



A Message to
the Clergy and People
of the Diocese of Southeast Florida

Friday
15 September 2017

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

This will be the last of these daily messages that I shall be sending. I hope that they have been at least a small help and encouragement in these first days after the storm. Eduardo will help us by regular communication to remain in touch with each other in effective ways, but we shall soon be moving from this first phase of post-hurricane work to other tasks.

If you are, like me, from an old-fashioned Anglo-catholic stable, the day after Holy Cross Day was traditionally a commemoration of the Mother of God. The focus was, not surprisingly, on her “sorrows,” but for a time in the development of this commemoration, the day was known as “Our Lady of compassion.” In the Christian East, this reflection (commemorated at a different time of the year) focusses on the Mother of God “who softens hardened hearts.”

Each of these three aspects of devotion to the Virgin Mary is appropriate for us in this season. There is huge sorrow at the loss of life and the ruin of communities throughout our region. We shall have personal sorrows, too. There is a desperate need for compassion that shows itself both in kindness and in acts of generosity. And there is always room for the softening of hardened hearts – our own, and those of others. This last may be the most necessary: for those of us who have been through more than one of these storms, it is easy to be judgmental of those for whom this is more of an emotional and physical struggle than it may be for us.

Religion that is worth the time and the energy confront all these matters squarely, and our Christian faith is rich in spiritual resources in the face of sorrow, in the deepening of compassion, and in removing our hearts of stone and replacing them with hearts that are broken open to love.

Sorrow is a part of the human experience that even God knows. The Gospels never tell us that Jesus laughed, but we do know that Jesus wept, and that tells us something of the importance for us not to dismiss sorrow as unworthy of the Christian, but to understand that in sorrow there is a way to a new integrity and wholeness in Christ. We cannot avoid, or make light of, what God himself was pleased to endure. How we live with and through our sorrow, so that our sorrow does not become an emotional or spiritual prison, is one of the principal endeavours of spiritual direction.

Someone has remarked recently that we are beginning, even at this early stage, to see some “compassion exhaustion.” That is not surprising, and seems to me to be OK, because at least compassion is there in the first place! The worrying times will be when we realise that compassion is absent, and that will require our

attention. How do we renew compassion in ourselves and in our communities? Where is the rich well of God's compassion in our midst?

As for hardened hearts, we know from our Christian tradition that a truly human heart, a heart that is able to love in the way that God intends, is made, not born. The truly human heart is forged in the anvil of the joys and pains of real life, in relationship, and in self-giving and sacrifice: the only hearts that are perfect are the hearts that are broken, and yet still love and focus on the life of the other. This is the way of life, and the force of Jesus words, when he says that those who seek to save their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives will find them. As a thoughtful theologian once remarked, the promise to us is not that we shall not face the very depths of grief, but that God will wipe away every tear from our eyes – so what then will God do with those who have never wept?

Facing sorrow, deepening compassion, softening the hardened heart – as the weeks progress in relief, rebuilding, and restoration, these are our spiritual challenges. May God give us the grace and the strength to do this inner work, that others may see in us the life of God which so many long to see, and for which our baptism has made us witnesses.

Rejoice, O Mother of God: turn our sorrows into joy and soften all hardened hearts.

People first. Be safe. Take no risks. These remain important touchstones for us.

Kate and I shall be praying for you all this Sunday especially, and I hope that you are able to find renewed purpose in your worship with your community.

With love and every blessing.

+Peter

Prayer for the gift of mercy and compassion

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(The Book of Common Prayer, p. 234)