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Sharing Others' Feelings

Empathy, the ability to share in other people's feelings, is very important for learning to love as Christ did. A new article in the series on forging a Christian personality.

03/10/2016

We have all had the experience that simply being told dry facts often fails to satisfy our desire to fully grasp what is going on in the world. For example, someone who plays a piece of music to entertain friends surely

hopes that they will enjoy listening to it as much as he or she does in playing it. But if the friends listening simply say that the musical piece has been well executed, without showing the slightest enthusiasm, then the likely result will be discouragement.

How many problems could be avoided if we truly tried to understand better others' feelings, their expectations and ideals.

“Charity consists not so much in giving as in understanding.”[1] The first requirement of charity is recognizing in the other person someone worthy of consideration and placing ourselves in that person's circumstances. The word “empathy” is often used to refer to the ability to put oneself in other people's shoes, taking stock of their situation and being aware of their sentiments. Joined to charity, this attitude fosters communion, the union of hearts. As Saint Peter

exhorted: *think the same thoughts, all of you, and share the same feelings.*[2]

Learning from Christ

Right from the start the disciples experienced how sensitive Christ was to those around him: his ability to put himself in the place of others, his refined understanding of what was going on inside the human heart, his sensitivity to the suffering of others. On reaching Nain, without a word being spoken, he realizes the heartbreak of the widow who has lost her only son.[3] On hearing Jairus' petition and the laments of the mourners, he brings consolation to the first and calm to the others.[4] He is aware of the needs of those following him and is concerned when they have nothing to eat.[5] He cries with Martha and Mary before Lazarus' tomb,[6] and becomes indignant at his followers' hardness of heart when they want to call down

fire from heaven upon the Samaritan village that refused to receive them.
[7]

By his life Jesus teaches us to see others in a different way, to share their feelings and accompany them in their hopes and disappointments. We learn from him to take an interest in the interior world of those around us, and with the help of grace we gradually overcome defects that make it hard for us to do so, such as distraction, impulsiveness or coldness. There is no excuse for giving up in this effort. “Remember that even if your virtues seem saintly, they are worth nothing if they are not united to the ordinary Christian virtues.”[8] Being close to our Lord’s Heart will help mould our own heart and fill it with the sentiments of Christ Jesus.

Charity, affability and empathy

“The charity of Christ is not merely a benevolent sentiment for our neighbor; it is not limited to a penchant for philanthropy. Poured out in our soul by God, charity transforms from within our mind and will. It provides the supernatural foundation for friendship and the joy of doing what is right.”[9] It is moving to see how the apostles, through their close relationship with our Lord, learn to moderate their quite diverse temperaments, which sometimes had led them to fail to show compassion towards others. John, so vehement that he merited with his brother James the nickname “son of thunder,” later saw his heart filled with meekness and insisted on the need to open our heart to our neighbor and give ourselves to others as Christ did: *By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.*[10] Saint Peter, who also had shown harshness towards

Christ's adversaries in the past, addresses the people in the Temple with words devoid of any rancor, seeking their conversion: *And now brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers . . . Repent, therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.*[11]

We see another example in Saint Paul. After being a fierce scourge to Christians, he converts and places at the service of the Gospel his clear mind and strong character. In Athens, although his heart is indignant at seeing so many idols, he strives to empathize with the inhabitants. When he has occasion to address them on the Areopagus, instead of taking them to task for their paganism and depraved morals, he appeals to their hunger for God: *"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For*

as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”[12] In the Apostle Paul's ability to understand and inspire others, we see a person who can integrate and moderate his emotions. He shows the cordiality needed to grasp the situation others are in and focus on a perhaps quite small but positive aspect of their mentality, in order to connect with his hearers, capture their interest and lead them to the fullness of the truth.

Paths towards loving the truth

In trying to help others, charity and kindness will guide us to the “reasons of the heart” that often open the doors of the soul more easily than do cold and distant arguments. God's love spurs us to take on an affable way of being that

shows others the attractiveness of Christian life: “true virtue is not sad and repulsive, but pleasantly joyful.”[13] We learn to discover positive aspects in each person, since loving the truth entails recognizing God’s footprints, however faint, in others’ hearts.

In dealing with friends, work colleagues and relatives, charity leads us to show understanding towards those who are disorientated, at times because they have not had the opportunity to receive good formation in the faith, or because that have not met a person incarnating the authentic Gospel message. Thus empathy is possible even when others are in error. “I do not understand violence. I do not consider it a proper way either to persuade or to win over. Error is overcome by prayer, by God’s grace, and by study; never by force, always with charity.”[14] We have to speak

the truth with unfailing patience, *veritatem facientes in caritate*,^[15] accompanying those who may be confused, but who over time can open themselves to the action of grace. As Pope Francis said, “Often it is better simply to slow down, to put aside our eagerness in order to see and listen to others, to stop rushing from one thing to another and to remain with someone who has faltered along the way. At times we have to be like the father of the prodigal son, who always keeps his door open so that when the son returns, he can readily pass through it.”^[16]

Apostolate and communion of sentiments

Some people could try to reduce empathy to a simple strategy, as though it were a technique used to sell a consumer product, to make people think it is just what they were

looking for. Although this might be valid in a commercial context, interpersonal relations follow a different logic. Authentic empathy requires sincerity and is incompatible with behavior that masks self-interest.

Sincerity is vital in seeking to make our Lord known to those around us. By making our own the sentiments of the people God has placed at our side, we will have the refined charity needed to share in each one's joy and sorrow. *Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?*^[17] What sincere affection is reflected in these words of Saint Paul to the Christians at Corinth. It is easier for truth to open a pathway when we share in others' sentiments, because a current of affection, of cordiality, is opened that reinforces communication. The soul becomes more receptive to the advice received, especially if a

constructive comment is made that encourages growth in that person's spiritual life.

“Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders.”[18] When we listen attentively we get involved intimately in the lives of others. We seek to help the other person discern the specific steps God is asking of them at this particular moment. And when others sense that their situation, opinions and sentiments are respected, and even shared in by the one listening, they open the eyes of their soul to contemplate the splendor of truth, the attractiveness of virtue.

In contrast, indifference to others is a serious illness for an apostolic soul. We cannot be distant from those around us: “People who think you are unpleasant will stop thinking that when they realize you really love them. It is up to you.”^[19] Our words filled with understanding, our small deeds of service, our friendly conversation reflect a sincere interest in the welfare of the people beside us. We will learn how to win the affection of others, opening the door to a friendship that shares with them the marvelous reality of dealing closely with God.

Encouraging others to set out

Pope Francis went on to say that “someone good at such accompaniment does not give in to frustrations or fears. He or she invites others to let themselves be healed, to take up their mat, embrace the cross, leave all behind and go

forth ever anew to proclaim the Gospel.”[20] On getting to know the weaknesses of others, we will also learn how to encourage them not to give in to conformity, to widen their horizons so that they continue aspiring to reach the goal of sanctity.

By acting in this way we will follow our Lord’s example, being very understanding while also making affectionate demands on people. On Easter Sunday afternoon, when walking beside the disciples from Emmaus, Jesus asked them: *what where you talking about amongst yourselves on the way?*[21] He lets them unburden themselves of the disillusion weighing on their hearts and the difficulty they had in believing Jesus had really returned to life, as the holy women had testified. Only then does our Lord explain to them the meaning of what has happened: *Was it not necessary that*

the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?[22]

What must Jesus' conversation have been like, how much must his words have eased the worries of the disciples from Emmaus, for them to say at the end: *stay with us*[23]? And they do so despite the fact that initially he reproached them for their inability to grasp what the prophets had announced.[24] Perhaps it was his tone of voice, his affectionate look, that made them feel welcomed, but at the same time invited them to change. With God's grace our dealings with others will also show appreciation for each person, a real understanding of what is going on in each one's heart, thus encouraging them to set out on the path of Christian life.

[1] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 463.

[2] *1Pet* 3:8.

[3] Cf. *Lk* 7:11-17.

[4] Cf. *Lk* 8:40-56; *Mt* 9:18-26.

[5] Cf. *Mt* 15:32.

[6] Cf. *Jn* 11:35.

[7] Cf. *Lk* 9:51-56.

[8] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 409.

[9] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 71.

[10] *1 Jn* 3:16.

[11] *Acts* 3:17,19-20.

[12] *Acts* 17:23.

[13] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 657.

[14] Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 44.

[15] *Eph* 4:15.

[16] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 46.

[17] *2 Cor* 11:29.

[18] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 171.

[19] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 734.

[20] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 172.

[21] *Lk* 24:17.

[22] *Lk* 24:26.

[23] *Lk* 24:29.

[24] Cf. *Lk* 24:25.

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(06/23/2025)