

# Aquinas on Compassion: Has He Something to Offer Today?

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## Abstract

‘Compassion’—an engaging yet troublesome word? Recent studies on Thomas Aquinas prompt a re-consideration of the place of compassion as an emotion and a virtue in his treatment of the Christian moral life. Through an analysis of relevant texts in Thomas and in relation to contemporary authors such as Oliver Davies, it becomes evident that compassion has a more significant role in his spiritual/moral theology than is often acknowledged. Despite the limits of his psychological model, Aquinas offers a carefully calibrated account of compassion as a defining emotion, of compassion’s development within the model of friendship, of the relationship between cognition, affectivity, and action, of divine compassion and mercy and, finally, of compassion and mercy within divinization through the differing modalities of the virtues and the gifts. After suggesting six ways we can learn from Aquinas, the article closes with a reflection on the impenetrable yet life-giving mystery of compassion.

## Keywords

Aquinas, compassion, emotion, mercy, moral

**B**e *more compassionate* is a call often made to the government or to the Church. Yet, what precisely does it mean? Clearly, as an affective response, too little compassion can dehumanize us. On the other hand, to be overwhelmed with compassion can either cripple action or impair its effectiveness.

‘Compassion,’ then, can be an engaging but perhaps confusing notion for many people. From a pastoral perspective, it may help to explore the treatment of compassion in Thomas Aquinas and see what he can offer us today. For Thomas, the Christian life as a spiritual/moral reality begins with the gift of the Holy Spirit in grace and develops through the virtues and the gifts in the context of friendship.<sup>1</sup> Recent studies lead us to

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1 Wadell, for instance, argues that Thomas Aquinas presents a ‘love-centered ethic,’ where the moral life is an odyssey through love to the good, ‘and in the good to find joy.’ See Paul J.

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reconsider the role of compassion in this process. Cates, for instance, suggests that, like Aristotle, Aquinas has ‘little to say about compassion.’<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, Vogt considers that, in the ethics of Thomas (and Aristotle), ‘nurturing a deep and ongoing relationship with someone facilitates our ability to feel another’s suffering as our own.’<sup>3</sup>

In this article, building on Vogt’s comment, I would like to investigate the question: what emerges in a reappraisal of Thomas Aquinas’s treatment of compassion and what are some implications? I do this in five stages: compassion as a defining emotion in Aquinas; growth in compassion in the context of friendship; compassion as a virtue with its cognitive, affective and volitional dimensions; compassion and mercy in God; and finally, as a component in the process of spiritual transformation known as ‘divinization.’ This article will finish with a consideration of some implications for today and possibilities for the future.

## Defining Emotions?

The emotions and affective virtues have a central role in Thomas Aquinas. I will focus on the *Summa Theologiae* which contains his most extensive treatment of this topic and where his moral psychology has its proper theological context.<sup>4</sup> His treatment of emotions (as ‘passions’)<sup>5</sup> and their correlative virtues is integral to how the exemplar (God as

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Wadell, *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992), 3. See also his *Friendship and the Moral Life* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1989).

- 2 Diana Fritz Cates, *Choosing to Feel: Virtue, Friendship and Compassion for Friends* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1997), 131.
- 3 Christopher P. Vogt, ‘Fostering a Catholic Commitment to the Common Good: An Approach Rooted in Virtue Ethics,’ *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 394–417, at 407. See also Robert Gascoigne, ‘Suffering and Theological Ethics: Intimidation and Hope,’ in *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church*, ed. James Keenan (London: Continuum, 2007), 163–166; James F. Keenan, *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (Cambridge/Grand Rapids, MI: SCM/Eerdmans, 2001); Michael J. Dodds, ‘Thomas Aquinas, Human Suffering, and the Unchanging God of Love,’ *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 330–344.
- 4 Henceforth STh. Unless indicated, the translation of the *Summa* used here is from the Latin/English (Blackfriars) version prepared in the English Dominican Province (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1963–1975). Other translations consulted were the *Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd and rev. edn, 1920, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province in the on-line version, [www.newadvent.org/summa/](http://www.newadvent.org/summa/) (accessed 20 December 2008) and the new translation by Alfred J. Freddoso, on-line version at <http://www.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC.htm> (accessed 20 December 2008). Summaries or paraphrases are the author’s.
- 5 ‘Emotion’ has two senses in Aquinas (as ‘passion’ and as ‘affection’). First, as an affective reaction with bodily integral in the sense appetite, it is designated a ‘passion’ (*passio animae*) and is, for Aquinas, integral to human moral agency. This is the dominant sense guiding our discussion. Second, ‘emotion’ is characteristic of all moral agents with ‘intellective appetite’ or will, such as angels, God, and humans. Aquinas describes this both negatively, i.e. without

creator and Trinity) is realized in the image, namely the human person with the capacity for knowing, loving, and self-directing freedom where emotions collaborate with reason as deliberative will.<sup>6</sup>

Thomas uses the Latin *misericordia* for three words in English—compassion, pity, mercy.<sup>7</sup> He reflects general usage when he uses compassion for both the emotion or feeling and the corresponding virtue. Further, in the past, pity and compassion were often interchangeable but, following Nussbaum, this is best avoided given pity's contemporary associations with condescension or even superficiality ('mere pity').<sup>8</sup> Again, whereas *misericordia* as compassion denotes being so affected that one moves to alleviate the distress of another, *misericordia* as mercy signifies a more specific removal of another's pain, namely the gift of forgiveness of harm done, specifically to the one who forgives.<sup>9</sup>

Thomas explicitly discusses *misericordia* three times in the *Summa*: concerning God and divine omnipotence,<sup>10</sup> as part of charity,<sup>11</sup> and in one specific question on the morality of the emotions, whose significance is often overlooked. Here, the principal focus is on *misericordia* as compassion. This will be our starting point.

Aquinas asks, in carefully worded language, whether there is any emotion that is always good or evil 'by its very nature'?.<sup>12</sup> From an earlier discussion, he argues that an emotion's moral status is discerned to the extent that it is guided by, or 'in tune with,' reason and only in a relational context.<sup>13</sup> Emotions are interactive responses or felt evaluations.

excitement of the soul (*sine passione*), but also positively in *affectus*, as acts of the will. See STh I 82. 5, ad 1; I 2. 22.

6 See STh I-II Prologue.

7 *Compassio* is used as a synonym for *misericordia* in the *Summa* on three occasions (STh II-II 30. 1, ad 1; 30. 2; Supp. 94. a.2). Its primary meaning is a natural attraction to something (see final section of this article). See also *A Lexicon of St. Thomas Aquinas*, eds Roy J. Deferrari et al. (Fitzwilliam, NH/Boonville, NY: Loreto/Preserving Christian Publications, 2004), 184.

8 Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001), 301–302.

9 For clarity's sake, I am suggesting that compassion's object is the lack of a due good (*privatio boni*) as in natural or physical evil whereas mercy's object is moral evil (see later discussion of STh I-II 59. 1, ad 3 and notes 42 and 79 in this article). Thomas does not seem to differentiate between deserved and undeserved suffering as does Aristotle. He recognizes the non-cognitive element where one spontaneously feels sorry for someone in their distress. But, importantly, he also moves to see the role of the virtuous response under the guidance of charity. For a full discussion on how Aquinas transforms Aristotle's account of pity into the Christian virtue of mercy through the influence of the love of charity and the model of Jesus' pity for the crowds in Matt. 9:36, see Anthony Keaty, 'The Christian Virtue of Mercy: Aquinas' Transformation of Aristotelian Pity,' *The Heythrop Journal* 42 (2005): 181–198.

10 STh I 21. 3 and I 25. 3.

11 STh II-II 30 and 32.

12 STh I-II.24. 4. The phrase he uses for 'of its very nature' is *ex sua specie* or *secundum speciem suam*. Earlier, in I-II 24. 1, Aquinas argues that emotions, considered in themselves, i.e. intrinsically (*secundum se*), namely as natural phenomena or psychological facts, cannot be called morally good or evil.

13 STh I-II 24.1.

In traditional moral theology, an emotion, like any action, is assessed morally in terms of its object, end, and circumstances. Here, Aquinas is not just asking how we define emotions. Arguably, he is also concerned whether there are certain emotions that define *us*. In other words, does our basic humanity require specific forms of emotional responsiveness without which we cannot be moral beings at all?

Aquinas replies there are two such emotions. An emotion that is good of its very nature is shame.<sup>14</sup> While shame is ‘negative’ (it makes us feel uncomfortable), its positive function emerges from its object, namely, the value it is directed towards upholding and the attitude produced.<sup>15</sup> There are some actions (and attitudes) about which we should be ashamed. For Aquinas, shame is prompted by a sense of self-respect, a view supported by authors ranging from Aristotle to Martha Nussbaum.<sup>16</sup> In contemporary terms, by disposing our sensitivity to what can distort our moral horizon, shame is a sentinel guarding our personal self-transcendence in the search for meaning, truth, and value.

Alternatively, Thomas Aquinas suggests an emotion that is evil of its very nature is envy (*invidia*). He starts by citing Augustine for whom *miser cordia* (as compassion and mercy) is a virtue exercised not solely in heartfelt sympathy for another’s distress but involves the impulse towards action, namely to relieve that distress.<sup>17</sup> His focus now is on compassion as an emotion, not in itself, but in terms of the virtue that it embodies. He then proceeds to expose the positive role of compassion through a form of inversion. He argues that compassion’s opposite is envy, namely, the ‘chagrin over another person’s good fortune’ which, he says elsewhere, is a capital vice.<sup>18</sup> By inference, compassion is the reverse of this ‘unfavourable attitude’ to something truly good. It means that being moved to envy and being moved to compassion involve sets of judgments that exclude

14 See my ‘Healthy Shame? An Interchange between Elspeth Probyn and Thomas Aquinas,’ *Australian Ejournal of Theology*, No. 12, July 2008, [http://www.acu.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/107469/Ryan\\_Practical\\_Theol\\_Conf.pdf](http://www.acu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/107469/Ryan_Practical_Theol_Conf.pdf) (accessed 11 December 2009).

15 This is clarified in the same article when Aquinas says that those emotions are good which ‘create a favorable attitude towards something truly good or an unfavorable attitude towards something really evil; and those emotions are evil which create an unfavorable attitude towards something truly good, or a favorable one towards something really evil’ (Sth I-II 24. 1).

16 This is consistent with Aristotle’s view that appropriate self-regard (*philautia*) is integral to human flourishing. Shame is entailed in self-care as moral sensitivity to actions that could reflect, or have reflected, badly on oneself (and a sense of remorse and even a desire to atone). See Justin Oakley, *Morality and the Emotions* (London: Routledge, 1992), 74. Nussbaum notes that shame ‘requires self-regard as its essential backdrop. It is only because one expects oneself to have worth or even perfection that one will shrink from or cover the evidence of one’s nonworth or imperfection,’ Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 196.

17 Sth II-II 30.1. See also discussion in Keaty, ‘The Christian Virtue of Mercy,’ 185–186. Jordan points out that, while Aquinas draws on maxims from Aristotle, e.g. *Ethics* 2, 7, it is Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* that provides ‘a well-ordered moral account of the nature and structure of the passions.’ See Mark Jordan, ‘Aquinas’ Construction of a Moral Account of the Passions,’ in *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 33 (1986): 71–97, at 79.

18 See Sth II-II 162. 8. He also notes elsewhere that grief over another’s prosperity leads easily to joy in another’s misfortune (Sth II-II 36. 4, ad 3).

each other.<sup>19</sup> Thomas confirms this in the *Catena Aurea*, citing St Ambrose on the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:37). 'For relationship does not make a neighbour, but compassion, for compassion is according to nature. For nothing is so natural as to assist one who shares our nature.'<sup>20</sup> This view is supported by Cates who considers that Aquinas would hold to 'a natural (i.e. rational) human desire to be compassionate' and that, while it is diminished by sin, it is not totally destroyed.<sup>21</sup>

For Thomas Aquinas, basic humanity requires that we be aware of and recognize what is good in others. It also entails being affected by and responsive to their suffering through compassion.<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere, he acknowledges that this implies a sense of vulnerability to experiences such as suffering. In contrast with Aristotle, friendship with God means that *miser cordia*'s scope includes those whose suffering is due to their own actions (e.g. the sinner).<sup>23</sup>

## Growing in Compassion

While compassion is part of our basic humanity, elsewhere Aquinas appeals to friendship to probe it in more detail and depth. One aspect is relevant to our purposes here. Aquinas says compassion has two elements: sharing pain and a desire to act. The compassionate person feels sorrow for and tries to dispel the distress of the other as if it were one's own (*sicut miseriam propriam*).<sup>24</sup> At this level, concern for the other's welfare is couched in terms of one's own well-being or, in other words, of vulnerability to similar distress. Compassion is respect for the other that, like shame, has its grounding in respect for the self. If envy indicates defective self-worth, compassion assumes a basic level of self-love and sensitivity to whatever puts that under threat. This is consistent with Thomas's position that (a) healthy self-love is an essential component of Christian living; (b) we must have love for our body as a gift from God; (c) concern for one's own good is integral to virtue or moral self-transcendence.<sup>25</sup>

However, for Aquinas there is a further level of compassion that goes beyond sorrow in oneself for another's plight as if it were 'one's own' since this is still distinct from the

19 Stephen Leighton, 'Aristotle and the Emotions,' in *Essays on Aristotle's Rhetoric*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1996) 206–237, at 210. Elsewhere, Aquinas himself cites Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 2: 9 when he notes that the envious have no pity and the compassionate have no envy (STh II-II 36. 3).

20 *Catena Aurea*, trans. J.H. Newman (London: Saint Austin Press, 1999), 377.

21 Cates, *Choosing to Feel*, 273–4 citing STh I-II 85. 2. Vacek comments, '...to treat another person as a human being is to achieve a form of respectful justice but it is not yet to love that person,' Edward Collins Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1994), 161.

22 Arguably, this is an indicator of the intrinsically social nature of human beings who, for Aquinas (and Aristotle), can only exist and flourish in the setting of a community (STh I 96. 4).

23 STh II-II 30.1 and 2.

24 STh I 21. 3.

25 See respectively STh II-II 25. 4; 25. 5; 26.6. One could also argue, as does Oakley, that a person's sense of self-worth is 'partly grounded in what he sees as his capacity and ability to help others.' See Oakley, *Morality and the Emotions*, 64.

suffering of another. Compassion moves towards identifying oneself with the other in their distress. For Aquinas, this kind of identificatory compassion is a fuller realization of the virtue of *misericordia* in the form of compassion (as also in its corresponding expression in forgiveness animated by charity—which we shall see later). Parents, children, lovers, or friends can be so close that it is as if they are part of ourselves (*quasi aliquid nostri*). Here, it is not so much compassion we experience at their distress, but rather ‘we suffer as if in our own wounds.’<sup>26</sup> As Dodds notes, in this instance, ‘One suffers not so much “with” the other through a kind of sympathetic response as “in” the other by a sort of empathetic union.’ For instance, a mother with a suffering child will hardly be aware of her own suffering but only conscious of her child’s pain, which she somehow experiences as her own.<sup>27</sup>

### Significance of Compassion

For Thomas Aquinas, then, compassion reveals the other-oriented and inter-personal character of human existence. Its necessary condition is a healthy love of self. In that sense, it is, with shame, a ‘defining’ emotion and a virtue. The worth of the ‘other’ as a person is revealed through an affectively resonant responsiveness to them. Second, compassion as a felt evaluation is ‘fitting’ to our humanity, and hence normative. To be sad at another’s gifts and success or to take pleasure in another’s plight indicates defective self-esteem. One’s moral character is flawed. Finally, Aquinas sees any deeper realization of compassion in the context of friendship and devoted love through identification with the plight of the other.

So far, two aspects have emerged. First, Aquinas’s theological ethics offer a rich description of what constitutes a good human life more in terms of beatitude than of virtue.<sup>28</sup> God is the uncreated good who alone can fill our hearts. God is the ‘object’ of our search, but in the medieval sense of ‘that which confronts us, provokes us and evokes a response from us.’<sup>29</sup> This process needs stable dispositions of intellect, will, and emotions to respond or act in the right way. For Aquinas, there are specific and carefully defined emotions that, of themselves, always foster or always oppose authentic humanity (‘right reason’) as it engages the intrapersonal and interpersonal domains, especially through love. Compassion / envy (with shame) are such emotions with the affective virtue or vice they express.

Second, the cohesion of Aquinas’s account indicates that his choice of these emotions and their correlative virtues is not random but deliberate (and insightful). As felt evaluations and affective virtues that ‘define’ us, they provide, as no other emotions can do, a psychologically sound platform for the moral life. For Aquinas, a healthy

26 Thomas precedes this by saying that we speak of ‘suffering’ (and not ‘compassion’) when we have the personal experience of cruel treatment.

27 Dodds, ‘Thomas Aquinas, Human Suffering, and the Unchanging God of Love,’ 339.

28 ‘The best way of describing the moral considerations in the *Summa Theologiae* is not as virtue ethics, let alone as divine command ethics, but as an ethics of divine beatitude’ (Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 133).

29 Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 129.



love of self and concern for one's own good as loved by God are integral to moral agency. They underpin sensitivity concerning one's moral integrity and one's person (shame) as they do responsiveness in our relationships, especially our capacity to identify with others in their suffering (compassion). The divine image made for creative self-direction is gradually realized through responsiveness to others and to God. This brings up the second concern.

### Three Dimensions of Compassion

In his study of kenotic theology, Oliver Davies argues that compassion exposes the other-orientated character of consciousness, hence, of existence as inter-subjective. To be moved by compassion is a feature of the structure of consciousness.<sup>30</sup> He draws on Nussbaum's defense of compassion as 'the basic social emotion.'<sup>31</sup> Davies argues that, in compassion one can discern an identifiable triadic structure: we are exposed to another's distress (cognition), we feel moved by what we see (affective) and we take active steps to try to remedy it (volitional). On that basis, I cannot truly be called compassionate if I am aware of, and moved by, another's suffering but decide not to act (for instance, from fear of what others may think or of possible inconvenience). In that case, without the volitional or, conative element, it is simply pity. Nevertheless, a person is compassionate who understands and is affected by another's plight, but is constrained in practice from acting to ease the person's suffering (as, for instance, in terminal illness).<sup>32</sup> This specific profile of compassion's structure has a clear parallel in Aquinas. For him, emotions entail some form of cognition, whether of an immediate object or through memory or imagination.<sup>33</sup> This is the necessary condition for triggering the responsive or affective ('being affected') dimension. There is a movement to or from an object as agreeable or disagreeable. An emotion, then, has a passive and active component. Generally, the moral virtues terminate immanently, namely they modify the subject's capacity to respond affectively. Yet, in an emotion such as compassion, its volitional dimension, in which the will moves toward choice and action, gives it a transitive thrust. Most importantly, despite the differing underpinnings of Davies' and Aquinas's construal

30 Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 17. Davies offers an extensive, rich, and creative theological enterprise of kenotic theology. Inevitably, there are overlaps with the work of Aquinas. The focus here is on one common element. It is beyond the scope of this article to attempt a full comparison of the two authors. This is particularly pertinent in reference to the philosophical/psychological model used by Aquinas and the structure of consciousness/phenomenological method in Davies.

31 Martha Nussbaum, 'Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion,' *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13:1(1996): 27–58. She gives a later and more expanded treatment in *Upheavals of Thought*.

32 Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 18.

33 Murphy notes that most contemporary philosophers interested in the emotions argue that 'emotions,' whatever else they involve, 'involve at least cognitive states.' For that reason, she suggests that, for Aquinas, 'taken together with their proximate cognitive cause ... They make up a complex that could match our understanding of "emotions"' (Claudia Eisen Murphy, 'Aquinas on Our Responsibility for Our Emotions,' *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 8 (1999): 163–205, at 168).

of compassion, we have seen that, for both, compassion reveals the other-oriented character and inter-relational nature of human existence.

Aquinas further clarifies the three-fold structure of an emotion such as compassion when he asks ‘Does emotion add to or detract from the goodness or evil of an act?’<sup>34</sup> He replies by noting, against the Stoics, that reason-guided emotions are integral to human excellence and maturity.<sup>35</sup> The more emotions are directed by right reason, the more they facilitate the use of reason and draw a person more intensely to what is good.<sup>36</sup> It is a morally better action that is done not just by choice but also with an accompanying affective element, namely, is done from the heart and engages the body (through emotions as ‘passions’). There is a deeper investment of the person. Personal integration with its moral, psychological, and spiritual components will be greater, the more the various facets of the human person are under rational control. In other words, they are moving in a life-trajectory in a way that is increasingly coordinated, harmonious, self-transcending, and centred on love.

Aquinas’s particular contribution is that, unlike Davies, he proceeds to offer a fuller account of the ‘identifiable structure’ of an emotion in terms of the working relationship between the three elements. While he does not use a phenomenological method from within the subject’s experience (as in Davies), Aquinas tries to analyze their interdependence. He starts by describing emotions, in relation to deliberation and will (as cognitive, affective, and volitional) as either consequent or antecedent. This distinction, perhaps triggering memories of moral theology manuals and a preoccupation with sin, is still valuable, especially in this discussion.

## Consequent and Antecedent Emotions

Consequent emotion (one that follows the act of deliberative will) can enhance the goodness of an action in two ways. First, it can occur by an overflowing of intensity (*per modum redundantiae*) downwards so that the emotion is both the result of the will’s intense orientation to goodness and a sign of the greater moral worth of an action.<sup>37</sup> Thus, a minimal habitual disposition fosters a resonance between the emotion and the will. For example, Jane considers she should help street people. On meeting someone begging for food, Jane is moved by her plight and gives assistance.

Second, an action’s intensity may result from a deliberate decision to cultivate a certain emotion precisely to act more promptly and intensely for the good.<sup>38</sup> When the

34 STh I-II 24. 3.

35 ‘One feature of human excellence will be the existence of the emotions and their control by reason. For the root of all human goodness lies in the reason; human excellence will therefore be the greater, the greater the number of human elements under rational control’ (STh I 2. 24. 3).

36 It is better that a person ‘be bent on the good, not merely with his will, but also with his sensory orexis’ (STh I-II 24. 3).

37 ‘The higher part of the soul is so strongly bent upon some object that the lower part follows it’ and the presence of the emotion is a sign of ‘the will’s intensity, and hence an index of greater moral worth’ (STh I-II 24.3, ad 1).

38 STh I-II 24. 3, ad 1.



emotion is in tune with the will's choice, psychological and physical reverberations facilitate the act.<sup>39</sup> For our purposes, Jane's further decision to spend a night each week with the St Vincent de Paul Night Van deepens her awareness, her conviction, and her compassion for the street people she meets. It may even prompt some anger at the injustice of social inequity and unfair distribution of resources. Overall, Jane, as a moral subject is more engaged at the cognitive, affective, and volitional (conative) levels.

With antecedent emotion (one experienced prior to the act of deliberative will), again, there are two dimensions. First, at the subjective level, it can diminish or even remove culpability as when a person, under the influence of an emotion, performs a harmful action, for instance, homicide from fear for one's life. To take an example related to the emotion of compassion, feeling sorry for another's plight could motivate assisted suicide.

Second, since attraction and avoidance characterize emotions, Aquinas notes that emotions can cloud moral judgment and, at the objective level, can detract from the goodness of an act.<sup>40</sup> For instance, one could envisage someone helping another person motivated more from the expectations of others (embarrassment) than from the value of the action in itself. The example used by Aquinas is particularly relevant to our discussion of compassion: 'An act of charity is more praiseworthy when done from deliberate choice than simply from a feeling of pity (*ex sola passione misericordiae*).'<sup>41</sup>

Despite its condensed form, the point is clear. One may spontaneously help someone in need simply because one feels sorry for that person. For Aquinas, this is not compassion in the virtuous sense. A more considered evaluation may indicate that, in terms of practical reason, the situation requires another form of intervention that is more loving and effective to be morally good or even morally better.

This is confirmed when Aquinas discusses *miseriordia* as an ennobling virtue. He describes it as a movement of the soul 'complying with,' 'at the service of' reason, namely, when compassion and mercy are exercised in a way that justice is preserved (human rights recognized) as when help is given to the poor or forgiveness to the penitent. The virtue guides one to be compassionate according to reason, namely, to render what is due. Acting solely from the emotion ('mere pity') can lead to misguided actions that do not promote justice or continue to violate a person's rights.<sup>42</sup> The example also highlights the distinction made earlier. *Miseriordia* understood as compassion moves to alleviate the distress of another (the poor) in terms of what is due. As mercy, it is forgiveness God extends towards the sinner (penitent) from sheer liberality. The person who shares in the divine life and is thus animated by charity also gives such forgiveness. Compassion needs justice but also exceeds and fulfils it.<sup>43</sup>

39 When a person has the virtue of courage, anger that follows choice facilitates the eager performance of the act (see *Quaestiones Disputatae* 26.7).

40 They can be powerful enough 'to cloud rational judgment on which the moral worth of an act depends, and so detract from it' (STh I-II 24. 3, ad 1).

41 STh I-II. 24. 3, ad 1.

42 See STh I-II 59. 1, ad 3.

43 STh I-II 21. 3, ad 2.

It has emerged that Aquinas offers the lineaments of the structure of compassion. For him, its fuller development from basic human responsiveness occurs within the context of friendship. In this, there is a certain convergence with Davies, for whom compassion, with love, shares a foundational character ‘so that it is not so much a particular virtue as a self-dispossessive attitude of mind which makes the particular virtues possible.’<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Vogt examines how nurturing a deep and ongoing relationship enhances compassion in the three elements already discussed. Thinking involves the noticing and empathetic presence of conscious awareness. The feeling component, as a form of moral knowing, has a thrust towards interactive dialogue with the person in distress so to act in such a way that it will truly be for their good.<sup>45</sup>

For Thomas Aquinas, then, ‘mere pity’ (*sola passione misericordiae*), as an antecedent emotion, can distort perception and judgment.<sup>46</sup> Again, considered solely in its affective moment, compassion may be insufficient in grounding any duty concerning the suffering of others. While it can alert us to their plight, any adequate response needs the support of prudential consideration before it can be truly rational, hence virtuous.<sup>47</sup> It is a reminder of two points: first, many virtues are needed to evaluate various moral situations; second, it falls to prudence, animated by love, to discern which virtue should be given priority when there is any conflict between them (e.g. the needs of others and the duty of self-care).

The respective approaches of Davies and Aquinas complement each other. For both of them, there is something foundational with compassion. Aquinas’s use of the distinction between consequent and antecedent emotions, while immediately concerned with moral responsibility, has as its context growth in friendship with God through the virtues. To that end, it offers a more finely tuned account of the relationship between the cognitive, affective, and volitional elements of compassion. While Aquinas sees the three elements as intentional (in terms of their ‘objects’), they are, in fact, presented less as separate ‘faculties’ and more as interrelated and, even, interdependent operations of human rationality. Aquinas is working on the assumption that our capacities reveal their nature through their activity.

44 Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 18.

45 Vogt, ‘Fostering a Catholic Commitment,’ 407–408. While her context is not a discussion of Aquinas, Cates has an extensive and parallel treatment in part 3 ‘Compassion and Friends’ in *Choosing to Feel*.

46 Leget notes that the perspectives of metaphysics and salvation history (the human person as disordered through the ‘Fall’) that underpin Aquinas’s account of emotions mean that it lacks the element of personal narrative and ‘the messiness of everyday life.’ Without a sense of the emotions’ darker side, their destructive and self-destructive tendencies, and their roots in the unconscious, it is easy to have an overly optimistic view of moral goodness and human flourishing. See Carlo Leget, ‘Martha Nussbaum and Thomas Aquinas on the Emotions,’ *Theological Studies* 64 (2004): 558–581, at 577–578.

47 Note Roger Crisp’s comment on Aristotle’s approach to virtue: ‘Someone with the virtue of compassion will act in ways characteristic of someone who feels compassion appropriately. She will offer the right kind of help in the right kind of way, rather than ignoring the other’s plight on the one hand, or providing the wrong sort of assistance, such as smothering the other with her concern,’ Roger Crisp, ‘Compassion and Beyond,’ *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11 (2008): 233–246, at 243.

## Divine Compassion and Mercy

In our third consideration, we now move from the human image to the divine exemplar. For Aquinas, *misericordia* is most properly attributed to God such that God's power is revealed 'most of all' (*maxime*) in divine compassion and mercy. It is striking that Aquinas appeals to the Church's worship to clinch his argument.<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere, Aquinas says that compassion and mercy are the source of all God's works. In so doing, Aquinas uncovers in *misericordia* a third dimension, beyond relieving distress and offering forgiveness. It befits God to compensate for creaturely limitation, leading to further self-transcendence.<sup>49</sup> Again, as noted earlier, Thomas distinguishes between emotion understood as 'passion' (entailing bodily change) and *affectus* (affective response of the will).<sup>50</sup> Since compassion as a passion involves some form of imperfection, to attribute it to God would compromise divine immateriality and immutability. Hence, we can speak of moral feeling in God (e.g. justice, love, and mercy as passions) only in a metaphorical sense.<sup>51</sup> In this move, Aquinas is endeavouring to safeguard divine transcendence.

However, since *affectus* (without bodily arousal) is attributable to angels and to God,<sup>52</sup> Aquinas says that we can properly, though analogically, speak of divine mercy and compassion. Rather than God being 'affected' in himself by sorrow (as a passion), *misericordia* indicates the activity of God's love for the creatures.<sup>53</sup> However, importantly, Aquinas adds that this effect proceeds from the affection (*affectu*) of the will, which is not a passion but a simple act of will, 'an act of love, one with the divine being, the act by which God loves himself and all things.'<sup>54</sup> In that sense, there is moral feeling in God. This is not from any defect but from the fullness of being and love. We can, properly speaking, attribute to God affections of love and joy, which imply no imperfection, since they are qualities of all moral subjects. For Aquinas, then, God's *misericordia* (in its three senses of compassion, mercy, and the generosity that cultivates creaturely self-transcendence) is visible in its effects because it is embedded within the divine *affectus* from which God pours out his love.

48 STh II-II 30. 4. He cites the Collect of the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost. In the revised liturgy, the same wording is in the Prayer of the Church for the 26th Sunday of Ordinary Time: 'Father, you reveal your mighty power most of all by your forgiveness and compassion.' In addition, Thomas's fellow Dominican Meister Eckhart said, 'You may call God love; you may call God goodness; but the best name for God is Compassion' (cited in Matthew Fox, *A Spirituality Named Compassion* [Minnesota, MN: Winston, 1979], 34).

49 'If we consider every work of God at its primary source, we see that *misericordia* is present. This is because God, out of the abundance of His goodness, bestows on creatures what is due to them more generously than is demanded by what is fitting for a particular thing's nature' (STh I-II 21.4. Author's translation adapting Freddoso's version). See also STh I 25. 3, ad 3.

50 See above n. 5.

51 STh I 20. 1 and I 22. 1.

52 STh I 82. 5, ad 1.

53 STh I 21. 3.

54 Dodds, 'Thomas Aquinas and Human Suffering,' 338, citing *Summa contra Gentiles*, 4, c. 23, no. 11.

Any discussion of divine compassion raises the issue of the ‘suffering’ of God?<sup>55</sup> How do we preserve divine perfection yet take seriously the divine vulnerability where the triune God is moved, as the Scripture says, to his very depths? Maritain points out that Aquinas’s response, while true, ‘leaves the mind unsatisfied.’<sup>56</sup> How can we speak of divine distress at our distress, as an element in the perfection of the divine Being, as an expression of God’s knowing and loving? Alternatively, as Maritain expresses it, ‘Should we not say of mercy, then, that it exists in God according to what it is, and not only according to what it *does*?’<sup>57</sup>

From Maritain and Thomas Aquinas, there are four possible approaches. First, the distinction made above can be helpful. Compassion can be attributed to God, not as a passion, but ‘according to what it is,’ namely, as part of the divine *affectus* in its desire is to love beyond what is demanded or what is just and to give beyond what is ‘fitting’ to a creature’s nature.

Again, we can consider God as the plenitude of Being. As Anthony Kelly notes, ‘to be’ and ‘to love’ are one and the same in God and that love is ‘identified as the prime root of all movements of the will.’<sup>58</sup> All created goodness arises from divine loving.<sup>59</sup> If we see compassion or the ‘pain of God’ in terms of the depth of God’s being and love, one can appeal, as does Maritain, to the notion of divine perfections that are *nameless* and implying no imperfection. He argues that compassion and mercy exist in God as a perfection of the divine being *for which there is no name*: a glory or splendor unnamed, implying no imperfection, unlike what we call suffering or sorrow, and for which we have no idea, no concept, and no name that would be applicable to God.<sup>60</sup>

Third, Maritain notes that the suffering of human love is a reality that is not totally negative. Together with its ‘deprivation,’ it carries something positive, noble, fertile and precious, in other words, a perfection. Its analogate in God, namely, its unnameable and deeply

55 Of course, because of the unity of divine and human natures in a single person, Jesus of Nazareth, it is possible to say that Jesus’ suffering is itself the very suffering of God. See STh III 16. 2–4 and his phrase ‘...the Impassible God suffers and dies...’ (*impassibilis Deus patitur et moritur*) (*Commentary on 1 Corinthians* c. 15, L. 1). Interestingly, Coolman, citing J-P. Torrell, points out that, while Aquinas devoted considerable attention to Christ’s affectivity, he did not consider the compassion of Jesus. See Boyd Taylor Coolman, ‘Hugh of St. Victor on “Jesus Wept”’: Compassion as Ideal Humanitas,’ *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 528–557, at 528. From another perspective, Davies’ aim is a phenomenological study on how the compassion of God accomplished in Jesus Christ is ‘an epiphany of infinite being,’ Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 271.

56 Jacques Maritain, ‘Quelques réflexions sur le savoir théologique,’ *Revue Thomiste* 69 (1969) 5–27, at 16–17. This article is discussed in Gilles Emery, *Trinity, Church and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays* (Sapientia Press, 2007), 254. Maritain alternates between *miser cordia* understood as ‘compassion’ and as ‘divine forgiveness’ and, at times, as a blend of both.

57 Maritain, ‘Quelques réflexions,’ 17. Emphasis original.

58 Anthony J. Kelly, ‘A Multidimensional Disclosure: Aspects of Aquinas’s Theological Intentionality,’ *The Thomist* 67(2003): 355–374, at 357.

59 ‘The love of God is actively infusive and creative of the goodness of things’ (STh I 20. 2).

60 Maritain, ‘Quelques réflexions,’ 17. Italics in original.

mysterious ‘exemplar,’ is the merciful suffering of God as a part of God’s ‘happiness and beyond what is humanly conceivable.’<sup>61</sup> There is undoubtedly suffering that is not compatible with the absolute perfection of God. Nevertheless, Maritain argues, there is a ‘hurt of God,’ a reality beyond concepts and language, that is a pure perfection. The deep mystery of the unspeakable sorrow caused to God by evil, sin, and suffering brings, not divine disintegration, but rather reveals the ‘unsuspected grandeur’ of the Godhead. The human analogate of this unutterable ‘hurt’ or compassion as a perfection in the heart of God is *magnanimity*—‘the nobility that sorrow carries with it when it is overcome by greatness of soul.’<sup>62</sup>

Fourth, can we consider divine compassion, again in a way beyond our minds and language, not so much in terms of divine self-emptying (*kenosis*) but of divine love’s *ecstasis* in delight and joy? In describing the expansive and inclusive momentum of love and joy, Aquinas resorts more to phenomenological language than to the metaphysics of substance. He speaks of a certain ‘dissolving’ or ‘melting’ of the heart to describe the union of lovers.<sup>63</sup> In his analysis, joy in rational beings arises from a self-reflexive awareness of one’s happiness.<sup>64</sup> He then appeals to experiential language when he speaks of the ‘swelling of the heart’ to capture how inward joy (*gaudium*) overflows its boundaries and manifests itself externally (*laetitia*).<sup>65</sup> Hence, there are three moments in God’s compassionate and merciful love: it expands to experience and share the good more intensely and consciously in delight and joy; it identifies, in its nobility and fertility, with the suffering other in magnanimous compassion; it mysteriously absorbs and transforms pain, sin, and evil within the depths of divine happiness and joy.

## Divinization and Compassion

Finally, given that for Aquinas, the Christian life is friendship with God, it is grounded in grace and a sharing the Trinitarian life, namely we are ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4). As a state or a process, this is known as ‘divinization.’<sup>66</sup> What is the role of compassion in this spiritual transformation?

Pamela Hall confirms what was implied earlier, namely that Aquinas subverts Aristotle’s notion of friendship and its ethical implications.<sup>67</sup> For Aristotle, complete friendship was a relationship between equals. Without belief in human deification in Christ, he could not

61 *Ibid.*, 17.

62 Emery, *Trinity, Church and the Human Person*, 256.

63 STh I-II 28. 5.

64 STh I-II 35. 2; I-II 11.4, ad 2.

65 STh I-II 31. 3, ad 3.

66 ‘Deification’ is also used to translate the Greek *theosis*. Andrew Louth notes that it is broader than redemption and is, rather, the fulfilment of creation. *Theosis* represents ‘what is and remains God’s intention: the creation of the cosmos that, through humankind, is destined to share in the divine life, to be deified.’ See Andrew Louth, ‘The Place of *Theosis* in Orthodox Theology,’ in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, eds Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 32–44, at 34–35.

67 Pamela M. Hall, *Narrative and the Natural Law: Interpreting Thomistic Ethics* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1995), 76–77.

envisage friendship between God and human beings. Further, he could not imagine such friendship, with its roots in love for God, extending to love of enemies or forgiveness of hurt done.<sup>68</sup> For Aquinas, on the other hand, these were integral to our graced share in the divine nature and to the process of divinization. There are three aspects to this.

First, as the image of the God who desires and shares goodness, we humans desire to communicate our goodness.<sup>69</sup> The nearer we are to God in goodness, the more we share in the divine knowing and loving through the virtues.<sup>70</sup> This entails an ongoing process of transformation. With the affective virtues, this is achieved not primarily in terms of action but in the subject's capacity to recognize, appreciate, and respond to what is truly good. This becomes 'connatural' or second nature in one's embodied emotional disposition (with its cognitive, affective, and volitional aspects). There is a gradual shift in consciousness in how one perceives, interprets, and responds emotionally to the world and others. Its trajectory is revealed in the changing relationship between feeling, thinking, and willing. For Aquinas, virtue shifts from being guided by, 'according to' (*secundum*) right reason, to being 'with,' 'in tune with' (*cum, consonans*) right reason. This marks a shift from a directive/guiding relationship to one of mutual resonance and collaboration.

Second, a person is moved, under grace, to deeper levels of participating in the knowing, loving, and responding of the persons of the Trinity. The gifts of the Holy Spirit enable a person to operate in a supra-rational mode, governed by divine instinct so that, in wisdom, there is a 'taste' for the things of God. This mode of connaturality, bypassing the discursive mode of moral reasoning, makes a person receptive to (*patiens*) divine things through love. Here is another sense of 'compassion' in Aquinas. It is a wisdom that entails 'sympathy with' (*compassio*) things divine, a God-given 'attunement.'<sup>71</sup> Through participating in the divine inter-subjectivity, our intentional consciousness and operations partake increasingly in those of God. We share in that 'greatness of soul' or magnanimity that is God's. This is consistent with Aquinas's view that magnanimity is the ornament of all virtues.<sup>72</sup> Specifically, we share in what is most characteristic of God, namely, compassion and mercy. As Aquinas notes, not only is *misericordia*, in one sense, the greatest of the Christian virtues, but it is especially through *compassion* and merciful forgiveness that the 'human being imitates God.'<sup>73</sup>

Finally, for Aquinas, humanity's vocation is to participate in divine providence.<sup>74</sup> We collaborate in God's work as the divine artist who guides the universe to realize its purposes.

68 See STh II-II 23.1, ad 2.

69 STh I 19.2 and I 44. 4.

70 For Thomas Aquinas, virtue is an analogical term (see STh I-II 61. 1 ad 1). The clearest analogue is in the infused rather than the acquired virtues.

71 STh II-II 45. 2. See also n. 7 above.

72 STh I-II 60. 5; II-II 136. 4 and 5.

73 STh II-II 30. 4, ad 3, where Thomas speaks of *misericordia* as the virtue likening us to God by imitating God's work in terms of 'the willingness to enter another's chaos.' See James F. Keenan, 'AIDS and Casuistry of Accommodation,' in *Reflecting Theologically on AIDS: A Global Challenge*, ed. Robin Gill (London: SCM, 2007), 186–202, at 202.

74 STh I-II 91. 2.



This share in divine causality is not from divine weakness but from the abundance of divine goodness. We grow in the divine likeness by communicating our being to another.<sup>75</sup> Elsewhere, Aquinas offers a metaphysical foundation for this in noting ‘[T]he last perfection to supervene upon a thing, is its becoming the cause of other things.’<sup>76</sup> In other words, we participate in the process by which ‘the love of God is actively infusive and creative of the goodness of things.’ We share in the divine urge to nourish the self-transcending impulse in creation (the third aspect of divine *miseriordia* our investigation has uncovered in Aquinas).<sup>77</sup> Beyond this, in compassion, we share in God’s identification with those in distress. From justice as giving everyone their due, we move to seeing and judging through the eyes of God’s justice where generosity, compassion, and forgiveness are due to everyone as well.<sup>78</sup> We know, love, respond and judge in and with God to the suffering of others and to evil in the world. We also share in the divine desire to forgive wrongs, to absorb evil into love, to reconcile with Christ the world to God.

## Reappraisal and its Implications

I would like to return to the question guiding this investigation: what emerges in a reappraisal of Aquinas’s treatment of compassion and what are some implications today?

Our investigation highlights the limits of translation with regard to ‘compassion’ and its more adequate expression as *miseriordia*. The reappraisal has disclosed a wider and richer approach to ‘compassion’ in Aquinas than has perhaps been acknowledged. I contend that, in Aquinas’s treatment of *miseriordia* (in its three senses), we can detect a carefully calibrated account, which follows the trajectory of differing forms of relationship. It embraces (a) the *interpersonal*—in which *miseriordia* is a defining emotion in a social context where (b) its growth towards identificatory compassion and merciful forgiveness occurs particularly within the model of friendship guided by charity. It includes (c) the *intrapersonal*—where, as a virtue, it entails the interplay of the cognitive, affective and volitional dimensions, (d) the *intra-divine* mystery of *miseriordia* and its overflow into the *divine–human* relationship whose (e) participatory dimension involves *miseriordia*’s role in *divinization* through the different modalities of the virtues and the gifts.<sup>79</sup>

With regard to the implications from this reappraisal, I suggest we can learn from Thomas’s treatment of the moral, anthropological, theological, pastoral, spiritual and methodological levels.

It has emerged that *miseriordia*, understood as the desire to ease another’s plight, has a foundational role for Aquinas. Morally, whether as an emotion or a virtue, compassion grounds and fosters responsiveness in our relationships, moves towards identification

75 STh I 22.3 and 22.4.

76 *Summa contra Gentiles* 3. 21.

77 See above n. 49.

78 Wadell, *The Primacy of Love*, 122. Given Aquinas’s theological context and purpose, this helps explain the comment made earlier in n. 9 concerning deserved and undeserved suffering.

79 As a significant theological voice, Aquinas appears to exemplify Keenan’s comment that ‘We Catholics have defined ourselves distinctively in our moral lives. That distinctiveness is found in the virtue of mercy.’ Keenan, *The Works of Mercy*, 1.



with the ‘other,’ and finds its fullest expression in mercy and forgiveness. It also makes more specific the goal of Aquinas’s love-centred ethics through *miseriordia*’s unique place in the process by which the divine exemplar is realized in the human image.

Since, for Thomas, compassion reveals the other-oriented and inter-personal character of human existence, this reveals something of his anthropology. Relationality, with its call to be affected and responsive to others, is integral to human personhood. It is only in this matrix that personhood is fully realized as the image of the Trinitarian God. Such a position is consonant with Pope Benedict’s emphasis on relationship in his recent encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*.

Theologically, for Aquinas, *miseriordia* is the quality most proper to God. In his presentation of ‘suffering’ in God, Aquinas participates in a debate going back to the early patristic period on the question of divine impassibility. Aquinas is able to hold in balance that God is ‘affected’ by our suffering (divine immanence) but is never so overwhelmed by the other’s suffering that divine power and love cannot ‘affect’ and transform our distress (divine transcendence).

Pastorally, Aquinas offers a carefully weighed approach to compassion as an affective response. It requires accurate perception and the guidance of prudential judgment about the truly good action. Lack of basic compassion can dehumanize us. On the other hand, identifying with the pain of another in feelings that overwhelm us can either impede action or undermine its effectiveness. Aquinas’s focus on compassion as desire moving towards *action*—to alleviate another’s distress prompted by fellow feeling but always under the guidance of the virtue of prudence—brings a certain healthy realism to his treatment.

In relation to spirituality, the investigation clarified the two wings of *miseriordia*—the desire to ease the distress of another and the movement towards forgiveness. In the process, it uncovered a third aspect—the divine generosity to the creature beyond what is fitting to its nature such that it is propelled to a further level of self-transcendence. This clarification has implications for the spiritual life. Through the transformative process known as divinization we share in these three forms of divine *miseriordia*. Further, we do so through the differing registers of compassion as cognitive, affective and volitional. The deliberative mode of the virtues opens up to the instinctive mode of the gifts.

Finally, brief note has been made of the complementary treatments of compassion in Davies and Aquinas but with the latter as the dominant focus. Methodologically, two aspects have emerged, one epistemological, the other stylistic and linguistic.

Rather than beginning with the mind or the experience of consciousness, Aquinas’s epistemology starts with the external objects that prompt our intellectual activity and bring our capacities to fulfilment. In the specific context of this investigation, while Aquinas sees compassion’s three dimensions (cognitive, affective, and volitional) within a particular (and limited) psychological model, he, in fact, explores their working relationship and interdependencies. Such a dynamic reading of human capacities at work does more justice to Aquinas than some static interpretations often made of the ‘faculty’ model. It is an instance of Kerr’s reminder that, for Aquinas, ‘beings’ are revealed not in what they *are* but in what they *do* and always in an interactive context.<sup>80</sup>

80 Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 48–9 citing STh I.105.5. Emphasis original.

Aquinas is often summary and elliptical in his style, assuming that the reader will make connections with other parts of his overall synthesis. Further, in terms of theological method, what has emerged in this investigation is that Aquinas, on occasion, resorts to the phenomenological vocabulary in order to go beyond the constraints of the language and conceptual frameworks available to him.

## Conclusion

In the last analysis, then, we must return to our starting point with Vogt's comment in that it points to compassion's possibilities and its impenetrable depths. On that note, I would like to conclude with a story that captures, more than any analysis, something of the mystery of human and divine compassion.

In 'The Woman from County Meath,'<sup>81</sup> Frank Brennan, a palliative care physician working in Dublin, recounts a conversation with a woman whose husband lay dying in the last stages of cancer. Despite his suggestion to have a brief rest after her long vigil, she said, 'No, I will not be leaving him.' Then she spoke tenderly of their meeting, courting, marriage, and of their children. She was speaking across the vast sea of their lives. With each memory, she repeated, like the tolling of a distant bell, 'No, I will not be leaving him.' Brennan continues:

And then she said something that I have never heard expressed in the same way before. She said that from their wedding day, they were united; that they were, as the prayer states, one body and that as he has fallen ill so had she, that as he was buffeted by the storms of pain, so was she, that as he was suffering, so was she, and that as he lay dying so was she. No James Joyce, no Oscar Wilde, no Samuel Beckett could have put it so powerfully. As Angela Murphy, the palliative care nurse with me in the room that day, said later: 'She was saying what *he* was feeling.'

This incident encapsulates compassion as empathetic union, as identity with another through suffering that wells up from profound love and devotion. It also captures what Davies, drawing on Edith Stein, suggests is compassion's ontological dimension (paralleled in Aquinas's metaphysics of being and its transcendental qualities). There are occasions where compassion in the voluntary act of displacement and self-dispossession experiences the other as an 'epiphany' of being. A new horizon as enhanced or enriched existence opens up, disclosing the inter-subjectivity or 'sociality' of consciousness itself.<sup>82</sup> This is about 'being'—its truth, goodness, beauty, unity, its inherent relatedness, its expansiveness—'being' that reveals itself in what it *does*.

Seen in that light, the 'epiphany' is true not only for the grieving woman from Meath but also for her physician, the nurse, and for the reader. As Brennan concludes, in distant years, if he were to meet his nurse Angela Murphy in the street, 'We would stop and no doubt remember the woman from Meath who spoke to us of a love that was boundless, a union that was indissolvable and who gave us a momentary glimpse into the mystery at the heart of it all.'

81 Frank Brennan, *Review* section of *The Australian Financial Review*, 'A Doctor's Notebook,' 7 August 2007, 1.

82 Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 232–233.

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