



Deeper Waters

Following Christ means practicing empathy

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By Julie McCarty

Lately I’ve been reading about the life of Edith Stein, also known as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. As a result, I’ve become fascinated with the topic of her 1916 doctoral dissertation, empathy.

Empathy is the ability to taste a little of another person’s experience despite the fact that you can never really get “inside the skin” of another human being completely. For example, an empathetic surgeon shows with words and facial expression that he or she really cares about the patient as a person.

I wonder what would happen if Catholics in this country were to put aside the politics of right and left, practicing empathy instead?

Practicing Empathy

Let us consider the fictional case of Rachael, a young adult, and Connie, a sixty-something woman, who work in the same office. Both of them are Catholic, and one day their conversation turns to the latest announcement that a nearby parish is going to offer an additional Sunday mass in Latin.

When the topic arises, Rachael is bursting with excitement while at the same time Connie feels a pit in her stomach.

This is the critical moment, when each one realizes the other feels differently about the same topic. At this point, they have a choice. Each may react defensively, fighting for her views like a bickering husband and wife, neither one listening to the other.

However, if they treat each other with kindness and open hearts, truly listening to each other, there is a chance for empathetic understanding to occur.

If Connie shows interest in Rachael’s excitement, she may discover that Rachael grew up in a very noisy, technological and “virtual” world. When Rachael attended a mass in Latin with a friend, she had a firsthand spiritual adventure into the world of reverential silence, classical music, and the transcendent nature of God.

Likewise, if Rachael listens attentively to Connie, she may begin to understand Connie’s discomfort with the Latin Mass. When Connie was a little girl, all masses were said in Latin. Her parish priest often preached about the pains of hell and said that only Catholics go to heaven. Her favorite aunt, a Lutheran, died at this time. For Connie, old-style priest vestments, the scent of incense, and the sound of Latin chant, bring on her childhood terror that her aunt might be burning in unending flames of fire.

Empathy does not mean that either Connie or Rachael will necessarily change how they feel about the Latin Mass. However, if they have empathy, they will have more respect and understanding for each other. This will help them work together in the office and pray side by side in the church pew.

Practicing empathy is not for the morally weak. It takes inner strength to set aside one's own self-centeredness to really listen to another compassionately.

Neither is empathy only for women, as we can see by the fact that St. Paul taught the same basic principle in the Letter to the Romans: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."

Christ's empathy for others

I believe Jesus Christ, True God and True Man, is the most empathetic person who ever lived. His empathy was one of standing beside people and sharing their pain, not lording over them (see Matt. 20:25-28). While religious leaders feared becoming "impure" by eating with sinners, Christ freely dipped his food in the same dish. He showed empathy for women in ways that broke the social taboos of his time, freely talking with women who were not his kin and allowing impure women to touch him. On the Road to Emmaus, the Risen Christ spent time listening attentively to the disciple's feelings before talking with them about the Scriptures.

If we call ourselves followers of Christ, then we must also practice having an open heart and open mind towards others, no matter who they are. It is not enough to "love each other" in the abstract if we are not willing to listen empathetically. It is not enough to "defend the truth" if in the process we practice the techniques of war and hatred.

Without empathy, there can be no true peace in our churches or peace on earth.

Reflection questions:

- Is there someone in my life I find mildly annoying? How might I develop empathy for him or her?
- When talking about church or spiritual matters, do I feel compelled to "take sides" in every conversation? Is the Catholic way really so black and white as all that?



About the columnist:

Julie McCarty is a syndicated columnist and author of *The Pearl of Great Price: Gospel Wisdom for Christian Marriage* (Liturgical Press). Contact her through her website, www.juliemccarty.com .