

Grateful Patience

by Don Giuseppe, S.C.

Compassionate actions are always characterized by gratitude, whether they confront evil in the world or support the good. Anger can make us active and can even unleash in us much creative energy. But not for long. The social activists of the sixties who allowed their anger to fuel their actions soon found themselves burned out. Often they reached a state of physical as well as mental exhaustion, developed neurosis and needed psychotherapy or a "new spirituality."

To persevere in a compassionate life on behalf of the poor, the suffering and the oppressed, without visible success, we need a spirit of gratitude. An angry action is born of the experience of being hurt. A grateful action is born out of an experience of healing. Angry actions want to take. Grateful actions want to share. Gratitude is the mark of action undertaken as part of the discipline of patience. It is a response to grace. It leads us not to conquer or destroy, but to give visibility to a good that is already present. Therefore, the compassionate life is a grateful life.

Compassionate actions born out of appreciation are not compulsive but free, not somber but joyful, not fanatical but liberating. When gratitude is the source of our actions, our giving becomes receiving, and those to whom we minister become our ministers because in the center of our care for others we sense a caring presence, and in the midst of our efforts we sense an encouraging support. When this happens we can remain joyful and peaceful even when there are few successes to brag about.

I have been working with developmentally disabled children and adults all my adult life, that is more than forty years. I live with them, wash them, dress them, feed them, walk with them, go out with them, play and pray with them. Now I realize how much I learn from them and how much peace and joy they bring to my life. Life becomes real. The opportunity to serve them becomes their gift. God manifests himself in so many small ways. I remember vividly one lifetime lesson I never forgot.

A developmentally disabled child is brought to my office for misbehavior. I am supposed to talk to him and change his aggressive mood. He refuses to talk or even to look at me. We are at an impasse. Two hours go by. I wait for the right opening. Nothing. The phone rings. A friend wants to talk to me. I am already busy. "Please tell the caller I am not in," I ask the secretary. Dutifully she lies for me. My friend drives by, sees my car in the parking lot and walks straight to my office.

"I was told you were not home!"

Before I even opened my mouth, the boy who had been in my office, angry and obstinately silent for the last two hours, gingerly answered:

"It's not true! He just did not want to talk to you!"

Thank you God for the gift of honesty and humility!

Blessed Louis Guanella was a grateful man in positive and negative events. One day, his biographer writes, he was traveling from one of his institutions to another. In order to take the coach he had to cross a river. That could be done either by boat or a long walk to the nearest bridge.

Blessed Guanella, who was as poor as anyone can be, decided for the long walk to save money. When finally he reached the bridge tired and sweating, he knelt and bent down to drink from the river. In doing so his wallet slipped into the water and was taken by the current. To save money, he had even lost the possibility to pay for the



coach. He started walking toward his destination fifty miles away until a generous soul stopped his carriage and invited him to ride along.

Blessed Guanella loved to tell his followers this story. He was grateful for the loss of his wallet. He learned to trust most in the Lord and then his own devices. The man in the carriage became a friend who supported him for the rest of his life.

Many times the Lord's plans are so different than ours. It is better to place our life in God's hands, with gratitude, and try to understand what his message is for us in the events of our lives. Gratitude puts us more in touch with God, with our own heart and with the people around us.

(Credit: Don Giuseppe. "Grateful Patience" *Now and at the Hour* Feb-Mar 2002: 27.)