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# The Understanding and Experience of Compassion: Aquinas and the Dalai Lama

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His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama writes that the essence of Mahayana Buddhism is compassion.<sup>1</sup> Although most people recognize compassion as one of the most admirable virtues, it is not easy to find discussions of it by Christian theologians. Instead, Christian theologians tend to discuss charity, a virtue infused by God into a person. Some of these theologians, such as Cardinal Henri de Lubac,<sup>2</sup> insist that Christian charity and Buddhist compassion are very different from each other. Are they correct? A good source to investigate this claim is in Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, which contains a very developed discussion of charity. If we look at Aquinas's text and compare it to what the current Dalai Lama writes about compassion, we will recognize that they are discussing the same virtue. Moreover, by combining the insights from East and West, as expressed by the thoughts of the current Dalai Lama and St. Thomas Aquinas, we can achieve a better grasp of compassion so that we can more easily practice it in our daily lives. Though remarkably similar, the two accounts offer differing perspectives, which can be incorporated for mutual enrichment.

Much of Aquinas's philosophy of compassion derives from his Christian beliefs, just as much of the Dalai Lama's teachings on compassion are based on Tibetan Buddhism. This explains some of the differences in their accounts. Unlike Christians, Buddhists neither believe in a personal God nor in a soul. Yet despite their theological differences, Aquinas and the Dalai Lama generally share a very similar view of compassion. In fact, one could well imagine Aquinas agreeing with the Dalai Lama who, after acknowledging his religious influence, writes that his goal is "to appeal for an approach to ethics based on universal rather than religious principles."<sup>3</sup> It is appropriate, therefore, to begin by considering the similarities in their accounts of compassion, starting with their definitions of compassion.

## DEFINITIONS

Etymologically, the word “compassion”—*compassio*—comes from two Latin words: *com* means “with” and *pati* means “suffer.” Literally, then, “compassion” means “to suffer with.” Aquinas discusses compassion as an interior effect of charity, a theological virtue. It is interior because compassion is felt within the person who has charity. The cause of compassion, charity, Aquinas describes as the friendship between God’s children and God Himself. Although Aquinas wrote prolifically on the subject of charity, someone could overlook his writing on compassion because he discusses it under the term “mercy.” Diana Fritz Cates, for instance, who draws on an Aristotelian-Thomistic ethical framework to develop a theory of compassion, observes, “Aristotle and Thomas have little to say about compassion: hence, it will not be helpful to begin with their accounts.”<sup>4</sup> However, Aquinas uses the word *miser cordia* (mercy) as a synonym of *compassio* (compassion). The synonymous relationship between compassion and mercy is also recognized by the Dalai Lama, who affirms, “Mercy and compassion are the same.”<sup>5</sup>

Aquinas defines mercy as “heartfelt sympathy for another’s distress, impelling us to succor him if we can.” If we experience this heartfelt sympathy, we’re not discouraged if the person we try to help doesn’t respond. Explicitly connecting mercy and compassion, Aquinas add that mercy, *miser cordia*, gets its name “from denoting a person’s compassionate heart (*miserum cor*) for another’s unhappiness.”<sup>6</sup> The concept of “another’s unhappiness” is important to his discussion. A necessary condition of being happy, in Aquinas’s view, is that an individual must obtain what he or she wishes. Conversely, someone is unhappy when he suffers what he doesn’t wish to suffer. Aquinas maintains that the suffering produced by one’s frustrated desire for what he or she perceives as good is a sufficient condition for evoking mercy. In regard to the merciful response, it shouldn’t matter what the suffering person perceives as good. So long as the person is suffering what he doesn’t wish to suffer, this person should be treated mercifully. Suppose a teenager suffers from being unpopular with his peers. Although the compassionate person may not value popularity, she should extend compassion to the adolescent rather than judgmentally look down on his values. Quoting St. Gregory approvingly, Aquinas writes, “Godliness is not disdainful but compassionate.”<sup>7</sup> Another crucial part of his definition is that we should help a suffering person “if we can.” For Aquinas, we don’t feel genuine compassion or mercy if we merely shake our heads over someone’s plight. Compassion moves us to do something about it.

Actress Angelina Jolie, illustrating the compassionate person’s motivation to act, experienced compassion after seeing people in a refugee camp who had their limbs cut off as a result of the violence taking place in their country. Although she thought she would be bitter when she returned to America, at the Golden Globe Awards she told a CNN reporter “something had changed in me as a hu-

man being.”<sup>8</sup> She began to feel compassion for the other actors who were “so worried about how good they look tonight.” She adds, “I just saw everybody as human and wished . . . they had the experience I had.” In regard to the refugees, her experience in the camp made her “commit to doing something with these people in my life.” Over the course of time, Jolie has adopted two orphans and is now planning to adopt another, donated \$1 million to ease the suffering in refugee camps, gives one-third of her income to refugees and other causes, urged Congress to provide money for AIDS orphans, and bought ultrasound machines and other medical equipment for two state-run hospitals in Namibia. In line with Aquinas’s definition of compassion, Jolie “felt heartfelt sympathy for another’s distress,” which impelled her “to succor” the suffering people she saw.

Aquinas’s concern with suffering is also found in Buddhism. Both the Christian saint and the Buddhist tradition affirm that the appropriate response to suffering is compassion. The Tibetan word for compassion, *nying je*, the Dalai Lama writes, “connotes love, affection, kindness, gentleness, generosity of spirit, and warm-heartedness.”<sup>9</sup> Having these traits, one is naturally moved by the suffering of others. Suffering, which involves more than having bodily or mental pain, pervades all sentient life. We suffer when we have to tolerate unpleasant events that we want to avoid. We also suffer when we lose those things we want to keep, both possessions and loved ones. The suffering is caused by our failure to realize that possessions and loved ones are just as impermanent as we are. Permanence doesn’t exist either in that which we experience or in our own psychological processes. Because we ourselves and the things we experience are impermanent, our attempts to think of them as permanent are futile. The search for permanence leads to suffering.

Compassion, according to the Dalai Lama, is an attitude that not only wishes for others to be free of their suffering, but is also “associated with a sense of commitment, responsibility, and respect towards the other.”<sup>10</sup> He insists that the commitment, responsibility, and respect engendered by compassion impel us to help others if we can. A compassionate person isn’t one who merely renders lip service to freeing others from suffering or one who expresses a vague wish that others be happy. Instead, the Dalai Lama says that a compassionate person develops a strong commitment to free others from suffering and its causes and to experience happiness.<sup>11</sup> Neither Aquinas nor the Dalai Lama thinks that good intentions alone amount to compassion.

Observing the same connection that Aquinas does between “another’s unhappiness” and compassion, the Dalai Lama says that if we want to develop compassion, it is important to think about the unhappiness of others. Using imagination and creativity, we should visualize ourselves in another’s unhappy position. For instance, when hundreds of thousands were killed during the December 2004 tsunami, we may have visualized the suffering of one child or one family. Visualizing the suffering of others makes us aware that just like ourselves, all others have an inborn desire to overcome suffering and be happy.

Once we recognize this commonality, it's easier to feel a connection and intimacy with others. According to the Dalai Lama, this awareness is the foundation for the feeling of compassion.<sup>12</sup>

#### FEELING THE SUFFERING OF OTHERS

Those who interiorize compassion or mercy will feel themselves vulnerable to similar suffering of the kind they confront in others. Seeing people devastated by a natural disaster, the compassionate person will be aware that they may someday be in that position or that the disaster could have just as easily happened to him. By perceiving the unhappiness of another as his own, his compassion causes him to do something about the other's unhappiness. Seeing someone starving, he vicariously feels the hunger and offers food to stop the other individual's suffering. There are two ways, according to Aquinas, that the compassionate person comes to see the suffering or unhappiness of someone else as his or her own. The first way is through "union of the affections, which is an effect of love."<sup>13</sup> This occurs when we see the suffering of a friend, whom we see "as another self." The compassionate person feels his friend's hurt as if it were his own. The second way is through a "real union" with the evils suffered by another. In this case the compassionate person recognizes his own vulnerability to the same kind of suffering as the one who suffers. Aquinas mentions that "old and wise" people, who know through experience or reflection that they may someday encounter hardship, are inclined to sympathy. This is also true of people who are feeble and timid. The possibility of their own misery on a future occasion unites them with the one who is currently suffering.

Although Aquinas asserts that some people are aware that they may go through the same torment in the future as the one who is currently suffering, he only implies that this awareness is based on their past suffering. Making this aspect of compassion explicit, the Dalai Lama says that in order to feel the "unbearableness" of someone else's suffering, "one must first have an appreciation of the seriousness or intensity" of someone else's suffering. One can better acquire this appreciation, he adds, "the more fully one understands suffering."<sup>14</sup> His Holiness is expressing the notion that a person who has experienced suffering in his or her own life is better able to feel compassion for the suffering of others. The person who has suffered in the past is able to draw on his or her memory in order to feel the intensity of someone else's pain. Without this past experience, we can only feel another's pain in an abstract way.

Yet someone may object that feeling the intensity of someone else's pain is tantamount to making ourselves suffer. For example, the reporter who interviewed Jolie noted that she goes repeatedly to refugee camps "and that takes a toll." He then asked her how she can function in that environment. Acknowledging that it does take a toll, Jolie responded, "I am so inspired by these people. And they are the greatest strength. . . . But you think, Jesus, the things these people go through. I owe it to all of them to get myself together, to stop whin-

ing about being tired and . . . because God, it's the least I can do." If the Dalai Lama had entered the dialogue, he may have responded, as he did in one of his books, "There is an important qualitative distinction to be made between experiencing one's own suffering and experiencing suffering in the course of sharing in others'. In the case of one's own suffering, given that it is involuntary, there is a sense of oppression; it seems to come from outside us." Then the Dalai Lama refers to the kind of strength Jolie had mentioned as he contrasts one's own suffering with sharing in someone else's suffering. Sharing in someone else's suffering, he notes, involves "a degree of voluntariness, which itself is indicative of a certain inner strength. For this reason, the disturbance it may cause is considerably less likely to paralyze us than our own suffering."<sup>15</sup> In other words, Jolie can act effectively because of the voluntary nature of her suffering.

#### WHO SHOULD EXTEND COMPASSION TO WHOM?

Few of us can imagine making the kind of sacrifices Jolie has made. Many may rationalize that because Jolie is a rich movie star, it's easier for her to be compassionate to others than it is for those of us who struggle to make a living. It's easy to suppose that some people may think that only saints and monks, like Aquinas and the Dalai Lama, would seriously consider being compassionate.

With his characteristic humor, the Dalai Lama observes, "If human nature were so bad . . . we would not have had to worry about the population problem."<sup>16</sup> More seriously, he insists that compassion is not relegated only to people in certain kinds of professions. Instead, he affirms, "It is the necessary business of every member of the human community."<sup>17</sup> Neither the Dalai Lama nor Aquinas has a Hobbesian view of human nature.

Although both men agree that all people should and can be compassionate, Aquinas admits that the wealthy should give more than the needy. It's a matter of proportion. For Aquinas, it is "praiseworthy" when a person gives abundantly "as compared with his means." Regarding whether only the affluent or monks can be compassionate, he refers to the Gospel passage in Luke (21:3–4) in which Jesus "commended the widow because of her want, she cast in all the living that she had."<sup>18</sup> Aquinas adds the qualification, however, that we should give only to the extent that the "decencies of life can . . . easily be recovered."<sup>19</sup> While compassion doesn't require us to give to the point where we starve or have no shelter over our heads, we can realistically give to others either our time or material goods regardless of our situation in life.

Some people may object that we should make sure people deserve our time or material goods before we sacrifice these things. They would point to the fact that, with a few exceptions, most people have a greedy, competitive, and selfish nature. These people, it may be claimed, don't deserve our efforts. We shouldn't waste our time on them. Responding to the claim that cruel and harsh people don't deserve mercy, Aquinas says that such faults in people may call for mercy since their very faults, their cruelty and harshness, may cause them to suffer. They

punish themselves without knowing what they're doing. Aquinas asks us to consider Jesus as an example of how we should respond to such people. "Jesus seeing the multitude had compassion on them because they were distressed and lying like sheep that have no shepherd" (Matt 9:36).<sup>20</sup> Jesus expressed his compassion in healing distressed people both mentally and physically. His ultimate compassionate act toward harsh and cruel people was enacted by his voluntarily accepting crucifixion. Even if Jesus's ultimate act is more than we can do, our compassion toward others can be expressed by trying to heal them of their mental and physical pain. We don't have to be psychiatrists or physicians to do this. Simply giving one's time to listen with an open heart can help to alleviate someone else's suffering.

#### THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COMPASSION AND PITY

While the Dalai Lama and Aquinas don't think compassion is exercised only by certain kinds of people, they don't go to the other extreme. That is, they're clearly aware that not everyone exercises compassion. This point may not be understood if we confuse pity and compassion. Suppose we think that pity and compassion are equivalent because both involve grief over another's distress. It seems obvious that everyone, at certain times in their lives, has experienced pity. Yet if pity and compassion are equivalent, it would follow that everyone has experienced compassion.

Aquinas would deny the major premise of the preceding argument, drawing our attention to a significant difference between compassion and pity.<sup>21</sup> He argues that pity is solely an emotional response to another's distress. A purely emotional response can cause more harm than good, because it can move us to misapprehend a negative situation or respond to it incorrectly. Moving us to respond incorrectly to suffering, emotions render us powerless to discern the cause of the suffering or help the situation. For instance, an employer may hire someone out of pity who lacks the essential skills needed for a job. The suffering this creates will affect all the stakeholders in the company and eventually create even more suffering for the person he pitied. Moreover, a purely emotional response isn't a virtue because virtue involves choice. Pity, like any mere feeling, can well up in us without us choosing to feel it. In fact, there are some feelings (anger, jealousy, envy) we would choose not to feel if we had a choice in the matter. Compassion or mercy, on the other hand, comes from the will, the rational desire. In other words, we choose to extend compassion or mercy to someone.<sup>22</sup> Because compassion involves choice and isn't simply an ephemeral feeling, it stays with us long enough for us to assist the sufferer. Because it has an intellectual component as well as feeling, the compassionate person is able to identify a practical solution.

The Dalai Lama concurs that compassion, as a virtue, doesn't imply pity. Like Aquinas, he says that compassion "belongs to that category of emotions which have a more developed cognitive component." His Holiness describes compas-

sion as a combination of empathy and reason.<sup>23</sup> He writes that compassion or mercy must be “accompanied by wisdom” so “that it is put to the use of others.”<sup>24</sup> Then the compassionate person can offer genuine practical assistance to those who need it. Aquinas would add that the reasoning component the Dalai Lama discusses is found within the act of choice, which follows from deliberation. While all people, at one time or another, may feel a pang of pity, not everyone makes the choice to exercise compassion.

Writing prior to the Dalai Lama, de Lubac takes issue with the claim that Buddhist compassion is distinct from pity. Objecting to the translation of Buddhist “loving-kindness” as “charity,” de Lubac says “It remains essentially ‘pity’ or ‘compassion’.” He then continues to discuss pity and compassion interchangeably.<sup>25</sup> Although de Lubac may not have read the Dalai Lama’s words on the difference between compassion and pity, it is more startling that de Lubac, a Catholic theologian, indicates he was unfamiliar with Aquinas’s teaching, because the saint clearly distinguishes pity from compassion, and connects compassion to charity as its most vital interior effect.

#### THE CAUSE OF COMPASSION

Because Aquinas writes that compassion is an interior effect of charity, an understanding of his account of compassion entails an understanding of what he means by “charity.” According to Aquinas, charity is a theological virtue that is infused by God. In fact, he defines charity as the friendship of humans for God. The person who has been gifted with charity is a friend to God both in respect of Him, but also in respect of all that is “connected with Him in any way.”<sup>26</sup> Just as when we love a friend we love his children, Aquinas maintains that our friendship with God will cause us to love those He created. Through charity, what we love in all beings is the “one good common to them all, which is God.”<sup>27</sup> The love for God is the source of all the acts of charity that an individual performs. Though the action of charity consists in centering a person on God, it involves Love for all His creatures. As a consequence of our love for God, a new relationship with others is formed. They are loved not just in themselves but in Him. Aquinas writes that “it is specifically the same act whereby we love God, and whereby we love our neighbor.”<sup>28</sup>

But how does compassion operate? The primary act of charity, Aquinas writes, is love. The Holy Spirit infuses the act of love by moving a person’s will so that he or she is inclined to love.<sup>29</sup> The infusion gives a person the strength by which his or her will feels an inclination to respond as God wants him or her to respond. In this way, the person does the act of charity out of his or her own free agreement.

The first time someone hears Aquinas’s teaching that charity is a virtue infused by the Holy Spirit, he or she may wonder why the virtue needs to be infused. Why, after all, can’t we develop the virtue by simply repeating virtuous acts, as we develop the other virtues? In response, Aquinas explains that the act



of charity is beyond the power of a human being because the kind of love that can extend to all things, as related to God, is not easy or pleasurable in itself. Just think of how hard it is for most people to love their enemies. Yet the person infused with charity feels pleasure in all the love she extends, even to those who hate or hurt her. The love she feels uplifts her, filling her with joy and peace. This occurs regardless of the response she receives.

Aquinas anticipates another possible objection to the notion that charity is infused by God. An imagined objector may ask about cases when one love relationship conflicts with another. Shouldn't God supply a way for us to know what relationship we should honor most? Suppose that a husband complains that his wife is spending too much time in church or in prayer. Since she loves both her husband and her spiritual life, shouldn't she be infused with knowledge of what to do? There is an order in charity, according to Aquinas, that would answer this question. We should love God most of all, followed by our own spiritual nature. Our love for ourselves can serve as a model for how to love others. As Aquinas says, "the model exceeds the copy." Once we love our own spiritual nature, we can extend charity to our neighbors.<sup>30</sup> It is important to bear in mind here that Aquinas is talking about love of self only as it regards our soul or spiritual nature. Self-sacrifice is consistent with charity if it only harms one's body. He means that we may give up our life out of compassion for others. During the Vietnam War, Buddhist monks self-immolated out of their compassion for the victims of war. But harming one's own spiritual nature is impermissible. For instance, suppose a friend is having an affair and asks me to cover for her by telling her husband a lie. If I complied, I would violate the charity I owe myself. My spiritual nature would be damaged. In Buddhist terms, I would have breached Right Speech.

#### IS CHRISTIAN CHARITY COMPATIBLE WITH BUDDHIST COMPASSION?

If compassion is caused by charity, which involves the love of God, it may seem antithetical to Buddhist teachings. In fact, this is the very claim de Lubac makes. After citing scholars who argue that Buddhist charity and Christian charity exist on the same level, de Lubac writes that their conclusions were based on "a misunderstanding of the exact nature of Christian charity." He claims that there is an "utterly different spirit informing the two religions."<sup>31</sup> De Lubac's thoughts made such an impact that they are still discussed. Joseph Roccasalvo quotes de Lubac in his 2002 article "Toward an Atheism of Reverence: The Special Case of Buddhism": "All the insufficiency—all the falsity, in fact—of the Buddhist religion comes . . . from this. The failure of this . . . gigantic raft on which half of humanity embarked for Deliverance comes about because Buddha was ultimately unable to see beyond . . . to the face of the God of Charity."<sup>32</sup> De Lubac, however, showed little familiarity with Aquinas's teachings in the book from which the above quote came. Despite having 453 endnotes in *Aspects of Buddhism*, he cited Aquinas only once. This is rather odd, because he was a Jesuit who has

been acclaimed as one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century. It becomes more understandable when one learns that de Lubac had at one time been forbidden to publish after he showed that Suarez had commented on some works by Aquinas that were later known to be unauthentic.

In contrast to de Lubac, the Dalai Lama insists that there is no conflict between Buddhism and Christianity owing to the love of God. During an interview, he explained that the Christian teaching of loving God and our fellow human beings means that we should “keep God close to our hearts, and we should like him and love him.” Explicitly highlighting the similarity between Buddhism and Christianity in this regard, he added: “Buddhism also teaches having respect for and liking the Buddha. Christianity says we should have a warm heart and feelings, not for all beings, but specifically for our fellow human beings. So, if we speak very roughly, we can understand this to be like our love in Buddhism and it is the same.”<sup>33</sup> To counter remarks like those of de Lubac, it needs to be emphasized that within Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha is regarded as a fully transcendent, omniscient, and omni-benevolent Being rather than a merely human sage. No less than Christians, Mahayana Buddhists also believe in keeping God close to one’s heart and loving Him.

Although the Dalai Lama sees no discord between Buddhism and Christianity on the love of God and other human beings, he does mention a point of clear difference. This difference is brought out by Aquinas, who draws the line at what kind of beings count as neighbors. The Christian saint unequivocally insists that only human beings can be loved out of charity, for only they can enjoy divine friendship in the afterlife. This excludes nonhuman animals. In his view, we can charitably love other creatures only insofar as they are a means for people to enjoy “everlasting happiness” with God.<sup>34</sup>

In Buddhism, other sentient animals are viewed as our neighbors because they have within themselves the potential for Buddhahood in some future life. Because Aquinas argues that someone is our neighbor because they can enjoy God’s friendship in an afterlife, he is not saying something radically different from Buddhist teachings. Both teachings agree that it is specifically the same act whereby we love God and whereby we love our neighbor. However, Aquinas’s understanding of who can enjoy divinity in an afterlife is much more sharply curtailed than the Buddhist understanding. As a result, this difference between Christian teachings on compassion and Buddhist teachings on compassion is one that has not yet been bridged.

#### OTHER INTERIOR EFFECTS OF CHARITY

In addition to mercy or compassion, Aquinas tells us that the love evoked by charity has two other interior effects: peace and joy. Joy, he tells us, “is caused by love, either through the presence of the thing loved, or because the proper good of the thing loved exists and endures in it.”<sup>35</sup> The person who experiences God’s presence around her will feel a joy that lights up her face. Joy may also

manifest itself in benevolence, which causes a person to rejoice in the well-being of others. Aquinas describes peace, another interior effect of charity, as tranquility in which all of an individual's desires are "at rest."<sup>36</sup> It is an inner stillness, a calm that pervades a person's life regardless of her experiences.

Similarly, the Dalai Lama writes that if we "experiment" with compassion, we "will discover that when we reach beyond the confines of narrow self-interest, our hearts become filled with strength. Peace and joy become our constant companion."<sup>37</sup> The Dalai Lama attaches at least as much importance to these effects as Aquinas does. Adding that this peace and joy are not merely selfish effects, he says, "When we act out of concern for others, the peace this creates in our own hearts brings peace to everyone we associate with."<sup>38</sup> Others can sense the peace of a compassionate person, and it influences them, whether consciously or unconsciously, to feel peaceful in this person's presence.

When His Holiness connects compassion with peace and joy, he implies that compassion *causes* peace and joy. In this way, compassion has a distinct status from peace and joy. While Aquinas doesn't say that compassion causes peace and joy, he too gives it a distinct status over peace and joy. He singles out mercy or compassion as a virtue, unlike peace and joy, which are merely the felt effects of charity. In fact, the saint writes that in regard to external works (the things we do for others), "the sum total of the Christian religion consists in mercy."<sup>39</sup>

#### THE GREATEST VIRTUE AND ITS GREATEST OBSTACLE

Emphasizing the preeminence of compassion, Aquinas writes, "In itself, mercy takes precedence of other virtues, for it belongs to mercy to be bountiful to others, and, what is more, to succor others in their wants, which pertains chiefly to one who stands above."<sup>40</sup> In the same article, he writes, "Of all the virtues which relate to our neighbor, mercy is the greatest, even as its act surpasses all others, since it belongs to one who is higher and better to supply the defect of another, in so far as the latter is deficient." As we try to fix what is wrong with someone else, we stand in a superior position. We can give the help that the other person requires. Yet, if we act from mercy, our superior position does not yield to arrogance nor does it patronize.

Aquinas recognizes that some people "recede from works of mercy" because they don't want to be bothered with other people's misery.<sup>41</sup> They may rationalize that others suffer deservedly.<sup>42</sup> There are people, for instance, who think that those who suffered during Hurricane Katrina deserved it because they should have evacuated when they were told to. Others say that anyone who is jobless in America doesn't want to work. Aquinas says that such people lack sympathy because they are proud and arrogant. They are so arrogant and self-interested they don't want to expend their time or energy on other people unless they see some good in it for themselves. In a highly competitive, individualistic culture, few of us practice compassion on a daily basis. Social pressure encourages us to think, "What's in it for me?" We can see "what's in it" for us when it comes to

our friends and family, whom we see as part of our own identity. But compassion for others doesn't seem to fit in with the self-interested attitude a highly competitive, individualistic culture promotes.

In response to the issue of self-interest, the Dalai Lama observes that all sentient beings have an innate desire for happiness and dislike suffering just as much as we do. Because others want the same thing that we do, if we treat others with love and respect, they will treat us the same way. According to the Dalai Lama, when we approach others with compassion, we create an atmosphere congenial to "receiving affection or a positive response from the other person."<sup>43</sup> The more we treat others compassionately, the more warmth and affection we receive. If we like to receive affection or positive responses from others, then we can see "what's in it" for us. Further, compassion is contagious. If you compassionately allow someone in need to precede you in line at the check-out counter, that person will be more likely to be more compassionate when driving, letting someone who has been waiting to make a turn pull out in front of her. The driver may, in turn, be more compassionate to his spouse who has a headache, offering her assistance. Who knows how far the ripple effect may extend?

#### LEVELS OF COMPASSION

But, on Aquinas's account of compassion, how can we receive the benefits of compassion unless God infuses us with charity? The saint responds that the act of charity, which is love, can "dispose man to receive the infusion of charity."<sup>44</sup> In this way, it is like the other virtues that first take root in a person through individual actions. In fact, Aquinas teaches that there is a more attenuated form of compassion that we can develop through our own efforts. We don't need any help to be generous to our "friends or others united to us."<sup>45</sup> Generous acts can result in the virtue of generosity or liberality, which occurs when we regularly and spontaneously do favors for people we are attached to. If the favors are motivated by love, the generous or liberal person may be open to receive charity and experience its interior effect of compassion.

Corresponding to the virtue of liberality, the Dalai Lama acknowledges that there is an ordinary love and compassion, the kind of affection one feels because of a selfish motivation. Feeling this ordinary virtue, a person cares about certain people because they temporarily help him or they are his friends. Because this "ordinary" kind of love and compassion are based on attachment, it is restricted to a relatively small number of people:

Our ordinary sense of love and compassion is actually very much involved with attachment. For your own wife or husband, your parents, your children, you have a feeling of compassion and love. . . . It is centered on a selfish motivation—because these are *my* mother, *my* father, *my* children, I love them. In contrast to this is a clear recognition of the importance and rights of others. If compassion is developed from that viewpoint, it will reach even to enemies.<sup>46</sup>

Aquinas would clearly agree with His Holiness. But, in the saint's view, the greater form of compassion, which rises above the ordinary, requires an extraordinary act. In other words, the natural virtue, which he would agree is "very much involved with attachment," requires the agency of the supernatural. When God infuses us with mercy, we consider only the needs of others and not their relationship to us.<sup>47</sup> Extending mercy, we don't consider whether someone will appreciate our efforts or return our favors. Likewise, the Dalai Lama recognizes a deeper love and compassion that extends to "even those who would do you harm." He adds, "As compassion grows stronger, so does the willingness to commit yourself to the welfare of all beings, even if you have to do it alone."

Expanding the idea of a lesser form of compassion and a more complete compassion, the Dalai Lama describes three stages of compassion.<sup>48</sup> The first stage is found in a person who has a compassionate motivation. His Holiness refers to this level as the "seed" of compassion. Many parents teach their children the seed of compassion when they say, "Now Johnny, how would you feel if you were in Mary's shoes?" The question asks children to imaginatively feel what someone else feels. If a child imagines this, he or she is experiencing empathy. Referring to this "seed" stage, the Dalai Lama explains that "Compassion is understood mainly in terms of empathy—our ability to enter into and, to some extent, share others' suffering."<sup>49</sup> Yet empathy is just the beginning of compassion.

The middle stage is reached when a person puts his motivation into practice, renouncing immoral actions because they bring suffering. In a concrete situation, the practitioner gives a higher priority to extending compassion than to living a life of pleasure. If someone needs his immediate help just when he is about to go to a party that he has been looking forward to, he will choose to help and prefer to help. His commitment to be compassionate is his natural ally. Because this stage requires continuous effort, it is the most difficult of all the stages. At this stage, the practitioner "might become tired and discouraged." But if the practitioner perseveres despite the difficulties he encounters, his commitment to be compassionate will increase.

If the practitioner perseveres sufficiently, he will be "in the continual presence of great compassion." In this greatest and final stage, the compassionate person "will always be fully engaged in the welfare of others." The practitioner will dissipate his feeling that he is a self separate from all others. Feeling the suffering of others as his own suffering, the fully compassionate person tries to bring a complete end to all the sufferings of other sentient beings. Using what is called "skillful means," the practitioner will show compassion to others in a way that is consistent with their individual needs and circumstances. Taking into account the circumstances and the particular temperament of the person the practitioner extends compassion to, he or she may communicate directly or more subtly; he or she may present either a nurturing appearance or a sterner one. The Dalai Lama describes skillful means as "the efforts we make to ensure that our deeds are motivated by compassion" after considering "the particularity of the situation."<sup>50</sup>

Although Aquinas doesn't discuss various stages of compassion, he does dis-

tinguish three levels of charity based on the way a person pursues charity.<sup>51</sup> Because compassion is an effect of charity, his discussion suggests that just as charity has different stages, so does compassion. According to Aquinas, the beginner in charity is primarily concerned with avoiding sin and desires, which oppose charity. For beginners, charity has to be encouraged and nurtured because of its fragility. This stage is compatible with having the compassionate motivation that the Dalai Lama discusses.

At a deeper level, Aquinas says that the individual's primary pursuit is to progress in virtue. Clearly, his or her progress requires continuous effort and perseverance in the face of difficulties. Aquinas describes such people as "proficient" in virtue, and he says that their chief aim is to strengthen their charity.

The highest level belongs to the perfect, who pursue "union with and enjoyment of God." He writes that this perfect kind of charity belongs to those "who desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ." While the Dalai Lama doesn't mention God or Christ, both men agree that in this final stage of compassion the practitioner will be "in the continual presence of great compassion" and "will always be fully engaged in the welfare of others."

For Aquinas, the way to progress from one level to another is through individual acts of charity. Each act of charity, which is love, disposes a person to an increase of charity. Each act makes a person more ready to act again according to charity. Loving more fervently and striving to advance in charity results in a more intense feeling of charity.

The Dalai Lama offers a more detailed explanation of how to progress from one level to another. First, he tells us to imagine three specific people in front of us: a friend, an enemy, and a neutral person. As we observe them, we should "consider that there is no certainty that any one of them will at all times either help or harm." It could happen that one of them helped you last month but harmed you last year. Conversely, the other person may have helped you last year but harmed you last month. So thinking of our person as a friend and another as an enemy is somewhat arbitrary. The Dalai Lama says, "Help or harm from another is temporary, and mere timing cannot be the basis for choosing intimacy or alienation."<sup>52</sup> When we feel convinced of this, "a sense of equanimity will develop toward these three." This feeling should gradually be extended toward other beings.

Next we should consider the kindness other beings have shown to us. Think about how the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the houses we live in, and a multitude of other things we enjoy are produced by other people. As we reflect on these things, we feel grateful to those who have labored to make it possible for us to use their products.

Continuing, toward the same goal, the Dalai Lama writes about the next step, which involves a feeling of love. This is the kind of love that wishes for the happiness of all sentient beings. It's the kind of love that wishes that sentient beings who lack happiness have happiness. In his words, "As much as you view sentient beings with love, finding a sense of pleasantness in everyone and cherishing

them, so much do you generate the next step, compassion, which is a wish that they be free from suffering and all of its causes.”<sup>53</sup> In short, after we use our reasoning and imagination to develop equanimity toward all beings, we gratefully reflect on their kindness until we view them with love. At this point, we can easily generate compassion.

#### COMPASSION TOWARD ENEMIES

Both Aquinas and the Dalai Lama insist that compassion should be extended to our enemies. Many may not understand how anyone can have compassion for his or her enemy. They may be familiar with the idea of nonviolence because the Gospel also tells us to love our enemies and to turn the other cheek. But they may either not accept the Gospel message or, if they do, they may find it too difficult to implement in their lives. It is not that people who hate their enemies lack empathy; rather they judge that sometimes hate, anger, or bitterness is warranted. In short, the scope of their empathy is limited to certain people. How, they may ask, can we be required to have warm feelings for those who wish to harm us?

However, Aquinas and the Dalai Lama aren't asking us to feel affection toward our enemies. As Aquinas notes, “this would be impossible.” In his discussion of charity,<sup>54</sup> Aquinas says that we should love our enemies in a general sense, in accord with their nature. After all, they too are our neighbors. Further, we should be prepared to love each enemy “if the necessity were to occur.” In other words, we should be ready to come to their assistance when it is urgent to do so. If we see an enemy who has just been injured in a car accident, for instance, we should stop and help him. Anyone who has even the least amount of charity and compassion will extend this assistance. Further, when we pray for people in general, we should not exclude our enemy from our prayer. In other words, we shouldn't pray that God heal the sick, except for our enemies. Aquinas adds that when we do a favor for the whole community, that favor shouldn't exclude enemies. We shouldn't offer to fund a section of a park or library only on the condition that our enemies can't use it.

As we advance in charity, we'll find it easier to put our animosity aside and respond compassionately. Those who are fully developed in charity may show their enemies “signs of love” and do favors for them in order to win them over by love. The person who has compassion in abundance is able to put her arms around an enemy who has just lost a loved one. Aquinas explains that the more one loves God, the more we love our neighbor. By way of analogy, he says that “if we loved a certain man very much, we would love his children though they were unfriendly towards us.” Our deep love of God will naturally move us to love our enemies.

Actually, a true love of God, in Aquinas's view, is incompatible with hating an adversary. Suppose we see that an enemy is very ill and needs help. If we claim to love God, we can't turn away from our enemy in hatred. This would

be to allow hate to predominate over love. It would amount to valuing our hate for our enemy over our love for God.<sup>55</sup> No person who feels the friendship of God that is charity will permit this. We can't love our enemy insofar as he is an enemy to us, but we can love him insofar as he belongs to God.

The Dalai Lama explains that our enemies can be our teachers by helping us practice compassion. Each morning, he focuses on those Chinese leaders and officials who torture or kill Tibetans. Then he draws their ignorance, prejudice, hatred, and pride into himself. Having already acquired a virtuous character, he doesn't think their vicious attitudes could change his behavior. But, he hopes, his practice lessens their problems. Even if it doesn't, his morning ritual has the positive effect of giving him peace of mind.<sup>56</sup>

Not only do enemies help us practice compassion, but, according to the Dalai Lama, they help us develop tolerance and patience. In contrast, he notes, that you can't learn these virtues "from a religious teacher or your parents." Supposing you have benevolent teachers and parents, they can't test "the strength of your tolerance."<sup>57</sup> We don't have to develop tolerance for those we love or feel great respect toward.

If we don't care enough about acquiring virtue to be motivated to feel compassion for our enemies, the Dalai Lama provides us with a different kind of thought experiment. He asks us to imagine our hated enemy earnestly begging our forgiveness and regularly doing acts of kindness toward us. Imagine his tears of repentance, his words of entreaty, and his many attempts to appease us with desirable gifts and time-consuming favors. If our enemy actually did all this things, could we any longer think of him as completely evil? We would probably relinquish this belief, reinforced by the reflection that no one is completely evil. If, out of gratitude for no longer being burdened by this false belief, we look more deeply, we may find some good qualities in the person we perceived as our enemy. Then, the Dalai Lama counsels, we should keep reminding ourselves of these good qualities until our feeling of hatred gradually dissipates.<sup>58</sup> Once we no longer feel the albatross of hatred around our necks, we feel the exhilaration of a newfound freedom. Perhaps the lure of such freedom is enough to make us seriously attempt this thought experiment.

#### MUTUALLY ENRICHING UNDERSTANDINGS

The greatest difference between Aquinas's discussion of compassion and the Dalai Lama's is that Aquinas connects compassion with an infused virtue, whereas the Dalai Lama does not make this connection. In fact, the Dalai Lama suggests that we can acquire compassion based on our own efforts. Yet, if we look at the practical implications of having compassion, the difference becomes negligible. According to Aquinas, an infused virtue is a gift from God. But God doesn't announce to a person that she is the recipient of a gift. Just as one may be given an ordinary gift and never open the package, one may be given a gift from God and never exercise it. The only way to know if we have been gifted



with charity and its accompanying effect, compassion, is by observing the way we feel and act toward others. In this way, infused virtues, such as charity, depend on our feelings and actions. We can recognize the gift only when we see it, but we can only see it in our interactions with others. Regardless of whether compassion is infused or acquired, it must be put into action. Because Aquinas acknowledges that God doesn't act for us, both he and the Dalai Lama would agree that putting compassion into action is something only a human being can do.

There is another difference between the two discussions of compassion that has enormous practical implications. Aquinas insists that we should extend compassion only to other human beings, whereas the Dalai Lama argues that we should extend it to all sentient beings. His Holiness contends that all beings, including nonhuman animals, seek peace, comfort, and security. Each of us fears pain and desires happiness. Just as humans cherish their lives, the Dalai Lama recognizes that animals, too, cherish living.<sup>59</sup>

Philosophically, Aquinas would agree with the Dalai Lama on these points. His main argument for not extending compassion to animals is based on his theological belief that they cannot enjoy God's friendship in heaven. As a result of his theology, Aquinas's account of compassion wouldn't have a problem with factory farming or animal experimentation whereas the Dalai Lama sees these enterprises as incompatible with compassion.<sup>60</sup> Yet factory farming, animal experimentation, trapping, and other commonplace practices inflict enormous suffering. If we could see how the pig tethered by the neck in a small metal pen experiences terror before becoming bacon, or be present when rabbits have household products poured directly into their open eyes in product testing, or observe how a mother raccoon chews off her own feet in a leghold trap to return to her babies in their den, then the need for compassion toward nonhuman animals would become manifest. No compassionate person would seek benefit for himself if it means that other feeling beings will be forced to undergo deprivation, starvation, mutilation, burning, and scalding, as they so regularly do in animal experimentation. If Jesus's compassion sets the model for Christian behavior, then how can we ignore the suffering of "the least among us"?

In this aspect of their accounts of compassion, the Dalai Lama's point is stronger than Aquinas's, for if we select who we extend compassion toward, we aren't truly experiencing compassion. When we choose to feel compassion for some beings but not others, it is simply judgment wearing a disguise. It was pointed out that the Latin word for compassion—*compassio*—literally means "to suffer with." The very word implies that we should extend compassion to all beings who are capable of suffering. Compassion is the kind of virtue that can be extended limitlessly. Unlike material goods, compassion can't be exhausted. Tibetan Buddhism observes that as compassion increases in its scope or breadth, it also increases its depth. The person who practices compassion can feel the *same* depth of love, the same intimacy, for all sentient beings that he or she feels toward family and close

friends. Compassion makes us feel connected to sentient individuals in a way that transforms us.

Yet Aquinas's contention that we should extend compassion to our spiritual nature, our soul, more than we should extend it to others is a point that could bolster the Dalai Lama's account. The Dalai Lama says that we should cultivate compassion first for friends, then neutral persons, then enemies, and finally for all sentient beings.<sup>61</sup> But this "order of compassion" overlooks the point that it takes a healthy soul, a healthy psyche, to truly feel compassion for others in a way that precludes self-interest. The person who lacks salutary self-love is always seeking to acquire something more to compensate for this lack, even at the expense of others. Rather than self-love, this egotistical grasping indicates a weak ego. Attempting to cope, a person with a weak ego competes against others to prove something to himself or favorably compares himself to others to show that he is worthy. Amid this competition, comparison, and insecurity about his own inherent goodness, it is very difficult for the insecure person to feel compassion for others. After all, how can one give what one does not have? In order to give compassion to another, a person must *first* love herself. In fact, our compassion for others is derivative of our love and compassion for ourselves. We want for others the good things we want for ourselves. If we concentrate, instead, on extending compassion to others and neglect giving it to ourselves, we will end up frustrated and feeling worse about ourselves than before we began our attempts.

The weaknesses in Aquinas's and the Dalai Lama's accounts of compassion should not be ignored because they impede the practice of compassion. It is vitally important to extend compassion to nonhuman animals and it is also essential to first treat oneself compassionately. Nevertheless, the Western and Eastern sages offer very compatible accounts of compassion. Taken together, they can help us to better understand compassion, which facilitates our experience of it. By first considering and then interiorizing their best insights into this virtue, we may find a great gift within ourselves that can yield great gifts to others. As we become a gift to others, we may influence them to find their own gift. These cascading gifts have the potential to change the world. Think of it!

#### NOTES

1. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *The Heart of Compassion* (Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press, 1997), p. 64.

2. Henri de Lubac, *Aspects of Buddhism* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954), pp. 15–53.

3. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), p. xiii.

4. Diana Fritz Cates, *Choosing to Feel: Virtue, Friendship, and Compassion for Friends* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1997), p. 131.

5. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Cultivating Compassion*, trans. Jeffrey Hopkins (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), p. 157.

6. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), II-II, q. 30, a. 1.
7. Ibid.
8. "Angelina Jolie: Her Mission and Motherhood," on CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360 De-grees*, June 20, 2006.
9. The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, p. 73.
10. The Dalai Lama, *The Art of Happiness* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 114.
11. The Dalai Lama, *Kindness, Clarity, Insight* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2006), p. 48.
12. The Dalai Lama, *The Art of Happiness*, p. 113.
13. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 30, a. 2.
14. The Dalai Lama, *Kindness, Clarity, Insight*, p. 116.
15. The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, pp. 129–130.
16. The Dalai Lama, *The Heart of Compassion*, p. 70.
17. Ibid., p. 75.
18. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 32, a. 10.
19. Ibid., II-II, q. 32, a. 6.
20. Ibid., II-II, q. 30, a. 1.
21. Ibid., II-II, q. 30, a. 3.
22. Ibid.
23. The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, pp. 73–74.
24. The Dalai Lama, *Kindness, Clarity, Insight*, p. 69.
25. De Lubac, *Aspects of Buddhism*, pp. 37–40.
26. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 23, a. 1.
27. Ibid., II-II, q. 25, a. 1.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., II-II, q. 23, a. 2.
30. Aquinas continues discussing this order, arguing that we should love a neighbor who is a good person more than one who is not good; we should love those who are more closely related to us more than those who are better people; we should love our blood relatives more than others; we should love our parents more than our children, our father more than our mother, and our parents more than our spouse. In II-II, q. 26, he devotes thirteen articles to the order of charity.
31. De Lubac, *Aspects of Buddhism*, pp. 30–32.
32. Joseph Roccasalvo, "Toward an Atheism of Reverence: The Special Case of Buddhism." *Chicago Studies* 41, no. 2 (summer 2002): 210.
33. Question sessions with His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama Concerning the Kalachakra Initiation, Dharamsala, India, November 5, 1983; August 13, 1984; January 22, 1985; March 25, 1985; March 26, 1986; trans. Alexander Berzin.
34. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 25, a. 4.
35. Ibid., II-II, q. 28, a. 1.
36. Ibid., II-II, q. 29, a. 1.
37. The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, p. 75.
38. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 30, a. 4.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., II-II, q. 31, a. 4.
41. Ibid., I-II, q. 70, a. 4.
42. Ibid., II-II, q. 30, a. 3.
43. The Dalai Lama, *The Art of Happiness*, p. 69.
44. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 24, aa. 2–3.
45. Ibid., I-II, q. 69, a. 3.
46. The Dalai Lama, *Kindness, Clarity, Insight*, p. 19.

47. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 69, a. 3.
48. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *How to Expand Love: Widening the Circle of Loving Relationships* (New York: Atria Books, 2005), pp. 134–136.
49. The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, p. 123.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
51. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 24, a. 9.
52. The Dalai Lama, *How to Expand Love*, p. 36.
53. The Dalai Lama, *Kindness, Clarity, Insight*, pp. 46–48.
54. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 25, aa. 8–9.
55. Aquinas, *De Caritate*, a. 8.
56. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *How to Practice: The Way to a Meaningful Life*, trans. and ed. Jeffrey Hopkins (New York: Pocket Books, 2002), p. 39.
57. The Dalai Lama, *The Heart of Compassion*, p. 73.
58. The Dalai Lama, *The Art of Happiness*, p. 176.
59. The Dalai Lama, *The Heart of Compassion*, p. 65.
60. The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, p. 157.
61. The Dalai Lama, *How to Expand Love*, p. 142.