

## COMPASSION - the biblical gift to the human spirit.

Johann Baptist Metz, a German Catholic theologian (b.1928), argued <sup>1</sup> that compassion is '... a primary reaction to another person's suffering. It possesses a political dimension, in that a merely private attitude ... is not enough. And since it has to be exercised in the midst of oppression and repression, it has to become *justice*.'

In the Gospels, Metz observes, Jesus is more attentive to the sufferings of others than their sins, but is very critical of the sins of hypocrisy committed by the scribes and Pharisees – the religious authorities. Unfortunately, however,

*'Christianity very soon began to have serious difficulties with this fundamental sensitivity to other people's sufferings, which is inherent in its message. The worrying question about justice for the innocent who suffer, which is at the heart of the biblical traditions, was transformed, with excessive haste, into the issue of salvation for sinners.'*<sup>2</sup>

Metz pointed out that Jesus had been more concerned with people suffering than their sin and points out that the parable of the Good Samaritan has entered into the narrative of humankind's memory. The God whom Jesus reveals is one who connects with people because of his revealed compassionate heart from which compassion emerged. Metz argued that 'compassion' was the only word which could adequately carry this sense of divine sensitivity to human suffering and a key word for a global programme for Christianity and *the 'biblical gift to the human spirit'*. Such an imperative demands justice and, if Europe embraced a political culture inspired by compassion it would offer a creative, inspirational landscape. Although this might seem naïve any politics of freedom must move beyond a narrative of economic competition to the morality of compassion. He quotes how the Jesuit theologian Ignacio Ellacuría (martyred in San Salvador in 1989) wrote of the way the church, maintaining political neutrality, needs instead to express a passionate solidarity with the needs of the suffering poor. He described this as a spirituality of 'open eyes' that sees more and pays attention to the needs of the suffering regardless of how difficult that might be, for God is their friend.

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<sup>1</sup> Sobrino, Jon, 2016, *Fifty Years for a Future that is Christian and Human*, in 'Journeys of Liberation: Joys and Hopes for the Future', ed. Maria Clara Bingemer, 'Concilium: International Journal of Theology', p.70

<sup>2</sup> *Toward a Christianity of Political Compassion* in 'Love that Produces Hope: The Thought of Ignacio Ellacuría', ed. K. Burke SJ and others, 2006, Liturgical Press