

COMPASSION IN PEDIATRICS

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1. What is compassion?

Our mission as catholic medical doctors is taking care of the sick. Not “taking care” like a counter clerk that makes the line of people move efficiently through the waiting room of a busy hospital, but “caring” as an act of compassion, as a true expression of our love for our patients. Compassion is the central and defining trace of the catholic health professional.

Compassion is a word that has fallen out of fashion. It has even been proscribed in many parts of our modern world. It is understood by many as inadequate because it amounts to having pity or feeling sorry for the people in suffering, which is thought of as an avoidable feeling, as if we were on a higher ground.

Compassion has been replaced, in many places, by another word, which is empathy. This relatively new word originated in late 19th century German aesthetics and was translated as empathy in early 20th century American experimental psychology.¹ It is defined as the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation.² In other words, it is the ability to let the sufferer know that we can understand their predicament because we can imagine ourselves in his place. I (who am not suffering) want you (who is suffering) to know that I imagine your pain. Paradoxically, empathy, which is a respectable attitude, can create a space between ourselves as catholic doctors and our patients and, again, place us in a higher ground, thus avoiding a real and direct involvement with our patients.

Therefore, let's stick with compassion, which is our appropriate answer to suffering. It derives from two Latin words, «cum» and «patior». «Cum» means «with» and «patior» is the root of the word «suffer». Therefore, the etiology of the word indicates that compassion is the attitude that we display of suffering with another, the gesture of sharing – or better, to take part – in his suffering, which is not indifferent or alien to us. Our role model of compassion, with Jesus Christ in the Cross. He carried our sufferings with the cross on his back, up to the Golgotha, where He died for our sins.

2. The science of compassion

There have been many advances in the science of compassion. A recent search in PubMed shown just “compassion care” showed 13,858 results, with a strong emphasis in the last decade.

There are prestigious institutes that are dedicated to researching the effects of compassion in medical care.

¹ Eisenberg N, Strayer J. (Eds). Empathy and its Development. Cambridge University Press, 1987

² Cambridge Dictionary

However, I won't talk about the technical benefits of compassion, which will be the focus of other speakers. I want to address the religious perspective of compassion, based on my personal experience of being a Pediatric Cardiologist for 28 years.

3. The challenges of compassion

a. The Christian doctor as a superhero

I believe that my lectures should include a personal perspective, going beyond theory and bridging the gap between what I know and what I do. When I was invited to address this topic, I thought that it should not be hard: "I have been a doctor for 28 years, I should know something about this, already". However, trying to explain in a coherent form what is the practice of compassion did not reveal itself as an easy task. Also, the challenge of being a compassionate doctor is not always easy.

Therefore, after praying and thinking, concluded that to be a good compassionate doctor, one must be a real superhero. So, I will share the superpowers of what this Super-compassionate doctor should have. Please be reminded that I am not this superdoctor, but what I thought I should be. The superdoctor has three superpowers.

b. Gratefulness

The first superpower is the gratefulness.

A dear patient of mine went recently to a popular TV morning show, to thank for all the medical care that he had thorough his life. His name is Ruben. Four cardiac surgeries and eight cardiac catheterizations later, he is now a good-looking 21 years old young working adult.

But the gratefulness that I want to highlight is not his, but mine. Because, the possibility of accompanying him and seeing him grow, gave me a privileged seat to witness his courage, and that of his mother, for facing the challenges of his life.

Gratefulness also to be fortunate to has the opportunity to follow on the footsteps of Jesus' healing miracles.

Gratefulness to be constantly reminded how fragile yet precious is the gift of life, of which we are stewards. As doctors, we are blessed by the recurring possibility of encountering the ones that suffer. The very nature of our profession puts us daily in the place of the good Samaritan. We are constantly called to take pity on our neighbor, as the Good Samaritan did, and have mercy on him. The correct medical expression of love is the encounter with the one who suffers. It is caring for him with the use of the best *legis artis* and trying to imitate the compassion of Christ.

The doctor that is grateful for his patients and their stories is a superdoctor. So, here is the first part of our superhero, a thankful football player:



c. Awe

The second superpower is awe.

There is a terrible temptation that we all face, as health professionals, which is the banality of evil, as Hannah Arendt well wrote. We simply get used to seeing other suffering and, sometimes, dying.

We are taught, in medical schools, not to be involved with our patients. It is said that this is to protect us. We are told that it is a medical mistake to have an emotional connection with our patients. That we must protect ourselves from that risk, or else we will be unable to remain focused on treating the disease. Or, even worse, suffer with the bad things that happened to our patients.

Again, I think that here we must go in a different path and imitate our Master. For also He allowed himself to cry real tears of sadness when his friend Lazarus died, and that pity that He felt moved Him to resurrect him. We should not let our hearts harden, as so many times Jesus said. And as some many times Pope Francis reminds us of so many times. Sometimes, our hearts “becomes hardened through painful experiences”, the Pope said. And he added, we must “ask the Lord for the grace to have a docile heart”.

The compassionate doctor is not afraid to be vulnerable in love. The compassionate doctor has a tender heart. The compassionate doctor dies a little, for each patient he loses. I have an imaginary cemetery in my heart, where I go and pray to the patients that I lost.

This is not to say that we may forget the theological virtue of Hope. It is precisely because of Hope that we can rest assured that, in the middle of the storm, Jesus is not carelessly sleeping with His head on a pillow. Because he really cares that we do not drown, and He will attend to our needs when we pray to him, calm the wind, and give us peace.

Here's another personal story. Constança was born premature and with a severe heart malformation, which is a bad combination. Many thought that she would not survive or even not reasonable to try to treat. She was submitted to heart surgery and many, many subsequent interventional cardiac catheterizations. Today, she is 12 years old. Her survival alone is a thing to contemplate with awe. She recently fulfilled her dream,

with the help of the company Land of Dreams. Her dream, even in this era of wokism, was still to be a princess. However, she wanted to be a very special princess: she wanted to (pretend to) drive a litter truck! Which she did, with great joy. Another moment of awe for all.

One thing that I learned during my 28 years as a doctor of children with heart disease is that my patients will invariably surprise us. They will convalesce unimaginably fast, they will accomplish marvelous achievements and overcome apparently unsurmountable obstacles.

There is a great risk for the doctors who cease to be surprised by their patients, for whom all is a routine. We need to pervert the eye of awesomeness and allow ourselves to be dazzled. We need to keep working with our jaws dropped, wondered, gazing at everything as if were the first time. Like a baby, who lives with the certainty that things around him are wonderfully new. And so, we add another part of our superhero, a baby:



d. Tenderness

Tolkien, the great catholic author, has a great image of compassion at the heart of his masterpiece, the Lord of the Rings, which I have read quite a few times. The central story of the books is an adventure that is undertaken by the fellowship of the ring, an unlikely group of different Humans, Elves, Dwarves, and other intriguing creatures called Hobbits. This fellowship is led by a hobbit named Frodo. His mission is to destroy the viciously corrupting ring, The One, in the Mount of Doom. Almost at the end of his journey, Frodo himself is tempted by the evil power of the Ring and starts to hesitate in its destruction. Maybe he should keep his precious ring. Maybe he should not destroy it. What a pity it would be to not make the best of its powers. And then, comes Sam into play. Sam, a chubby and hesitant hobbit, is Frodo's best friend. He is full of compassion for his suffering. And what does he do? He does not take the ring himself, for he knows his feebleness will make him also succumb to the power of the Ring. What he does is pick up his half-dead friend Frodo and carry him on his back. Behold: he does not carry the ring, he carries the ring bearer. So that he can complete his

quest. And this is to me a great example of compassion. He does not suffer his friend's pain, he endured his own tribulation, and therefore helps his friend endure his own. We, as catholic doctors, should be compassionate like Sam, carry our patients in our back, pick up our cross, so that our patients can carry their own.

And therefore, we can add Hobbit's feet and complete our superhero:



And let's put my face, and a cape, to make it look even more like the superhero I set out to create:



And now that I see it complete, instead of being content, I realize that I conceived a grotesque creature which I don't want to be. The sum of a random number of positive features may not make us compassionate doctors, if there is no love to make sense of it all. And the truth is that I already have a model of virtue that I can try to imitate as the perfect compassionate doctor, Jesus of Nazareth. He who taught us that that life is a precious gift that we must be thankful for; He who captivated our gaze to the awe of creation; He who, in the supreme act of tenderness, loved us to death. Our pains were the cross on His back.

He is the true super-compassionate doctor.

4. Compassion in Pediatrics

Let's contemplate some of Jesus miracles:

- Jesus Heals an Official's Son at Capernaum in Galilee
- Jesus Raises a Widow's Son from the Dead in Nain
- Jesus Raises Jairus' Daughter Back to Life
- Jesus Heals a Gentile Woman's Demon-Possessed Daughter
- Jesus Heals a Boy with an Unclean Spirit

Here's a trivial bit of information, which I nevertheless will share with you: depending on the authors, there are around 40 reports of miracles performed by Jesus. Of course, the real number is truly unknown and, to be honest, quite irrelevant. I studied one such list of His miracles and counted 22 that consisted of healing of a disease or ailment. The times when He manifested his power as 'Christus medicus', as the Fathers of the Church referred to the healing miracles. And I mention this simple math to merely to say that Jesus performs nearly 20% of His healing miracles in children and adolescents. Furthermore, of the three resurrections that He does, two are in children. I guess we can safely affirm that Jesus of Nazareth had a special gift as a pediatrician. Well, in fact, He himself told us precisely that: "Whatever you did for the least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

Therefore, it is not surprising that his compassion was so often directed to children.

This resonates with me, as a Pediatric Cardiologist, who take care of very sick children. I believe that it is not a coincidence that there are so many healing miracles with children in the Gospel. Don't forget that in other miracles children are irrelevant. St Mathew's account of the multiplication of the loafs and fish tells us that more than 4000 thousand men were fed, not counting women and children. And, for some reason, so many of the healing miracles were in children.

Why is that? And why should we have compassion in Pediatrics? Especially in the smallest and most frail of all, the unborn? I spent the last week in my practice praying with this in mind, asking for some light on why and how to be compassionate with my patients. I do not have definitive answers, but I want to share two stories, that I was blessed to live in this very week.

The first is the story of Lara. She was a lovely and feisty 12-year-old girl that had a myocarditis when she was one year old. She was the recipient of a heart transplant at that time and lived a fairly healthy life for many years, considering the limitations of this situation. However, she eventually had a transplant rejection and spent the last year as an in-patient in the hospital, waiting for a new heart that never came. She died last Monday, just four days ago. Throughout the last year, she became a household resident of our Pediatric Cardiology department. She knew everybody, all the routines, interacted with all, created a successful Tik Tok account, even had a primetime TV interview. She touched everyone with her wits and moody behavior. She conquered her special rules and benefited from the unique prerogative of being allowed to sleep until lunchtime, something never-before seen in our department. She never ceased to remind everyone that dared to enter her isolated room (she was immunosuppressed) and create a personal relationship with her, that life is a precious and frail gift. After her death, the person who needed the biggest hug, besides the parents, was Teresa, the in-hospital educator that accompanied her daily, with plays and study, throughout the last year of her life. Her final year was an unforgeable testimony of how important compassion in Pediatrics is.

The second story is of Frailza. She is a 5-month-old baby that was born in a foreign country and came to Portugal to be treated for a complex heart condition. She has not yet been submitted to heart surgery because, upon arrival, she contracted a severe influenza flu, followed by a bacterial sepsis and then endocarditis. She is currently with invasive mechanical ventilation, midway through her triple antibiotic regimen. Her mother recently asked us to stop calling her Frailza and address her with her second name, Victoria. Victory, in English. I had a two-hour long intimate conversation with Victoria's mom, just two days ago. I explained the severe medical situation and how we did not know if she would make it to heart surgery. Time was of essence, in this instance. All of you know how precious our time is, as doctors. How many patients could I have treated in these 120 minutes? In the end, Mom told me that this had been the toughest conversation of her entire life. And then, she thanked me for it. Victory is really when we are compassionate with our patients.

John Paul graphically demonstrated the meaning of compassion for children when, in 1987, he embraced a young boy with AIDS at Mission Dolores Basilica in San Francisco, named Brendan O'Rourke.

When we treat children, we care for the purest human beings, the innocent ones. They carry the promise of a long life, which sometimes only continues in our memories, when they die early. And we also care for their mom and dad, family, and friends. That is why, I believe, compassion is so important in Pediatrics.

The Gospel demands reverence for life in all circumstances. Compassion toward the sick is the only authentic gospel response that the Christian doctor can have. So, from now on – and with this I finish – let's be in a hurry for love.