

Oscar Romero: Blowing on the charcoal

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Early on in the pandemic a friend sent me a picture of the globe wearing a Covid mask. The logo read, 'don't let's pray to go back to normal: normal was the problem in the first place'. Luke's Gospel says to us, 'Nothing is hidden but it will be made clear, nothing secret but it will be known and brought to light.' (Luke 8:17) Things emerge and are brought to light by contemplation of reality in the light of the Gospels, and of the Gospels in light of our lived reality... Pope Francis says, 'We must not let the current clarifying moment pass us by'.¹

In your contemplation during this long season of the pandemic...

- *What has been clarified for you about the world we live in and the values we live by?*
- *What challenge or invitation does this insight hold for you?*

Poverty comes in many forms and poor people are not a category. They are, precisely, people. We interact with those to whom we are close in physical ways: seeing, hearing, touching and being touched, sharing meals and stories. It's what St. Ignatius calls the 'application of the senses', a way of letting what we have prayed through sink more deeply into us via our bodily and imaginative senses. When we make efforts to get to know people outside our own social or societal circles, they become part of our sense world, and so part of ourselves.

Can you remember the last time you engaged directly with someone you identified as poor or in need?

- *What did she / he look and sound like? What was the expression on their face?*
- *If you can reimagine that encounter now, imagine that you are the other person. How does it feel to connect with you as you were then? What do you feel like saying?*
- *Now imagine that the other person you see is Jesus himself. What do you find yourself wanting to say to him about your fears, hopes and longings?*

'You know, Father, when a piece of charcoal has already been lit once, you don't have to blow on it much to get it to flame up again'.²

- *Is there anything in your life that you recognize as 'charcoal gone cold' that you want God to blow into flame once more? '*

¹ Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*, pp.6; 99

² *Ibid*, p.77

Taking a long, loving look at the real

Some people consider the contemplative life to be an escape or withdrawal from reality, whereas Jesuit theologian Walter Burghardt describes contemplation as taking 'a long, loving look at the real'.

What will inspire us to take a 'long, loving look at the real'? It could be a contemplative exercise to read a newspaper article or watch a news item on television slowly, asking God for the gift to enable us to feel the situation depicted from the perspective of those most closely impacted.

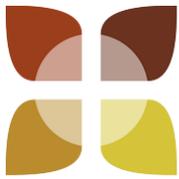
This can be hard. We are asking for the gift of compassion, literally 'suffering with'.

How do you feel when you come close to the threat and ugliness of human pain? Perhaps you feel an overwhelming sense of your own poverty and helplessness – you don't have immediate and magical answers. But that very sense of powerlessness is what brings you close to the heart of Christ, whose most powerful moment was when he hung helpless on the cross.

Asking to have a heart for the poor and suffering means asking for our heart to be broken. But it's the transformation of our heart from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh that is God's gift to us through contemplation of our global reality. Let's listen again to those prophetic words of Ezekiel:

'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you' [Ezek.36: 26-27]





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Some Bible readings for reflection and prayer:
Isaiah 58.1-12 / Matthew 25.31-40 / Isaiah 49.8-13