

# A Saint and Compassion Fatigue

by Ron Rolheiser

There is a story told about Saint Vincent de Paul. Perhaps it's partly myth, but its challenge is real, nonetheless.

Vincent once gave an instruction to his religious community that sounded something like this: "When the demands of life seem unfair to you, when you are exhausted and have to pull yourself out of bed yet another time to do some act of service, do it gladly, without counting the cost and without self-pity, for if you persevere in serving others, in giving yourself to the poor, if you persevere to the point of completely spending yourself, perhaps someday the poor will find it in their hearts to forgive you. For it is more blessed to give than to receive, and it is also a lot easier!"

That might sound curious. Why do the poor need to forgive us? For what do we need to be forgiven? Shouldn't we feel good about serving others?

All of us, I suspect, have a pretty good sense of what he means. We all know that there is a certain humiliation in needing to receive, just as there is a certain pride in being able to give. The things we often complain about are really our greatest blessings: What is worse than being too busy? Having nothing to do. What is more painful than having to give away something we own? Having nothing to give away. What is harder than being dragged out of bed to minister to someone in need? Being the person who is in bed and who needs someone to help him or her. What is harder than being brought to our knees by the demands of those around us for our time and energy? Being on our knees asking someone else for his or her time and energy. It is more blessed to be able to give than to receive, and it is easier. But there's more.

There is a certain divine power, literally, in being able to give. The one who gives gets to be God, or, at very least, to feel like God. That's not an overstatement. God is the source of all that is, the source of all gift. When we are in a position to give, we mediate divine power and we get to feel that power. Whenever we act like God we get to feel like God.

Yet, the irony is that our very gifts and strengths, if not given over with the proper attitude, can easily make others feel inferior. It is important to understand this so that we are more careful to not serve others in ways that demean them. It is not automatic, nor easy, to give a gift in a way that does not shame the recipient. Vincent de Paul's counsel highlights this caution.

But there's a second lesson here as well. Vincent de Paul meant this too as an antidote to self-pity. For anyone who is in a giving role (a parent, a minister, a teacher, a nurse, a social worker, an advocate for justice, a philanthropist, a politician) there is the temptation to fall into self-pity: "Look all I am doing! I do all this for others, but nobody is doing anything for me! I am so tired! Is there no end to this? Am I the only one who cares? This is asking more of me than is fair! I have my own problems that I should tend to!"

It is easy, especially when one is tired and frustrated by lack of support, to lose heart, to begin to feel sorry for oneself, and to eventually feel that we are being unfairly used by others, that we are being asked to give more than our share.

That is very common. Care-givers often feel victimized by those to whom they are giving of themselves. We've even coined some terms for this: "Compassion fatigue", "Compassion burnout." Not surprisingly, many good people resent the demands of the poor: the welfare system, the push by various groups for their rights, the pressure for more immigration, the drain that the sick put on the energy and money of our society, the cost of repairing the damage done by youthful vandals, and so on. The temptation is to give up and give in; give up on going the extra mile and give in to the temptation to resign and take care of ourselves.

And so Vincent de Paul's counsel should be told and retold: If we do not continue to serve the poor, despite our tiredness and self-pity, the poor will never find it in their hearts to forgive us. We need to remember that it is more blessed to give than to receive, and it is also easier.

Portraits of Vincent de Paul show him with a strong, warm face, a face that everywhere suggests a comfortable friendliness. He looks like a man you would want over for dinner. But if you had him over for dinner, you might want to make sure that you didn't complain about the unfairness of life.