

Reclaiming Compassion: A Christmas Meditation

By Marvin Olasky

Celebrant: 'Tis the season for compassion

(Tra la la la la la la la la)

Seeker #1: But tell me – is it empty fashion?

(Tra la la's optional)

Seeker #2: Does anyone know if we're really helping?

(Tra...)

Deus ex media: JUS' SHUD'UP... WE DON'T LIKE YELPING!

What is compassion? The word is used a lot, not only during this Christmas month, but throughout the year. This past September I made a concentrated search through five major newspapers and found the word about 300 times, in six typical usages.

First, “compassion” was used frequently as a synonym for “leniency.” On September 28, when a sheriff’s deputy was to be sentenced for selling cocaine, the judge was asked to be “compassionate.” That same day, a jury was asked to have compassion for an accused murderer by letting him off.

Second, “compassion” was used as a synonym for warm feelings that cannot be expressed in words: A California musical group attempted to “communicate” the idea of compassion in a “non-cognitive way” by playing goopy melodies.

Third, the word was used to convey a certain attractive pose: The *Los Angeles Times* described an actor as perfect for a role because “He’s got the strength, the compassion.” Actresses are taught to give come-hither looks, actors looks of compassion.

Fourth, it was used as a bulwark by left-liberals who wanted us to remain “unshaken in liberalism’s belief in governmental compassion for the weak and poor.”

Fifth, “compassion” was used as a temporary life-preserver for drowning Republican politicians. As Jim Courter ran away from his previous pro-life positions and lost the gubernatorial race in New Jersey, he told reporters “I’d like to be considered as a person who is compassionate....”

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Sixth, and perhaps most often, it was the verbal equivalent of elevator music, a throw-in for a speech or article stuck in a shaft. A music reviewer in Chicago complained that an LP record was filled with “make-out ballads” for “the wine-and-cheese crowd,” but was saved by “the mix of spiky aggression and compassion.”

Strong Word Turned Flabby. Wonder Bread may still build strong bodies twelve ways, but these six types of loose usages have created a flabby word out of one which could once pump iron. Even back in 1980, the word “compassion” was still an honorable one, and Professor Clifford Orwin could write a graceful essay entitled “Compassion” in *The American Scholar*. But what *Time* magazine tried to do to God during the 1960s, liberals and pharisees did successfully to the word “compassion” during the 1980s. God was not dead, despite what *Time* put on its cover, but the word “compassion,” in any meaningful sense, is.

After all, even a strong word like compassion could not be unbent when Ted Kennedy sat on it in 1985 and said, “The work of compassion must continue.” How could the word be used honestly when the *Washington Post* in 1987 portrayed Marion Barry and Jim Wright as Washington’s two great compassionate leaders, because both favored spending more of other people’s money? But I’m not just blaming liberals here. Defense witnesses for televangelist Jim Bakker tried to help out by labeling him “a compassionate preacher.” Steve Garvey, discussing his proclivity for informal bigamy or trigamy (I lost count), asked for compassion. When we’re supposed to feel compassion for every single passion, we got trouble.

Liberal Bludgeon. This is not to say that the death of compassion in intelligent discourse is entirely a bad thing. We are right to be wary of the armies of compassion and the wordsmiths that accompany them. As Orwin pointed out nearly a decade ago, “Our century has hardly seen a demagogue, however bloody and monstrous his designs, who has not known how to rally compassion and mine its potential for sympathetic moral indignation.” And it’s about time for the traditional liberal bludgeon to be losing much of its effectiveness. Better for “compassion,” as currently understood, to be used in elegy — “compassionate service in the spirit of Claude Pepper” — than prophecy.

Still, for reasons both pragmatic and principled, we should not rush to declare victory over compassion, and in doing so declare that the domestic cold war, and perhaps history itself, is over. Childcare bills, marches for the homeless and the construction industry, and other attempts to build bigger bureaucracies by mandating compulsory compassion, are always with us. A few ghostly Republicans are even trying to revive the me-too, bidding tendencies of Christmases past. Even if the left wises up and avoids use of the word “compassion,” its impulse for coercion continues.

Defining True Compassion. Besides, beyond the pragmatics, there is principle. Compassion is like Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, the ruins of which were recently excavated; what remained of the theater had been covered over by a parking lot. There is a wonderful idea buried beneath the ruins of “compassion.” Mother Teresa is truly compassionate. Those who, week in, week out, counsel women at crisis pregnancy centers, are truly compassionate. Those who adopt hard-to-place children are truly compassionate. We must be careful not to scorn all use of the word, lest we become part of what Nietzsche called the “hidden desire to belittle.”

We need to explore the distinctions between true compassion and its current epigones — distinctions theological, historical, and political. Rather than scorning compassion, conservatives must see how a misunderstanding of the concept is at the root of the ABC bill, the XYZ appeal, and many other current political and social panaceas. And we must learn how to make conservative compassion (which I will presently define) a real alternative to the devalued liberal variety.

To put it perhaps more vividly, I see conservative policy analysts as successors of Hercules, who hacked off one Hydra head after another only to find two growing in its place. Not until Hercules and his servant Iolaus burned off eight of the nine heads, and then cut off the immortal head, and then buried that head under a rock, was the monster finally slain. Our monster is government social spending, and its central head is the false understanding of compassion. We need to burn, baby, burn the eight heads, but our effort is in vain unless that last head ends up under a rock.

“Suffering With.” How do we begin? How can we use the word “compassion” correctly? What is the distinguishing mark of conservative compassion? When I am faced with puzzling questions like these, I tend to turn to the two books on my desk at home: the Bible and the Oxford English Dictionary, God’s Word and man’s words.

Turning initially to the babble, I was struck by the first definition of compassion offered by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED): “Compassion: Suffering together with another, participation in suffering.” The emphasis, as you can see from just looking at the word — “com,” with, and “passion,” from the Latin *pati*, to suffer — is on personal involvement with the needy, suffering with them, not just giving to them.

The OED, however, also includes a second definition of “compassion”: “The feeling, or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it....” There is a world of policy differences between those two definitions: One works, the other feels. But let’s be more precise: One is action, the other is “feeling” that does not require personal involvement except perhaps a willingness to send a check — yours or someone else’s.

Political Charge. Historical lexicography is a very interesting subject; we tend to think of dictionaries as objective repositories of bare fact, but words carry a political charge, as Orwell pointed out so well in his essay on “Politics and the English Language.” The history of the two definitions of compassion is revealed in some of those old dictionaries you can dig up at the Library of Congress. Noah Webster, in the 1834 edition of his *American Dictionary of the English Language*, defined compassion as “A suffering with another; painful sympathy....” A century later, however, lots of folks were using *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language*, which had been “Newly revised” by “a staff of eminent scholars, educators, and office editors.” All of those eminent scholars, educators, and office editors defined compassion as “A suffering with another: hence sympathy.” Interesting: Once the sympathy had to be “painful”; later, the “pain” was gone, and living was easier. And currently, in *Webster’s Third International Dictionary*, compassion is defined as a “deep feeling for and understanding of misery or suffering and the concomitant desire to promote its alleviation.”

These American definitions clarify those handed down in the august OED. I hope you’ve noticed how over the course of 150 years we have gone from painful sympathy to sympathy

to deep feeling; from “suffering with” to a vague desire to promote the alleviation of misery.

Now, we are not here today for a lexicography lesson, but if the older definition, “suffering with,” came to mind whenever we thought of compassion, we would laugh at contemporary uses such as the *New York Times*’ “compassionate observer” – compassion classically means participation, not observation. Nor would copy editors leave in redundancies such as the *Washington Post*’s “personal compassion,” used in the way a Hill staffer might say, “I personally spoke with the Senator.” After all, in the past compassion had to be personal.

Central to Christianity. Enough about man’s words for now. Keeping in mind the distinction between suffering with and feeling sad, let’s turn to the Bible. During this Christmas season, when we are surrounded by visions of ourselves as wise men and God coming to us bearing gifts, we Christians may need to be reminded that Christ’s coming was not a party, but an earthquake. We need to remember that God’s compassion is serious indeed. The idea of “suffering with” is central in Christianity because it was central in the life of Christ. Given the season, I hope even Ayn Randians will grant me the theological license to read from what my children memorize and I try to, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which dates from the mid-17th century and is one of the central Reformed documents (I’ll read a modern English version). The question, no. 27, is “How was Christ humiliated?”, and the answer is “Christ was humiliated: by being born as a man and born into a poor family; by being made subject to the law and suffering the miseries of this life, the anger of God, and the curse of death on the cross; and by being buried and remaining under the power of death for a time.”

What Christians celebrate at Christmas, in short, is humiliation: God coming to earth to suffer with. This, to my mind, is terrific stuff, and it led me to become a Christian some thirteen years ago: earlier, my chief political goal in life was to make the other side suffer. Other religions, including Judaism certainly, and Islam, and the eastern religions, have strong elements of compassion in them, but only Christianity, to my knowledge, has a God who comes to earth to suffer with. Jesus suffered with, and throughout his life on earth He told parables about the suffering with of Good Samaritans and others. (Note that the Samaritan in Christ’s story bandages the victim’s wounds, puts him on a donkey and takes him to an inn – the Samaritan walks alongside – nurses him there, pays incurred and future costs, and only then goes on his way, with a promise to stop back.)

Theology of Early America. What does it mean to live in a society in which people worship a God who suffers with, and believe that they – creatures made after God’s image – are called to suffer with? Some children today are taught to contribute money or cans of food to help the needy, and that may be a good thing, but what does it mean when the central religious theme is not just the transfer of material, but suffering with?

That was the theology of early America. People throughout the colonies could hear sermons such as this one preached by Benjamin Colman in 1725:

Compassion and Mercy to the poor is Conformity to God.... There is much of the Spirit of God in Bowels of Pity to one another....Acts of Compassion and Mercy to our poor and needy *Brethren*, and to the

necessitous Members of Jesus Christ, [are] esteemed by the *Lord of the Sabbath* to be *Holiness* to himself.

Colman emphasized that he was talking about personal involvement, and not mere monetary transfer:

How should an *unholy Person* offer to God in a holy manner? The Person is more than his Estate. Christ *seeks not yours but you*. God values our *Hearts and Spirits* above all our Silver or Gold, our Herds and Flocks. *If a Man would give all the Substance of his House instead of Love, the Loves of his Soul and the Souls of his House, it would be contemned.*

The historical record is clear: Individual action and public policy was based on the idea of suffering with. In 17th century New England, for example, it was common for families to share the care of the destitute: Some would share their homes for parts of the year, and others would pitch in for food costs, and supply clothing and medical care as well. At that time options other than suffering with, including governmental income transfers, were not unknown, but those who followed biblical precepts concluded that placement in poorhouses or distribution of alms without personal involvement was not suffering with. As one critic of the income transfer idea pointed out, state involvement was “a mighty solvent to sunder the ties of kinship, to quench the affections of the family, to suppress in the poor themselves the instinct of self-reliance and self-respect – to convert them into paupers.”

Stressing Personal Involvement. I do not have time today to plow through the historical record – I will be discussing that in future lectures and articles – but I want to note how thoroughly American society was impregnated with the idea of personal involvement. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about this, of course, but I’m as tired of Tocqueville quotations as many of you are, and there are numerous other sources. For example, in 1844 William H. McGuffey placed in one of his *McGuffey’s Readers* a wonderful little dialogue between a “Mr. Fantom” and a “Mr. Goodman.” Parts of it went like this:

Mr. Fantom: I despise a narrow field. O for the reign of universal benevolence! I want to make all mankind good and happy.

Mr. Goodman: Dear me! Sure that must be a wholesale sort of a job: had you not better try your hand at a *town or neighborhood* first?

Mr. Fantom: Sir, I have a plan in my head for relieving the miseries of the *whole world....*

Mr. Goodman: The utmost extent of my ambition at present is, to redress the wrongs of a poor apprentice, who has been cruelly used by his master....

Mr. Fantom: You must not apply to me for the redress of such petty grievances. I own that the wrongs of the Poles and South Americans so fill my mind, as to leave me no time to attend to the petty sorrows of poorhouses and apprentices. It is provinces, empires, continents, that the benevolence of the philosopher embraces; every one can do a little paltry good to his next neighbor.

Mr. Goodman: Every one *can*, but I do not see that every one *does*.... [you] have such a noble zeal for the *millions*, [yet] feel so little compassion for the units...come, do assist me in a partition I am making in our poorhouse...

Mr. Fantom: Sir, my mind is so engrossed with the partition of Poland, that I cannot bring it down to an object of such insignificance.

Minds were engrossed with Poland back then also, you see – but local problems demanded not just attention but action.

Again, I'll be writing more about the types of action many compassionate individuals took – the idea that people were cold and heartless during the pre-welfare era is progressive agitprop. There was, however, consistent opposition to any kind of bureaucratic approach. As minister William Ruffner noted in 1853, charity

is a work requiring great tenderness and sympathy, and agents, who do their work for a price rather than for love, should not be trusted to execute the wishes of donors. The keepers of poor-houses (like undertakers) fall into a business, unfeeling way of doing their duties; which is wounding and often partial and cruel to the objects of their attention.

Ruffner fought against the tendencies to think of compassion in terms of money rather than time:

To cast a contribution into the box brought to the hand, or to attend committees and anniversaries, are very trifling exercises of Christian self-denial and devotion, compared with what is demanded in the weary perambulations through the street, the contact with filth, and often with rude and repulsive people, the facing of disease, and distress, and all manner of heart-rending and heart-frightening scenes, and all the trials of faith, patience, and hope, which are incident to the duty we urge.

And he argued that professionals should be involved as facilitators, not major or sole suppliers:

There must, of course, be officers, teachers, missionaries employed to live in the very midst of the wretchedness, and to supervise and direct all the efforts of the people. And it is just here that the Church ought to connect herself directly to the enterprise. The leading officers should be appointed by the Church...but mark you! these officers are not to stand between the giver and receiver, but to bring *giver and receiver together*.

The system worked very well through most of the 19th century, regardless of what today's historical myth-makers say. Late 19th century charity networks were pushed hard by population increase and urbanization – a system that is time-intensive can be overwhelmed in times of rapid migration. Nevertheless, my preliminary research indicates that the community and church-related charitable organizations actually did quite well, as long as

their morale was high. My suspicion is that a change in theology among many Christians contributed as much to the change from personal to bureaucratic, as did the material needs of the wretched and the poor. And to explain that change, we need to look once more, briefly, at the Biblical meaning of compassion.

Culmination of a Process. Hebrew and Greek words that are commonly translated as “compassion” – typically *rachum* and variations in the Old Testament, *splanchnon* and others in the New – are used over 80 times in the Bible. Their most frequent use is not as an isolated noun, but as the culmination of a process. Repeatedly, in Judges and other books, the Bible shows that when the Israelites had sinned they were to repent and turn away from their sin – only then, as a rule, would God show compassion. Second Chronicles 30:9 states the process precisely: “the Lord your God is gracious and compassionate. He will not turn his face from you if you return to him.” Nehemiah 9:27 notes that “when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers....” God’s refusal to be compassionate at certain times makes the pattern even more evident. Isaiah 27:11 describes Israel as “a people without understanding; so their Maker has no compassion on them....” In Jeremiah 15:6, God tells Israel, “You have rejected me...I can no longer show compassion.”

The Christmas story and its aftermath, of course, show how God once again had mercy: “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” And yet, it’s important to note that Jesus’ miracles, like those of His Father, were never at random or universal. For example, Jesus certainly had the power to feed everyone...but he did not. Only after people had studied with him for three days and had nothing to eat did He say – in Matthew 15:31-32 – “I have compassion for these people.” (Then, from seven loaves and a few small fishes, He created enough to feed 4,000 men, and their women and children.) Jesus could have healed everyone...but he did not. Matthew 20:30-34 tells us that Jesus had compassion on two blind men who kept following him and shouting, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us.” Those circumstances are crucial: it was after the blind men recognized Christ’s Lordship and descent, that Jesus “touched their eyes, and gave them sight.”

Discriminate Compassion. God, in short, is not tame, and the idea of a God who merely feels sorry for people in distress is not a biblical idea. In past centuries, folks who daily studied the Bible understood that they were not to be indiscriminate in their compassion. For example, when Charles Chauncey preached a sermon in 1752 before the Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor, he told his compassionate listeners that they were

restrained as to the Distribution of [their] Charity; not being allowed to dispense it promiscuously, but obliged to take due Care to find out suitable Objects; distinguishing properly between those needy People who are *able*, and those who are *unable*, to employ themselves in Labour....

Referring to the apostle Paul’s famous maxim of 2 Thessalonians 3:10, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat,” Chauncey said:

The Command in my Text is plainly a *Statute of Heaven*, tying up your Hands from Charitable Distributions to the slothful poor. And, so far as appears to me, it would be an evident Breach of the Law of the

Gospel, as well as of Nature, to bestow upon those the Bread of Charity, who might earn and eat their own Bread, if they did not shamefully idle away their Time.

Warm-Hearted But Hard-Headed. This was the standard understanding for centuries. In England in 1349, the Statute of Laborers included a provision forbidding the giving of economic relief to “sturdy” beggars. In 1531 Parliamentary statute distinguished between the helpless and the able, with local officials charged to “make diligent search and inquiry of all aged poor and impotent persons which live or of necessity be compelled to live by alms,” but to whip those who were capable of working but chose not to. Cotton Mather in 1710 was direct, first in requesting that his congregant members suffer with the needy, and then in warning, concerning the idle, “don’t nourish ’em and harden ’em in that, but find employment for them. Find ’em work; set ’em to work; keep ’em to work.” (Mather added, “if there be any base houses, which threaten debauch and poison and confound the neighborhood” – today we might call them crack houses – “let your charity to your neighbors make you do all you can for the suppression of them.”)

In other words, Christian compassion could be – in fact, was supposed to be – warm-hearted but hard-headed. One early nineteenth century program was even described as “thoroughly Christian in its severity and its generousities.” These two principles – suffering with, but at times refusing to suffer with – were to go together in any realistic program. Otherwise, good intentions would actually cause those in need to lose ground. And that is exactly what began to happen in the United States late in the nineteenth century. Calvinist doctrines that allowed and even mandated different strokes for different folks, depending on their attitude to work, were supplanted by universalistic ideas that God would spiritually save all for the next world, and that Christian man should materially save all in this world.

It was that theological change, and not just the material onslaughts of urbanization and population growth, that left older patterns of Christian compassion swinging in the breeze. When it was no longer considered right to differentiate among the materially needy, Christian individuals and groups animated by what became known as the “social gospel” tried to care for everyone. I will be writing about this at length later on, but the short story is that many became so frustrated by their pilgrims’ regress that they ended up caring successfully for very few; they then turned the problem over to government.

Degrading Gifts. As state relief systems began to expand, even some university professors had eyes to see what was to come. Robert Ellis Thompson of the University of Pennsylvania in 1891 pointed out the problems of governmental brotherly love:

State relief of the poor cannot but be indiscriminate and degrading. The state, at its best, has a wooden uniformity in its operations....It cannot treat individual cases discriminatingly. It must treat all on the basis of equality, without much regard to merit, motives, or equity. For this very reason its gifts are felt to be degrading to the recipient. It can show no delicacy in bestowing them. It can pay no regard to the spirit in which they are received. It is as far as possible from the spirit of that divine law of Christ, to which it is paying the respect of the letter.

Thompson concluded that governmental aid “can only demoralize where it means to help.” But his warning was ignored in the rush to greater “compassion,” which was no longer defined as “suffering with.” The century of demoralization that resulted is the one that is now, mercifully, a decade away from ending.

Wimp Word. What can we do during that last decade? We are so demoralized that many conservatives and even many liberals think “compassion” is a wimp word. We hear it defined that way by Mickey Kaus in *The New Republic*:

Compassion is mushy-headed...It provides no principle to tell us when our abstract compassionate impulses should stop.... We have compassion for the unmotivated delinquent who would rather smoke PCP than work. Compassion makes few distinctions — we’re all in Cuomo’s ‘family’ — which is why a politics based on mass-produced compassion leads naturally to the indiscriminate dispensing of cash in a sort of all-purpose socialized United Way campaign.

Kaus’ complaint is exactly correct — once the biblical understanding of compassion is gone.

Now that it is gone, things that once were possible, with effort, now seem fraught with contradiction. Textbooks teach students about “the incompatibility of policies that simultaneously preach compassion and stress deterrence.” Yet, properly understood, only those policies that stress deterrence are truly compassionate. We are told that “the spread of fear and the kindly treatment of decent poverty could not coexist.” But just as God is both fearful and kind, so compassion and fear can — must — go together.

Strange Juxtapositions. Today, we see strange choices offered to us: for example, James Reston’s edict that we must choose between a competitive society and a compassionate one. We see strange juxtapositions: for example, compassion vs. law in discussions of tort reform. (It seems that if a potential plaintiff abides by the rules, he’s a sucker, and if a company legally requires someone to stick by the contract, it’s cruel.) The word “compassion” now carries with it a heavy load of antinomianism; rules seem made to be broken whenever compassion comes calling, or even crawling.

The main form of compassion that we know today is government-coerced. And yet, the question remains: What is governmental compassion? Can a politician pass compassionate bills, if the correct meaning of the word is understood? Generally, he or she can make others suffer together — but is that compassion, or torture?

Government Barriers. What, then, should folks in Washington do? The primary burden in reclaiming compassion, clearly, will be on tens of millions of people throughout this country; within the District, daily decisions made in northeast or southeast Washington will be just as important as those made in the White House. But let’s not romanticize reality by saying, as conservatives sometimes do, that government does not matter. It does. Federal, state, and local governments have often thrown up barriers to compassion. They have passed measures that restrict people’s ability and opportunity to suffer with. They have offered invitations to irresponsibility. And they have not provided the small encouragements to true compassion that government can give.

During the coming months I will be putting some specifics on these general statements — but I am starting from the premise that our goal as conservatives must be not the evisceration of compassion but its revival; not a limitation to cheapen, but an intensification. This is a difficult project, particularly after a century of demoralization. Anyone who talks about suffering with is likely to be attacked not only by liberals committed to the present culture of delegated compassion, but by those conservatives who want to ignore problems. Few on the left will admit, as Orwin pointed out a decade ago, that “compassion resembles love: to demand it is a good way to kill it.” And even some on the right will not agree with Robert Thompson’s comment on state-run charity a century ago:

The sooner it goes out of business the better. Its almshouse and work-houses and poor-houses are nothing but a rough contrivance to lift from the social conscience a burden that should not be either lifted or lightened in that way.

Sad Stability. Most of us have grown up with personal peace and affluence, to use Francis Schaeffer’s phrase, as the great goal. We like the way a welfare system, corrupt and inefficient though it is, removes the burden of basic material care from our consciences, and preserves us from the mean streets that we traverse only by day. We react to any prospect of removing the wall of pseudo-compassion in the same anxious way some last month reacted to changes in Central Europe: Agreed, the Berlin Wall is an atrocity, but it symbolizes a certain sad stability that has existed for four decades, and we’ve become accustomed to its face.

Furthermore, when we call for an end to programs that have established a wall of oppression in the name of compassion, we need to examine our own motives. If we are not careful, we can easily be like the lawyer who asked Jesus the question, “Who is my neighbor?” merely to justify his own lack of kindness. It would be wrong, and futile, to do a song-and-dance about compassion in order to develop complacent conclusions that justify country-club conservatism. The Bible points us to more effort, not less — but it is a different sort of effort than the cheap grace proffered by liberalism. We need to learn that we do not increase compassion by expanding it to cover everything. Instead, we kill a good word by making it mean too much, and nothing.

Conservative compassion is not cheap. One early nineteenth century program of true compassion was defined as follows:

It was an inexpensive system as to its money cost. But it was expensive beyond example in its personal cost — in the number of good men and true required to work it, and in the demands it made on their time, their attention, their moral force.

A century ago, Robert Thompson wrote of proposals for compassion,

You can judge the scale on which any scheme of help for the needy stands by this single quality, Does it make great demands on men to give themselves to their brethren? If it does not, the Christ-like element is wanting in it, and its success can only be of the low order of which mere machinery of any kind is capable.

If we adopt the compassion of time rather than that of cash, we are not trying to do the same thing as liberals, only a bit more cheaply. Instead, we must ask of every idea that calls itself compassionate, "Does it make great demands on men (and women) to give *themselves* to their brethren?" Are we offering not coerced silver, but our lives? If we talk of crisis pregnancies, are we actually willing to provide a home to a pregnant young woman? If we talk of abandoned children, are we actually willing to adopt a child? We need to ask questions like that, and pray for the grace to answer them rightly.

At the Heart of Faith. It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, a time when God came to earth to teach, to suffer, and to save by suffering. A generation ago, Whittaker Chambers wrote that "suffering is at the heart of every living faith. That is why a man can scarcely call himself a Christian for whom the Crucifixion is not a daily suffering." Chambers knew that Christianity is based in suffering – and I would add, suffering with – but he recognized that the meaning of the faith "has been blurred as Christianity, in common with the voices of a new age, seeks new escapes from the problem of suffering....Nothing is more characteristic of this age than its obsession with an avoidance of suffering."

Are we in America, and conservatives especially, serious people? Frankly, I do not always know whether I am. I do not know whether you are. I hope we are. I pray that we are. But I do not know. I do not know, but finding out is the challenge of the 1990s for the conservative movement, I believe.

During the past two months I've enjoyed staying late at the Library of Congress and learning about what compassion used to be. When I come out of the building, and it's dark, I can look to the left, towards the Capitol, and see the ghost of false compassion past, sniffing self-righteousness. I can look to the right, to the gentrified ghettos of Yuppiedom, and see the 1980s ghost of anti-compassion present, sneering with contempt. But I also can look out straight ahead, toward a terrain with dimensions still uncharted, and maybe I see, faintly, the 1990s ghost of true compassion future. I hope you can see it, too.

