



Compassion in Ministry

Healthcare chaplain **Margaret Naughton** knows the important role of compassion in the work of any chaplain.

As part of my wider role in pastoral care and education, I often find myself working with students in preparation for healthcare ministry. This is a rewarding aspect of my work, and one that I enjoy thoroughly. As part of the preparatory training for this work, we teach the trainee chaplains how to develop a myriad of skills and objectives: to be present, to listen more authentically, to become judgement-aware, to demonstrate a supportive and attentive presence. For me, the most important component of the caring ministry is to be able to offer an experience of compassion, a reaching out in compassion and in so doing expressing a compassionate presence to those struggling with suffering and loss.

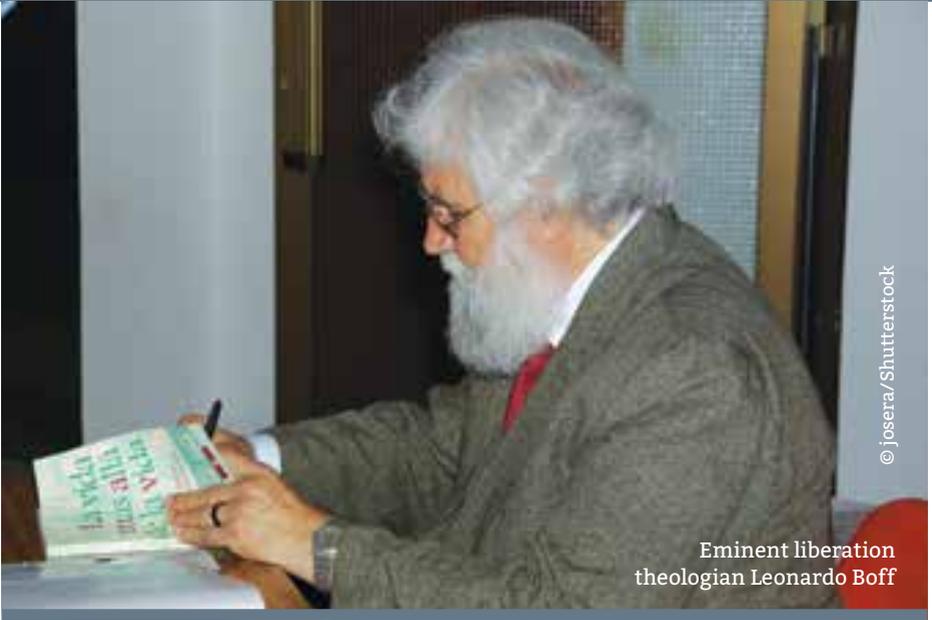
Compassion is, to my mind at least, not one of those skills that can be learned. I often think that compassion is quite impossible to explain but rather is an intuitive awareness of the gift of offering a compassionate experience to someone. It is something that is intrinsic in the person who strives to offer an experience of compassion in an authentic way and not learned or forced.

Compassionate care is an experience to be shared and known, often without the use of words but rather through an awareness that someone

cares for me right now as I struggle to make sense of it all. Indeed, having recently taught a workshop on compassionate care, I came to the conclusion that compassion is one of the most important things we can offer to anyone pained and struggling, while also being one of the most challenging. It is so hard sometimes to be compassionate even when we want to be.

In Luke 6:36 we read the command to 'be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate' This is a tall order, a strong challenge to me personally and I think for most of us. It is easy to show love and compassion to those who are nice, who welcome us with open arms and who offer us a listening ear. They get us, and we get them. We want to offer them something that says, 'I know that you are suffering'. When we are comfortable with someone, in love with someone, encouraged by someone, then when needed it can be a simple journey from head to heart to offer them an abundance of compassion and support. It is a roadway easily travelled. It truly is not that difficult to say, 'I am here with you. I understand your pain. What can I do to make this easier for you to carry?'

In contrast, compassionate care and presence is much more difficult



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Eminent liberation theologian Leonardo Boff

The liberation theology movement has I believe compassion at its heart. It reminds us of our call to be compassionate, to be present to the struggle of the ‘other’

to offer when we are not comfortable with its potential recipient. It offers us a real challenge to move outside our spiritual and pastoral comfort zone. It is not often instinctive to reach out with care and congruence to someone who has hurt us, shamed us, made us feel guilty, who has made our lives a struggle for whatever reason. We can find ourselves blocked from offering the same care we would give them if they hadn't marked us in some way. Instead, we can feel like walking away and leaving them to their own devices, letting them get on with and

in their own struggle.

The liberation theology movement has I believe compassion at its heart. It reminds us of our call to be compassionate, to be present to the struggle of the ‘other’. It reminds us of God's ‘preferential option for the poor’ – the poor in mind, body and spirit. It reminds each of us that we are challenged and called to be agents of this preferential treatment. It reminds us to walk that road that can at times be less travelled and offer the hand of God to those we might rather walk away from. 