

Moved by Compassion

*Exploring the Core of
Orthodox Christian Spiritual Life*



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Extended Abstract

Why should we care about being compassionate? To provide a response to this very practical question, I explore the meaning, nature, and role of compassion in Orthodox Christian spiritual life: everyday life animated by the grace of the Holy Spirit and our love for Christ and his Father. The book focuses on examining the expression of compassion in worship—especially the Divine Liturgy and the hymns of the Church—Holy Scripture, and Patristic and other Orthodox Christian writings. Works outside this tradition supplement my investigation.

I have not developed a strictly ‘theoretical’ or historical analysis of compassion or a “guidebook” for showing compassion in specific situations. Rather, interweaving philosophical and theological investigation together with pastoral and moral concerns, I have sought to layout the Orthodox Christian framework or worldview for understanding the dynamics of being moved by compassion and the vital role it plays in Orthodox Christian spiritual life and human life generally. This work is the first major study devoted to the nature and purpose of compassion within the Orthodox Christian Tradition.

The book begins with a brief introduction which develops the basic methodology for the book. In Chapter 2, I attend to the language we use to talk about compassion and at least sketch some similarities and differences between compassion and various phenomena such as empathy, sympathy, pity, mercy, and justice. I also discuss the notions of *splanchna* (“bowels” or viscera) and *kardia* (heart) since compassion in the Orthodox Christian Tradition is related in a basic way to the “bowels” or viscera as well as to the heart, understood as the holistic center of our human reality.

As the celebration of and participation in the Eucharist is at the center of Orthodox Christian religious experience and life, I devote Chapter 3 to some of the key texts of the Divine (i.e., Eucharistic) Liturgy that emphasize the manner in which God’s compassion is imparted in the Liturgy. This provides the background for discussing the nature of God’s compassion as manifest in the Old Testament and, through Christ, in the New Testament. I also reflect on a set of gospel texts that are read before Great Lent to provide a discussion of the fundamental role of compassion in Christian life and repentance: what is often called the “liturgy after the liturgy.”

In Chapter 4, I discuss references to compassion in an array of the hymns of the church. These hymns, many of which are quite ancient, beautifully express the lived theology or experience of compassion in the Church. I focus on the hymns commemorating the compassion of Christ, the Theotokos and selected saints, as well as hymns that enjoin us to care for others for their sake.

Chapters 2 through 4 provide a number of key clues that provide the basis in Chapter 5 for developing the nature and role of compassion in human life in a more systematic manner. This chapter sets forth the nature of compassion as a disposition and a virtue that belongs to us by

nature. Grounded in the heart, being moved by compassion arises from an alert sensitivity to suffering that bears with and cares for others for their sake. Animated by a thoroughgoing neighborliness, hospitality, and spirit of fellowship and solidarity with others, in compassion, we holistically affirm others in their humanity as unique persons in community with others and never supports denigrating or marginalizing judgments and actions. Compassion is perfected through humility, dispassion, and a radical acceptance of our human condition: its intrinsic honor and weakness or vulnerability.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I offer some observations about the relation between compassion and justice and the possible limits to compassionate action in confronting people who do harmful things. At its core, compassion directs us to an irenic or peaceful, non-violent resistance to evil.

Throughout the course of the book, I aim to show that in the Orthodox Christian Tradition:

- The compassion of God—the Trinity—and Christ fundamentally shapes their presence to creation. In his Incarnation, Christ radically unites divine and human compassion. The Orthodox Christian identification of Christ as the good Samaritan, from the parable of the good Samaritan, fundamentally captures the nature and purpose of compassion that animates the entire event of his Incarnation.
- Rooted in our nature, the capacity for compassion belongs to all people and is developed and perfected, with God’s grace, in our lifelong journey of repentance in which we aim to become living icons of Christ: out of our love for Christ and our imitation of the compassion he shows to us, we orient ourselves to the world to care for others for their own sake—loving others as Christ loves us.
- Human compassion is not simply an emotion but, as I noted above, a fundamental virtuous disposition. In particular, compassion plays a vital role in overcoming many toxic passions and attitudes that poison our hearts and undermine our relationships with others and with God, especially those passions and attitudes by which we denigrate, stigmatize, and marginalize others. In particular, I show that compassion is fundamentally different from the condescending pity that characterizes the modern sense of pity.
- In imitation of Christ, compassion is vital to our responsibility to face the world and live for others as an integral part of our liturgy after the liturgy. In particular, compassion is not simply a matter of “charity” or mercy but is fundamentally linked with individual and collective efforts to promote justice: personal, social, and institutional. At its core, compassion directs us to an irenic, or peaceful, non-violent resistance to evil.

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