

# Catholic Thoughts on Collaboration in Addressing Social Ills

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*I give you a new commandment: love one another.  
As I have loved you, so you also should love one another.*  
(Jn 13:14)

To love as Jesus loves is a lifelong journey of growing in compassion, love, kindness, and mercy. To care for one another, to be close to those who are poor, suffering, and marginalized, calls for the strength of meek and humble hearts. The surrender of self into the merciful mystery of Divine Love emboldens us to move in the world with compassionate hearts.

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For to have compassion, “to suffer with” another, is to long for and take action to address the social ills of our time and place in history.

The very heart of compassion is to live with deep respect for one another, to see each person as a true and unique sister or brother. There is a longing in our hearts for a world of peace, justice, and equanimity, a world that is the fruit of compassionate friendship.

“I call you friends,” Jesus says, “if you do what I command you . . . [and] because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.” (Jn 15:14–16)

Genuine collaboration, working together in a sacred and holy endeavor, is to be deeply connected in loving relationship. Jesus has shown us the way. As chosen friends of Christ, we are called to pray for, love, serve, comfort, challenge, and encourage one another. We are to “love each other with genuine affection and take delight in honoring each other” (Rom 12:10). Now is the time to step forth ever more boldly to nurture the bonds of authentic friendship that have developed in this dialogue. As people of goodwill based in love, peace, and joy, we value the ethical virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, patience, mercy, and forgiveness. Let us strive to work together as sisters and brothers in respectful service to our communities. Let us embody the deepest sense of true friendship and community to heal and reconcile our broken world.

## “Artisans of Peace”<sup>1</sup>

We, Catholics and Buddhists together, have much to offer as “artisans of peace.” We are voices united for the dignity of the human person and in the call for all to live in peace, to be treated with respect and care. We share a deep understanding of our common humanity, how we are interconnected with one another and with all of creation. We have looked deeply into suffering and how we may be free from suffering. We know that inner peace is possible and that it is the foundation for creating peace in our communities and on a planet where creation flourishes and sustains us for generations to come. Centered in compassionate friendship, we can create together a path for the cultivation of virtues that encourage lives based in love, not fear. “We work on ourselves in order to help others, but we also help others in order to work on ourselves.”<sup>2</sup>

Many of the social ills of our time in the United States reflect an individualism that keeps people isolated, longing for connection yet unable to acknowledge a deep-seated loneliness. Racism and all forms of xenophobia keep us trapped in fear. Anxiety fueled by unrelenting media reports of all that is negative translates into rising levels of stress in our daily lives. Very real problems plague our communities—crime, economic inequality that keeps people trapped in a cycle of poverty, hunger and homelessness, poor education for our children, drug addiction, lack of affordable health care, concern for our environment, a seemingly endless list. We are a people seeking a sense of safety, crying out to be seen, heard, respected, cared for, and loved. “Nothing ever goes away

until it has taught us what we need to know.”<sup>3</sup> What we need to know is that we are not alone in our hopes and dreams for a peaceful planet. Generous and loving people abound, too, in our society, people who search for those of like minds and hearts to give each other courage, lift up one another, and make a difference in the world.

## A Vision of Collaboration and Beginning Encounters

“When you love someone you want to be with them.”<sup>4</sup> Friends enjoy each other’s company, share meals and meaningful moments, have fun, and walk together in times of suffering. Buddhists and Catholics together can model the compassionate heart of friendship in action. Having returned from this dialogue, Buddhists and Catholics in Chicago are now in the process of discerning together social ills in our local communities and of opening new avenues of thought and possibility in addressing these concerns. In the “dialogue of life” and “dialogue of action” together we can become communities dedicated to compassionate service.

We envision gatherings of our combined communities to create an oasis of peace, where all are welcomed with a warm hospitality and joy that are the fruits of spiritual practice. In the “dialogue of theological exchange” we may encourage our communities to appreciate each other’s spiritual values. In the “dialogue of religious experience,” each rooted in their own tradition, we may share our spiritual riches, especially in the areas of prayer, contemplation, and meditation.

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1. Pope Francis, “To Participants in the International Meeting for Peace” (September 30, 2013).

2. Pema Chödrön, <http://www.pemachodronfoundation.org>, 2015.

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3. Ibid.

4. Jean Vanier, *The Wisdom of Tenderness*, American Public Radio, “On Being” with Krista Tippett (May 28, 2015).

Our discussions in Rome and at home in Chicago revealed a deep desire to draw upon these strengths of our traditions. Our spiritual practices develop deep inner resources that become the very foundation of peace and well-being. People transformed by spiritual practice have open hearts and minds that empower them to engage the world in transformative action. We are therefore looking to create opportunities that offer *contemplative practices as a strategy for social engagement*.

Already moving in this direction, since 2005 the Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii in Chicago, Illinois, has been developing an interreligious culture of encounter. Program foci have included cultivating the virtues of humility, forgiveness, mercy, and compassion; the study of scriptures in various religious traditions; and ways of cultivating inner peace through embodied prayer, mindful stillness, and contemplative prayer. Many of these programs have room for further growth and development. These models for future collaboration are presented below.

### The Compassionate Heart

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the rector of the Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii, Rev. Richard N. Fragomeni, Ph.D., called together a small group of Catholics to discern what might be the response of our community might to this horrific violence. A clear idea emerged that the Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii in Chicago would become known as *A Place to Pray for Peace*.

Living into this vision, over time our Shrine ministry has developed to embrace all people of faith in interreligious encounters such as The Compassionate Heart. This annual program features a lively conversation with Catholic and other Christian leaders, leaders of multiple religious traditions, and program participants.

We explore the virtue of compassion, how it is taught in different religions, and how it is lived out in daily life. A featured speaker at these programs has often been Rev. Asayo Horibe of Heartland Buddhist Sangha, Buddhist Council of the Midwest. Other religions included in The Compassionate Heart over the years have been from Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, and Diné indigenous spirituality.

In 2015 The Compassionate Heart will take place in November. Rev. Horibe will once again be with us at the Shrine as a speaker, joined by other local Buddhist leaders. We are all collaborating in the design of the program and discussing how we may share the fruits of our Vatican dialogue with members of our respective communities. The program's basic premise is that "compassion lies at the heart of a peaceful self and a peaceful world. Even amid troubled times, humanity as a whole can move toward peace. Many in our communities and the world around us are in need of our compassionate care. Together we explore simple, daily practices to cultivate compassion in our daily lives."

### Pilgrimage for the Planet

Care for creation is an integral part of Catholic Social Teaching. In *Laudato Si'*, the encyclical on the environment promulgated in July 2015, Pope Francis states, "Our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us." He adds a prayer of his namesake, St. Francis of Assisi, "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs."<sup>5</sup>

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5. *Laudatio Si'* (no. 1), footnote 1: *Canticle of the Creatures*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, Vol. 1 (New York: New City Press, 1999), 113–14.

Care for the earth is a duty of our faith and a sign of our concern for all people. We should strive to live simply to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. . . . As stewards called by God to share the responsibility for the future of the earth, we should work for a world in which people respect and protect all of creation and seek to live simply in harmony with it for the sake of future generations.<sup>6</sup>

Responding to this statement from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, in 2008 the Shrine partnered with Catholics United for the Environment and created “Pilgrimage for the Planet: A Celebration of the Feast of the Patron Saint of Ecology, St. Francis of Assisi.” This daylong retreat offered prayer and reflection on the current state of our natural world, an opportunity to reconnect with others and our life-sustaining earth, and renewal of our commitment to take care of God’s creation. Local farmers participated and spoke eloquently about their love for the earth and their understanding of the interconnectedness of all life. “Pilgrimage for the Planet” took place within the Shrine and amid the beauty of creation in Arrigo Park directly across the street.

The enthusiastic response to this retreat is an example of the depth of love for creation that lies within Catholic hearts. This love and understanding of our responsibility for creation is a place where we may collaborate with our Buddhist neighbors in a continuing call for the care for creation, our common home. Together we are on solid ground in encouraging action to live in harmony

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6. USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 2007.

with the environment so as to preserve our precious resources now and for future generations.

### Spirituality Series

The Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii offers a three-part spirituality series each year designed to help us move more deeply into awareness of our daily spiritual life. In recent years our programs included:

- **Moment to Moment: Finding God in the Everyday:** *Praying with Body, Mind and Spirit* is grounded in the sacredness of the body. We focused on praying with the postures and gestures used at Mass and other forms of embodied prayer; *Moving Into Stillness* featured embodied prayer with extended periods of stillness leading to praying in silence with Centering Prayer; *Embodied Lectio Divina* offered an in-depth reflection on the Incarnation, the sacredness of our own bodies, and *Lectio Divina*, noting the presence of the body in the scripture pericope.
- **Cultivating Virtues and the Golden Rule:** Seeking to be grounded in the holy, to live with compassion, and be of service to others, the Spirituality Series has featured programs to cultivate the virtues of humility, meekness, non-violence, forgiveness, mercy, and compassion. The program descriptions highlight our gospel foundations:
  - *You are the light of the world* (Mt 5:14). Jesus tells us this. Knowing the light of God within us, we are able to see God’s light in others. By cultivating humility and meekness, we are led with gentleness to look deeply into

the heart of nonviolence. *Humility* shows us our true place in the world. *Meekness* does not imply weakness. It is a sign of strength under control and submission to God. It is a lack of self-pride that allows us to share and to serve others.

- When we acknowledge our own sin we are able to turn to God, opening ourselves to receive God's infinite *mercy* and *forgiveness*. This allows us to offer *forgiveness* and *mercy* to others. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you* (Lk 6:31), known as the Golden Rule, is found in all major world religions. "I" and "you" are integrated as one in the heart of God. We come to know God within us and all around us. Through prayer and meditation our hearts are softened and purified. We come to a place of surrender to God.
- **Ministry of Consolation:** The Shrine offers inspiring days of reflection every year for those grieving the loss of a child or the death of a spouse, as well as a morning retreat for caregivers. Offering comfort and hope to those who are suffering is a hallmark of the Shrine's ministry. We welcome opportunities to collaborate with our Buddhist friends in discerning together how we might further reach out to those in need.

### Shrine Connections with Local Communities

The Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii faith community contributes to the food pantry in our neighborhood run by Holy Family parish.

Donations of food are collected at the Shrine the second Sunday of every month and delivered to Holy Family the following week.

The Shrine also supports the vital work of *Taller de José* (Joseph's Workshop), a sponsored ministry of the Congregation of St. Joseph. It is a community resource center offering the ministry of accompaniment to people in need, connecting people to services and services to people. *Taller de José* is located in a predominantly Hispanic community near the Shrine and serves new immigrants and all those in need. Being present and walking with clients through trauma, confusion, suffering, or uncertainty, they are changing hearts and lives, as well as systems. The Shrine contributes our Holy Thursday offering and a percentage of donations to our St. Joseph's Table celebration. We are currently in talks with their executive director on ways in which we may collaborate more closely to help meet their growing needs.

### Future Collaboration with Compassionate Heart Communities

As humble servant leaders bound in authentic friendship, Catholics and Buddhists may embody "compassionate heart communities" organized around a specific purpose and focus. Together we may work to alleviate suffering and promote the inner qualities of heart that give people courage to live their lives based in love and kindness. With gentle hearts we can guide them to a sense of real connection to our great human family. Being reconciled with each other enables us to widen our circles of concern to encompass the well-being of others. Compassionate heart communities can choose together to take concrete action to create a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

## Conclusion

In preparation for our Rome dialogue, Buddhist and Catholic delegates and other members of our communities met one afternoon at both the Shambhala Buddhist Meditation Center and the Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii, which are within walking distance of each other in the West Loop neighborhood of Chicago. We enjoyed a tour of our facilities, conversation, and tea. Spending time together and getting to know one another as friends models the heart of genuine dialogue. While in Rome we made a commitment to meet regularly in Chicago as our friendships develop and to discern next steps in our collaboration. Since returning from Rome we have met at the Midwest Buddhist Temple and have a meeting scheduled at the Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii. We will join together for The Compassionate Heart program at the Shrine in November and are looking at possibilities in the spring for an expanded program on social engagement.

May our efforts bear fruit that will last, the fruit of compassionate friendship in action, so that together we may bind the wounds that separate us, give comfort to those in need, and live joyfully with the peace that surpasses all understanding. We pray in the name of our friend, Jesus.

Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John,  
do you love me more than these?”

He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.”

A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John,  
do you love me?”

He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.”

Jesus said to him the third time, “Simon son of John,  
do you love me?”

Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time,  
“Do you love me?”

And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything;  
you know that I love you.”

Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

After this Jesus said to him,

“Follow me.”

(Jn 21:15–17)

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