

# Be Compassionate as your Father is Compassionate: Avoiding the Pitfalls of Compassion

*Marek Duran*\*

ABSTRACT: In her book *Memoir of Mary Ann*, Flannery O'Connor captured well the current cultural milieu when she wrote: "In the absence of faith, we govern by tenderness, and tenderness leads to the gas chamber." In our Western societies, most of the human atrocities are done in the name of compassion. We should, however, ask ourselves: "are we good simply because we feel good?" (AL 145). The aim of this essay is to salvage compassion as a basis for a Christian ethos. As Johan Baptist Metz puts it, in a world that looks for consolation "compassion unto God" is a double provocation. It is the clearest sign of God's existence as existence "for us" as well as a sign of a mature faith. I will argue, based on the teaching of Abraham Joshua Heschel who defines a prophet as the "incarnation of God's passion" that compassion is a modality of life within the realm of the covenant. Every Christian baptized into Christ stands on the side of the weak ones to witness the value of human life as well as to the power of God's love.

SOME YEARS AGO, Michael Schooyans wrote a lengthy essay entitled *The Pitfalls of Compassion* that caused quite a stir in the Vatican.<sup>1</sup> According

---

\* *Rev. Marek Duran*, S.T.D., is Assistant Professor in the Department of Moral Theology at University of St. Mary of the Lake, where he also earned his M.Div. and S.T.L. He was ordained a Catholic priest by Francis Cardinal George on May 22, 2004. In 2014 he defended his doctoral dissertation: "My Neighbor and His Wounds: Compassion and the Objective Knowledge of Good: Conversation with Martha Nussbaum and Edith Stein" at Pontificio Istituto Giovanni Paulo II in Rome. He is a certified spiritual director through the Institute for Priestly Formation and a member of the Society of Christian Ethics as well as the Academy of Catholic Theology. Before studying in Rome, he served as an associate pastor at St. Mary Star of the Sea parish in Chicago and at Our Lady of Perpetual Help parish in Glenview.

<sup>1</sup> M. Schooyans, "The Pitfalls of Compassion," available at <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=11315>. The essay became grew into a book: *Sur l'affair de Recife et quelques autres: Fausse compassion et vraie désinformation* (Paris: François-Xavier de Guibert, 2010).

to Schooyans, a corrupted notion of compassion has infected modern culture, even within the Catholic Church. In our own day it exonerates the worst atrocities against the common good, including a readiness to sacrifice mankind for the sake of the environment, to protect pedophiles, to distribute “contraceptive packs,” to recognize homosexual unions, and to promote euthanasia. Such crimes are sometimes defended and even promoted as human rights rather than being considered so egregious as to cry out for divine retribution.

In 1962, the Assizes Court in Liège (Belgium) was called upon to judge a rather unusual case. A mother was put on trial for killing her new-born baby. Why did she commit this act? She claimed that she did it out of compassion. During her pregnancy, she fell ill with cancer and was given a drug called Thalidomide. As a side-effect of the drug, her baby was seriously malformed. Commiserating over her baby’s future, she decided to kill her own child. After her acquittal, the woman left the court to public applause. Schooyans’s example might seem rather ancient history, except for the fact that we recently saw a cheering crowd greeting the governor of New York after he signed its liberalized abortion law.

In light of such atrocities done in the name of compassion we need to ask whether compassion should be repudiated? Augustine raised this question in the *Confessions*. Yet, even while noticing the dangers, he exclaimed, “By no means.”<sup>2</sup> The proper understanding of compassion is critical for the Church’s own self-understanding. In every liturgy, she echoes the cry of the chosen people for compassion: *Kyrie eleison*.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the Church situates compassion at the center of Christian living, especially in its spousal dimension.<sup>4</sup> Christian spouses are called to love in good times and in bad, and especially in difficult times are called to be compassionate to one another. As Johann Baptist Metz puts it, in a world that looks for consolation, “compassion unto God” is a double provocation. It is the clearest sign of God’s love “for us” as well as of maturity of faith when anyone stands on the side of the weak so

---

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 3.21: “*Repudietur ergo misericordia? Nequaquam.*”

<sup>3</sup> See Edith School, “Mercy within Mercy: *Misericordia and Miseria*,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 42/1 (2007): 66.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2010). She presents compassion as a special form of *maritalis affectio*.

as to give witness to the value of human life as well as to the power of God's love.<sup>5</sup>

In this essay I would like to outline a poignant version of compassion developed by Martha Nussbaum<sup>6</sup> and to contrast it with the notion of compassion found in Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Prophets*.<sup>7</sup> I chose these authors for five reasons. First, both of them are believing Jews. Second, both are accomplished scholars. Third, they both consider emotions as indispensable for understanding human beings. Fourth, both Nussbaum and Heschel consider insensitivity as a crucial problem of our age. Finally, they both see compassion as the source of human and divine involvement.

#### Nussbaum's Account of Compassion

According to Nussbaum, emotions are value-laden judgments. As judgments, emotions are thus not diametrically opposed to rationality. In fact, she sees them as belonging to the heart of it. Among the evaluative judgments that make up a given emotion, the most important one is what Nussbaum calls "eudaimonistic judgment." Eudaimonistic judgment is a judgment about the salience of external things for one's own flourishing. For Nussbaum, emotions are a subclass of desire. Their ethical relevance must be evaluated on the basis of the judgments about some good that is at stake. Although Nussbaum does not use the terminology of "intrinsic evil" that is typical of Catholic moral theology, she does hold that some emotions are inherently corrupted and irredeemable and that society should rid itself of them as completely as possible. She regards disgust, for instance, as such an emotion. On the other hand, there are also emotions that are ethically commendable, such as compassion, and some that are ambiguous like shame. Emotions provide a means of connection among all living beings with an animal nature. For human

---

<sup>5</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, "Suffering Unto God," *Critical Inquiry* 20/4 (1994): 611-22; Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. Matthew J. Ashley (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1998); Johann Baptist Metz, *Memoria Passionis: Un ricordo provocatorio nella società pluralistica*, Biblioteca di teologia contemporanea 144 (Brescia: Queriniana, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001); *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> A.J. Heschel, *The Prophets: Two Volumes in One* (New York NY: Hendrickson 2017); hereafter Heschel, with volume and page number.

beings, emotions bear the marks of an individual's particular life-history as well as the influence of society and culture upon that individual.

For Nussbaum, compassion is not a form of love. For love to be worthy of its name, it must pass through the normative lens of compassion, reciprocity, and individuality.<sup>8</sup> Following Aristotle, Nussbaum defines compassion in terms of some evil that is suffered and of value judgments about the experience. In other words, Nussbaum takes compassion to involve value judgments about fault, size, and *eudaimonia*. The *eudaimonistic* judgment is formed on the basis of an empathetic identification or of some similar possibility. By taking the point of view of an onlooker, such judgment can avoid falling into the trap of fusion or of contagion whereby someone's suffering would only double. By means of compassion, one can recognize (1) vulnerability (one's own and that of another), (2) the evils that someone else is suffering, and (3) the social, cultural, and political circumstances that underpin these evils.

For Nussbaum, judgments of compassion are formed correctly if they protect human dignity. She strongly believes in the role played by education in the process of forming a habit of compassion. The sort of education that she thinks useful involves such narrative forms as novels, drama, music, poetry, and philosophy.

In *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* Nussbaum applies her theory of compassion to the topic of social justice. There explains that "a life of human dignity requires a threshold level of provisions to allow for the realization of each ten basic capabilities: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination, thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, play, reproductive health, and control over one's environment."<sup>9</sup> A life that manifests at least a basic level of these ten capabilities would be considered worthy because the being will function in a "natural way." For her, the burden of providing these essential needs falls upon social institutions and government, even to the point of using coercion. Nussbaum strongly criticizes various theories of social contract for disqualifying people with severe mental disabilities from fully participating in society: "Justice for people with

---

<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, pp. 478-79.

<sup>9</sup> J. Chambers, "A Book Review of *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* by Martha Nussbaum" in *Philosophy Now*, available at: [https://philosophynow.org/issues/60/Frontiers\\_of\\_Justice\\_Disability\\_Nationality\\_Species\\_Membership\\_by\\_Martha\\_Nussbaum](https://philosophynow.org/issues/60/Frontiers_of_Justice_Disability_Nationality_Species_Membership_by_Martha_Nussbaum).

disabilities should include whatever special arrangements are required for them to lead a dignified life, and the work of caring for them should be socially recognized, fairly distributed, and fairly compensated.”<sup>10</sup>

Nussbaum’s account of compassion is compelling in many respects, and it makes a substantial contribution to the discussion of emotions, vulnerability, education, and human nature. The stress she gives to compassion renders her ethical theory superior to the theories based on utilitarian principles and on the calculation of rational self-interest. Nonetheless, her account suffers from three significant problems.

First, Nussbaum does not define human dignity very clearly and thereby risks assigning more rights to non-human animals than to unborn children. She is completely silent on the issue of justice and compassion towards these vulnerable members of the human family, the unborn. From any fair reading of the corpus of her writings, one might safely assume that she thinks that reproductive rights trump any other claim.

Second, Nussbaum claims that human nature is generally benevolent and sufficiently motivated for the cooperation needed in the achievement of common goods. Yet she also claims that government coercion is necessary to provide for the massive redistribution of wealth and the expansion of a society’s circle of concern. Even if such coercion were successful, would it cause the betterment of the human condition or just the institutionalization of compassion? I am afraid that the second would be the case. The growth of the government that would be required would stimulate the growth of a huge bureaucratic machine and a vast army of trained professionals that, as K. Lampert puts it, would exist just for the sake of suiting the “modern conscience” and allowing the prophets to sing the praises of “moral progress.”<sup>11</sup>

Third, Nussbaum’s account of compassion involves an anthropological reductionism. The primary objects of compassion’s concerns are the evils of bodily suffering and the social, and material circumstances of life. Nussbaum presents, in a very vivid way, the human bodily condition. Our biological constitution means that we are not self-sufficient entities. Rather, we are profoundly weak and needy. Everyone is dependent on others in infancy, in old

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Khen Lampert, *Traditions of Compassion: From Religious Duty to Social Activism*, ed. J. Hick, Library of Philosophy and Religion (New York NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 123-49.

age, and when injured. Everyone gets sick from time to time. Everyone is subject to such existential plights as bodily assault, ill-treatment, illness, lack of food, lack of friends, separation from friends, physical weakness, disfigurement, immobility, absence of good prospects, ruined vacations, traffic jams, political unrest, social stratification, and so on. The material dimension of human flourishing is important. There is no doubt about it! Yet, even when we accept this broad spectrum of human calamities, there is need to make some distinctions. Isn't human life more valuable than food or clothing? Nussbaum's theory of compassion runs the risk of being a theory of "having" rather than that of "being."<sup>12</sup>

In *Christians among the Virtues* Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches ask if Nussbaum's scholarly efforts to revive Aristotelian thought inadvertently also resuscitate paganism and its decadent morality.<sup>13</sup> Their assessment is not too far fetched if one takes into account that Nussbaum has been a staunch promoter and defender of homosexual unions and the legalization of prostitution. Her notion of compassion seems open to various abuses. By comparison, a religious notion of compassion involves self-sacrificial action in imitation of God's care for the world and a call to conversion. Abraham J. Heschel makes this point in his book *The Prophets*.

#### Heschel: Compassion as the Root of *Divine Pathos*

According to Heschel, the greatest threat facing humanity is human insensitivity. We can easily we are we are "too good to be in need of supernatural guidance."<sup>14</sup> But Heschel does not fall on his swords or start complaining. Rather, he boldly proclaims the living God of Israel is faithful to his covenant. He is not apathetic or indifferent. He speaks. He acts. He calls. He feels deeply towards humanity. God is passionately involved with the world and is concerned for his creations. For Heschel, the divine *pathos* is the greatest source of hope. God's *pathos* motivates an intimate involvement in the history of creation. God freely decides to participate in human history. God has a stake

---

<sup>12</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katharine Farrer (Westminster UK: Dacre Press, 1949). See also *Gaudium et spes* §12, 14, 15, 33, and 39.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and Charles R. Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1997), pp. 70-109.

<sup>14</sup> Heschel, vol. 2, p. 15.

in the human situation, and that changes everything. Humanity is not alone. The One in whose image human beings are created chose to make us a partner in his own life. Sin, understood as alienation from God, does not occupy the center stage of Heschel's theology. God's *pathos* does. God's living care for his creation is the fundamental dynamic modality of all living things. *Pathos*, compassion, living care, belong to the essence of divinity and motivate God's involvement with the world. As Fritz Rothschild puts it, for Heschel, God is not the Unmoved Mover but rather the Most Moved Mover.<sup>15</sup>

Having presented divine *pathos* as essential to understanding God, Heschel feels obliged to purify the notion of pathos from various historical misunderstandings. According to Heschel, *pathos* is active, rational, and ethical. Divine *pathos* does not denote passivity or some disturbance of mental health. On the contrary, *pathos* means energy, motion, activity and dynamism. Pathos also involves action and commitment. It is an abiding attitude. Heschel writes: "Passion was regarded as a motive power, a spring, and an incentive. Great deeds are done by those who are filled with *ruah*, with pathos."<sup>16</sup> Heschel also stresses the interconnection of pathos and knowledge: "The heart, regarded as 'the totality of the soul as a character and operating functions,' is the seat of all inner functions, of knowledge as well as of emotion.... The mind is not a member apart is itself transformed into passion."<sup>17</sup> *Pathos* is thus also linked to ethos, motive, and norm. Heschel says that the inner law of *pathos* is the moral law. The coincidence of *pathos* and ethos has its source in God: "God is the source of justice and His pathos is ethical."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, *pathos* is always other-centered. It is not self-referential or self-contained. It is always directed outward, toward man's flourishing.

Divine pathos becomes visible and tangible in history through the prophets. They share in God's own pathos: "The fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feeling of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos, a communion with the divine consciousness which comes about through the prophet's reflection of, or participation in, the divine pathos.... Sympathy is the prophet's answer to inspiration.... Prophetic sympathy is a

---

<sup>15</sup> Fritz A. Rothschild, "Architect and Herald of a New Theology," *America* (March 10, 1973), 211.

<sup>16</sup> Heschel, vol 2, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

response to transcendent sensibility.”<sup>19</sup> The prophet thus becomes an incarnation of the *pathos* of God, of his compassionate care and concern for the world.<sup>20</sup>

Heschel’s book is significant not only for Jews but for Christians. Christians regard Jesus not only as the last and the greatest of the prophets but as that and much more. He is the Son of God, the perfect image of the Father. He not only shares the emotional life of God but his very essence. In the words of the creed, “Jesus is light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made.” Jesus in a special way reveals the heart of his Father when he embraces the outcast, scolds the self-righteous, eats with the sinners, and challenges the political establishment. Jesus’s tears and his laughter reveal the perfect congruence of his emotions with the divine *pathos*.

Christians are baptized into Christ and consequently share in His prophetic mission. Hence they must also share in the divine *pathos*, with its roots in compassion. For Christians, compassion should be a mode of living within the new and eternal covenant that Christ instituted. Christians must stand up against institutionalization, bureaucratization, and depersonalization of compassion. They must stand up and decry the separation of *ethos* and *pathos*. They must resist insensitivity and complacency.

What Haschel presented as essential to the mission of the prophets also applies to Christians. He wrote:

To us, a single act of injustice – cheating in business, exploitation of the poor – is slight; to the prophets a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us an episode, to them a catastrophe, a threat to the world.... To us life is often serene, in the prophet’s eye the world reels in confusion. The prophet makes no concession to man’s capacity. Exhibiting little understanding for human weakness, he seems unable to extenuate the culpability of man.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Heschel, vol. 1, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> Heschel’s theological project is not without its problems. Among them, the most poignant is his presentation of God as unqualified possibility. In the words of Paul L. Gavrilyuk, Heschel’s God could easily seem a “perpetual heavenly masochist.” I will not enter here into this problem. See Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Heschel, vol. 1, pp. 4, 8.



Christians need to speak, even if we are not heard. God's compassion, the good of humanity, and their self-respect demand that.

To be compassionate is a holy and praiseworthy thing. Yet, to be compassionate without putting oneself on the line is not enough. To be worthy of its name compassion must be self-sacrificial. We must put ourselves on the line. As the Council proclaims, "Christ who fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear"<sup>22</sup> also reveals to man the true meaning of compassion.

---

<sup>22</sup> *Gaudium et spes* §22.