the other. You become a more wholesome person because your heart is alive and you have the capacity to connect deeply with another. In fact you could say, with Emmanuel Levinas, the French Jewish philosopher, that you are called to be the person that you are by the other, by the person who knocks on your door. You are called to be your self, to take up that place that is yours, and that no one else can fill. It is only when you take up your place fully in the position of responding, that you discover who your really are. In this way, you in fact receive

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your own life! And you realize that it is indeed a gift, not just at the beginning, but also throughout every year, every week, every day, and every hour. In a way your growth in selfhood and humanity depends on your response to this call of compassion or mercy. It is here and in this way that you are invited to grow.

And yet, we cannot, ultimately, become compassionate on our own: it is not just our achievement. It is itself a gift. But we can desire it; we can begin the journey towards being compassionate; and we can, already, respond in certain circumstances in a compassionate way to whatever or to whomever we encounter in life. Nouwen writes:

Only God himself, who is not in competition with us, who is the wholly Other, only he could enter into total *solidarity* with us. Jesus is the full, most perfect, expression of this unconditional divine compassion. Our real concern, therefore, is not to acquire compassion on our own by some special type of personal effort, but to become a manifestation of God's compassion by the way we unite our life to that of Jesus.¹³

Le me finish with a poem by Paul Murray.

O MERCIFUL ONE

When without hope, without aim,
we find ourselves turning and turning
on the outermost rim
of the circumference of our own lives –

When our hearts are cold, our mind
no longer open to the conviction
of the unseen
or to the sources of that conviction –

When words which were fiery
once, electrifying the mind and heart,
now seem but a mimicry of
flame, a dazzle of frozen sparks,

Burn us with your flame of truth,
with your word of love.¹⁴

¹³ Nouwen, *Ministry and Spirituality: Compassion*, 66.

¹⁴ See Paul Murray, *Scars: Essays, Poems and Meditations on Affliction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 114.