

## PRAYER FOCUS FOR MONTH OF MAY 2017

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### *COMPASSION and CONTEMPLATION*



We can learn much about compassion from the great medieval saint, Francis of Assisi. Francis broke down barriers between rich and poor and made the love of God available to all. In her book "Compassion - Living in the Spirit of St Francis" Ilia Delio OSF speaks of compassion as 'a way of being in relationship with another that accepts the other in his or her weakness and responds to the needs of the person with mercy'. (i) She describes compassion as a quality which flourishes when we have nothing to protect and everything to share.

This quality of compassion is well illustrated in the story of the 'Wolf of Gubbio' which tells of the time when St Francis went out of the town to tame the wolf that was terrorising the townspeople.

The story of the saint and the wolf is that the wolf terrorized the inhabitants of the small Italian town. Not only did the wolf kill and devour livestock but it began to attack and devour humans. All attempts to kill the wolf failed and the people of the town would literally shut the town down in fear whenever the wolf would appear. Saint Francis heard of this and decided to go and meet the wolf. The huge wolf rushed toward Francis as soon as he saw the saint approaching his lair. Francis made the sign of the cross and commanded the wolf in the name of God to stop his terrorizing of the town. Immediately, the wolf became docile before the saint. Francis went on to condemn the wolf for his attacks not just on animals but upon men and women who are made in the image of

God. Francis told the wolf that if he ended his attacks he would see to it that the inhabitants of Gubbio would provide him with the food he needed. The story goes that the wolf placed his paw in Francis' hand in agreement. Francis then walked the docile wolf back into the main square of Gubbio to the astonishment of the inhabitants and there reiterated the promise. Again the wolf placed his paw in the saint's hand in agreement. The saint had tamed the wolf. (ii)

Just like St Francis, we too live in a world in need of mercy and compassion. It is significant that Francis went to meet the wolf in the wolf's own territory. He went out to tame the wolf, not destroy it. He showed understanding and compassion for the plight of the wolf. In his interaction with the wolf Francis reflected God's love for the wolf and for all creatures. And most importantly, Francis was prepared to let go of his own need for safety and control in his life and enter the wolf's territory. Perhaps one of our greatest challenges as women and men of mercy is to respond to the invitation to leave our safe place and travel into the 'territory' of the other whoever they may be.

Pope Francis gives us a similar invitation in his words "Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognise that we are compelled to heed their cry for help. May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity." (iii)

We can be encouraged by the compassion and simplicity of St Francis as well as that of Pope Francis. They both call us to constantly seek out new ways of being in relationship with all creatures and all of creation. This is the path of compassion that will enable us to move beyond the cycle of violence in our world.

**Dear God,**

**We pray for another way of being:  
another way of knowing.**

**Across the difficult terrain of our existence  
we have attempted to build a highway  
and in so doing have lost our footpath.  
God lead us to our footpath:  
Lead us there where in simplicity  
we may move at the speed of natural creatures  
and feel the earth's love beneath our feet.  
Lead us there where step-by-step we may feel  
the movement of creation in our hearts.  
And lead us there where side-by-side**

we may feel the embrace of the common soul.  
Nothing can be loved at speed.

God lead us to the slow path; to the joyous insights  
of the pilgrim; another way of knowing: another way of being.

Amen.

(Michael Leunig) (iv)

- i Ilia Delio OSF, 2011, Compassion, Living in the Spirit of St. Francis.
- ii ([www.wordonfire.org/resources/blog/st-francis](http://www.wordonfire.org/resources/blog/st-francis))
- iii Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, Misericordiae Vultus, 15).
- iv Michael Leunig, 1993, Common Prayer Collection.



What is the pathway to compassion? How do we develop the kind of compassion which St Francis showed to the wolf of Gubbio? In her reflections on the life of St Francis of Assisi, Ilia Delio describes compassion as a heart-to-heart encounter where compassion flows from the human heart. She states that "compassion is not a rational conclusion to a problem . . . rather it is an act of love beyond what the mind can comprehend." (i) She says that the heart must be able to see what may be blind to the physical eye.

Similarly, Antoine de Saint-Exupery in his book 'The Little Prince' says that only with the heart can one see rightly - what is essential is invisible to the eye. (ii) As long as we fill up every part of our lives, making them busy with all that we do and all that we have, we are not allowing spaciousness of heart to see what is essential in our relationship with God and with all of God's creation.

We can create spaciousness of heart through contemplation. Contemplation can then be understood as 'vision of the heart' where we let go of seeing and interpreting life with our rational minds and develop the capacity to see with our hearts.

Richard Rohr suggests that such a letting go of our own small vantage point is so counter to ego consciousness that it has to be directly taught. . . . The contemplative mind, which is really prayer itself, is not subject to a mere passing on of objective information. *It must be practised and learned, just like playing the piano or basketball.* (iii)

The following process is one way of developing the practice of contemplative prayer -

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When engaged with your thoughts [including body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections], return ever so gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

The process of Centering Prayer is a 'pathway of return' in which every time the mind is released from engagement with a specific idea or impression, we move from a smaller and more constricted consciousness into an open, diffuse awareness in which our presence to divine reality makes itself known along a whole different pathway of perception. It can be understood as the capacity to perceive things from the heart and to come into sympathetic resonance with them. (iv)

This practice of Contemplation and Centering Prayer is our pathway to compassion.

- i Ilia Delio OSF, 2011, Compassion, Living in the Spirit of St. Francis, p70.
- ii Antoine de Saint-Exupery, 1946, The Little Prince.
- iii Richard Rohr Online Meditations, 2017, Prayer as Surrender.
- iv Cynthia Bourgeault, Richard Rohr Online Meditations, 2017, Prayer as Surrender.