

RESPONDING TO GOD'S LOVE: COMPASSIONATE SERVICE

This way has been tried, this way is certain.

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

I. THE CENTRALITY OF SERVICE IN THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

What is the best possible way in which you can give yourself to someone else? How can you most fully, most richly give who and what you are to another so that he or she can receive your gift of yourself in a way that genuinely advances and furthers him or her? How, in other words, can you give yourself to someone else in such a way that your self-gift advantages that other and not, first and foremost, you?

To address this important question, let me direct your attention to one of the most startling claims in the New Testament. Indeed, I can not help but think that at least some of our earliest fellow-Christians must have been sorely tempted to say, "This is intolerable; it can't possibly be what Jesus meant. Let's simply omit it." The fact that the first generations of believers left it in is really quite astonishing and certainly very, very brave. The passage to which I am referring is Matthew 25:31-46, the familiar story of the separation of the sheep from the goats at the last judgment. The Son of Man will come in glory, and all the peoples of the world will be gathered before him. He will mount the throne of judgment and separate all humanity "as the shepherd separates sheep from goats" (Mt 25:32 NJB), putting the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. Then he will address those at the right: "Blest are you because when I was hungry, you gave me food; when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink; when I was a stranger, you welcomed me; when I was naked, you clothed me; when I was sick, you visited me; when I was imprisoned, you came to me." And all those on his right will respond, "When did we ever see you in such straits? When did we ever serve you in these ways?" And he will reply, "When you did it to the least

of my brothers or sisters, you did it to me." And then he will turn to those at his left: "And you are condemned, because when you saw me hungry and thirsty, homeless and naked, sick and imprisoned, you did nothing for me." And they will object, "When did we ever see you in such a condition and turn away?" And he will tell them, "When you refused to serve the least of my brothers or sisters, you denied your service to me" (Mt 25:33-45).

To the best of my knowledge, this is the only passage in the whole of the collection of documents which we call the New Testament which describes the last judgment. The New Testament has a great deal about the end of the world or the end of this era of history, but there is not a syllable describing any criteria for the last judgment except Matthew 25:31-46. And notice what the only criterion of the last judgment is. There is not a word about whether you belonged to the church, not a word about whether you were baptized, not a syllable about whether you ever celebrated the eucharist, not a question about whether you prayed, nothing at all about what creed you professed or what you knew about doctrine or theology. Indeed, there is nothing specifically religious at all. Not one doctrine, not one specifically religious act of worship or ritual turns out to be relevant to the criterion for the last judgment. The only criterion for that final judgment, according to Matthew 25, is how you treated your brothers and sisters.

Now, it is startling enough that no explicitly religious belief or action is relevant to the last judgment. But it gets worse (or better, perhaps, depending upon your point of view). For notice, please, that *both* those on the right say to him, "When did we see you hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick or imprisoned, and serve your needs?" *and* those on the left ask, "When did we see you in such need and ignore you?" One thing *both* the "sheep" *and* the "goats" agree on: they did not think about the Lord at all when they served or failed to serve their brothers and sisters. And both are told, "When you did or did not serve the least of my brothers and sisters, you served or failed to serve me." The astonishing point is that no religious motivation is the basis for the last judgment. Not only are specifically religious acts beside the point, so are specifically religious motives. The point is not that you love your brothers and sisters *for Jesus' sake*, but simply that you love your brothers and sisters. In effect, both sides reply to the Son of Man, "We didn't think about you when we acted—or failed to act—for our brothers and sisters. It wasn't for your sake." And in both cases the response is, in effect, "I don't care *why* you did or did not act; what matters is that you did or that you didn't."

Earlier in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has said, "Anyone who gives a cup of cold water to someone because he is my disciple will receive a reward"

(Mt 10:42). The story in Matthew 25:31–46 takes this a step further, maintaining, as it were, that anyone who gives another a cup of cold water *for any reason whatsoever* will be rewarded. The point is not that you serve your brothers and sisters for the love of God. The point is that you serve your brothers and sisters. What matters is not *why* you did it but *that* you did it.

In short, the ground for the final judgment is *agaphe*. The only relevant question at the judgment is, “Did you give yourself away to those who needed you?” That you did so because you are a Christian may be wonderful, but it is not significant for the question. That you did so because Jesus told you to do so, or because you cannot stand by and see someone starve, or because you simply enjoyed helping the other person, is all irrelevant. For whatever reason you did so has landed you on the side of the sheep. Once again, we come to the extraordinary Christian claim about *agaphe*. Whatever the motive, the issue is to give oneself away as completely, fully and richly as possible.

Of course, to say that the love of God is not necessarily the motive is not to say that the goal of giving oneself away is not intimately linked to our understanding of God. I simply mean that the link does not consist in God’s being the explicit motive for our love of neighbor. Let me offer two images, both drawn from very perceptive nineteenth-century authors. The first is from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*, section 125, the section Nietzsche entitled “The Madman.” This passage is famous because it is the first time that Nietzsche makes his famous—or infamous—proclamation that “God is dead.” Section 125 is a kind of parable. A madman comes into the marketplace carrying a lantern and says that he is seeking God. The people who are in the marketplace laugh and ask whether God is lost. “Has he wandered off?” they respond, mockingly “Is he hiding? Has he emigrated?” But the madman turns on them and silences their sneers: “You do not know the great and terrible news. God is dead, and we have killed him, you and I. It was the mightiest deed ever done. We have murdered God.” Those in the marketplace are thunderstruck when the madman presses his announcement further: “How could we do it? How did we erase the whole horizon? How did we disconnect the earth from the sun? Haven’t you noticed that the world is becoming colder and darker, for the earth is spinning out into cold, empty space? There is no sense of direction now, no up or down, no forward or backward, no right or left.” His hearers are shocked, and the madman sadly observes, “You do not realize your great and terrible deed! We have murdered God, and yet you do not realize what this means. We have to become bigger than we are to live within the cavity created by the death of God. We must become gods ourselves if we are to

live in this world without God.” And when the people remain in stunned silence, the madman leaves them, saying, “I have come too early. They are not yet ready to confront the consequences of their great deed—although they themselves have done it.”

Nietzsche’s parable suggests that the people to whom the madman speaks and who initially respond with ridicule have killed God and, in some odd way, already know that God is dead. But they cannot face that fact with all its immense consequences. I think that there can be little doubt that the madman and his proclamation are Nietzsche’s depiction of himself and his work. He proclaimed to his age the news that his contemporaries knew but did not want to acknowledge fully, namely, that the idea of God which Judaism and Christianity had taught the western world and which had so deeply shaped the lives of men and women for centuries upon centuries in every aspect was now in fact dead. The people in the marketplace—the *laissez-faire* capitalist marketplace of the nineteenth century, governed by social Darwinian, survival-of-the-fittest, dog-eat-dog competition—had killed the idea of God.

How could they maintain that the God who is least wrongly understood as pure and perfect *agaphe* is alive, and conduct their lives in the marketplace and increasingly outside it as though the deepest laws of life are “Always look out for number one” and “Do it to the other guy before he does it to you”? They might not want to accept the consequences of the way they lived, but they had in fact killed God, even if they still liked to use the word and invoke the idea. Nietzsche’s immensely insightful and terribly uncomfortable point was that if the world of the nineteenth-century good, ordinary, middle-class, bourgeois Europe was the world in which one lived, then one lived in a world in which God is dead. Nietzsche, of course, thought that such a world was the only world in which one could live because it was the only world there is: a world indifferent to human concerns of love and happiness, hope and joy, justice and peace. But he also insisted that one could not delude oneself by dressing up that world with left-over notions taken from Christianity. One could not trot out God to comfort oneself when one was frightened or lonely. One could not go on appealing to the love of neighbor when such an idea only makes sense in a world which rests ultimately on the absolute agapic love of God, and God is dead. Instead, Nietzsche maintains, we must face the fact that we live in a universe which is indifferent to us and carve out a space for ourselves. We must become gods if we are to live without God. If we have eliminated God from our world, then we must live in a brand new way. What is that brand new way? We cannot be human any longer. Human beings need the reassurance and comfort of believing in God. If we are to live in a Godless world we must become

superhuman. One has to be more than human to live in a world without God. Become the superhuman or you simply will not be able to live at all.

The second nineteenth-century image I suggest that we consider comes from Fyodor Dostoevsky. At the beginning of *The Brothers Karamazov* the youngest brother, Alyosha, is in a monastery where he has become a disciple of Father Zosima, an elderly monk who is a renowned spiritual director. Fairly early on in the novel Dostoevsky presents the reader with a series of brief interviews between Zosima and various people who consult him about their problems and questions. The series of interviews culminates in Zosima's conversation with a woman who says that she is deeply distraught, that she is uncertain whether she can live any longer with her life as it is. She tells the old monk that if he cannot help her, no one can, and she will have no recourse but to kill herself. Her problem is that she is terrified by her inability to believe in life after death. She cannot even dare to raise the question of believing in God. She does not know how she has ceased to believe. Once she did believe when she was a child, but now the world seems so dark, so cold, that she can believe in nothing, and her lack of belief is sapping every aspect of her life of its vitality and joy. Nothing in life seems to matter if there is no ultimate purpose, no final reason, no God. She can believe in nothing except, perhaps, the weeds that will grow on her grave.

Zosima tells her that what she is experiencing is the most terrible thing that a human being can experience, and that he thinks he can help her. He cannot offer her some abstract argument proving the existence of God, but he can offer her a concrete demonstration. What she must do is go home and every day, very concretely and practically, love the people with whom she comes in contact that day. If she does this, he tells her, she will gradually, step by step, discover that she believes in God. And should she approach truly selfless love—the *agape* of the gospel—she will find that she cannot *not* believe in God. Dostoevsky concluded by having Zosima tell the woman, “This way has been tried. This way is certain.” And the rest of that long and glorious novel is, I think, an exploration of that claim.

Notice that Dostoevsky's woman without faith is very close to one of the people in Nietzsche's marketplace *after* the madman's announcement. She has come to recognize that in her world God is dead and she sees that the world is loosed from its moorings and becoming colder and darker. She knows that she cannot find her way up or down, forward or backward any longer, and she has discovered that she cannot live in this Godless world. But she also knows that she cannot go on pretending that she still believes in God simply because it consoles her. And Zosima tells her that if she is ever to believe in God she must first rediscover the people

around her. Nietzsche's challenge is that if we live as if the law of life is selfishness, then whether we admit it or not, we do not believe in God. Dostoevsky's Zosima replies that if we wish to believe in God, we must live as if the law of life is *agape*. His advice is not “Go home and pray” or “Read the scriptures.” Do not begin by thinking about God. Begin by loving those around you in the most concrete and practical ways. And then you will discover that belief in God is inevitable because the experience of God is so intimately bound up with the experience of self-gift.

We cannot experience God unless we love our brothers and sisters, and we cannot love our brothers and sisters without experiencing God. Dostoevsky is precisely right, I think. You cannot *not* believe in God if you truly love your brothers and sisters because you will experience your ability to love as being a gift to you, not of accomplishment by you. You will find yourself “doing” God, for God will be acting through you. Remember, God is more like a verb than a noun, not a lover but *love*. It is rather like someone asking, “Prove to me that there is such a phenomenon as breathing.” It is not a matter of argument; the person is doing it! In a sense, the Christian demonstration of God is “I love you, therefore God exists.” *Agape* love is experienced as a gift not only by the one loved but also by the lover. For the carefully attentive and self-reflective lover knows that his or her love is so conditioned and so fragile that when it approaches true selflessness the lover's abilities are transcended. That transcending power which we encounter in loving another for the sake of the other is God.

II. DISCERNING OUR CALL TO SERVE

Ah, but how to give oneself away? How do we discover what our particular way of self-gift, our vocation, is? Or, to put it another way, how do we discern the will of God for us?

Before attempting to answer this question, there is a point of great importance to clarify about discerning God's will: to realize that God's will is not the will of some other person out there someplace with which we are supposed to bring our will into line. There is no all-wise, all-powerful person named God who has a plan for us and who gives us hints now and again what that plan is, hints which we are expected to decipher so that we can keep God happy by doing what God wants. That would obviously be a complete misunderstanding of what the Christian community means by God. God is not another person out there. And therefore the will of God is not a will out there. The will of God is the will within and beneath my will. The will of God is the will that carries my

will. God's freedom allows me to be free. To find the will of God, don't look "out there"; drill down to the deepest depths of your own will, and there you will discover the will of God.

It is like looking at a great river. There are many, many currents on the river's surface. Sometimes it may even look as though the river is flowing backward upstream. But in fact, if you look at the river as a whole, it is always moving in one direction—from the mountains to the sea. The same thing is true of the will of God. The will of God is always moving in one direction toward one end. It is always self-gift. The will of God is *agape*, constant and perfect and eternal, and it bears all our wills with it. Sometimes our wills look as though they are going in exactly the opposite direction. But in fact, they are all being carried by that one great will. So, if you wish to discover the will of God, look to the depths of your own will. Discover what it is that you most really and deeply want when you are most really and truly you. When you are you at your best, what is it that you most truly desire? *There* the will of God is discovered.

There is also where the cross is found, because the cross is our desire to give ourselves away. It is our hunger to genuinely hand ourselves over, to give ourselves to others, because it is in doing so that we are most who we are. If you hold onto your life, you will not have life, but if you give it away, you cannot exhaust life. It becomes everlasting life. You become absolutely you. And who, finally, are you? You are the image and likeness of God. If God is pure self-gift, then self-gift is the image in which we are made, the blueprint on which we are built. Therefore, to give ourselves away is what we most deeply desire.

At times we may experience tension between our immediate situation, e.g. family obligations or the completion of studies, and our desire to serve. One of the most difficult lessons to learn is that one cannot do everything at one moment. Much depends on understanding the cycle in which we understand our lives. If everything has to be accomplished in twenty-four hours, then we must be impatient and attempt to perform the most important tasks immediately. But if we can live life in a seven day period, we can give ourselves a little more time for preparation for those all-important tasks. If one can plan one's life in month-long segments, then still greater long-range preparation can be given. And this is even more true, of course, if we can imagine our lives over the course of years. Service of others frequently demands both proximate and remote preparation. Remote preparation for service may be precisely what people may gain in the course of their university years, if those years are used well and wisely.

In St. Matthew's gospel there is an important instruction given by Jesus to his disciples when he sends them out to preach which does not

appear in the gospels of Mark or Luke. You know the familiar story in which Jesus tells them not to take a walking staff or extra sandals or any money with them and to eat whatever is set before them. Basically Matthew includes the same instructions as we find in Luke. But Matthew adds one final instruction from Jesus: "What you receive as a gift, give as a gift" (Mt 10:8). This seems to me the ultimate instruction to all disciples: what you have been given as a gift, give to other people as a gift. This is why we must develop our talents. Why is your work at a university or for your family important? So that you can give it to other people later. There is a saying attributed to Catherine of Siena, one of the great women in the Dominican tradition, that the only reason to learn is to teach, the reason to gain knowledge is to give it away. What you receive as a gift, give as a gift.

But how do we find the best way to give ourselves away? What are some criteria that we can use in decision making? How do we discern our individual vocations? How do we discover what the call to service means for each one of us concretely? There are three signs which, taken together, are nearly infallible. The first is to discover whether this work or service is a source of joy for you. Please notice that I am again speaking of *joy*, not *happiness*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, happiness is dependent on a thousand external factors, whereas joy is the interior conviction that what one is doing is good even if it does not make one happy or content. Being happy cannot co-exist with being frightened or disappointed or lonely or dissatisfied or rejected, but being joyful can. Thus whether or not a particular way of living or working makes you feel happy is irrelevant to the discernment of vocation. But whether or not it is a source of joy, a profound conviction that it is a good way to live a life and spend one's energy and talent, is of immense significance. This echoes back to the discussion of restlessness as opposed to satisfaction. It is, in fact, the first sign that one may have found the will of God.

The second sign is ability and the opportunity for growth. Do you have the strength, the knowledge, the skills needed to live this life or do this work or serve in this way? There are really two questions intertwined here. 1) Do you have what is required for this way of living and working, and is that ability sufficiently formed and shaped at this point? If it requires more forming and shaping, more exercise and education, are you willing to undergo that training? 2) Will this way of living and working make you grow and continue to expand? Will it call forth your talents and gifts? Will it stretch you? This includes a willingness to confront reality, because reality makes us grow. Look for ways in which you pursue the truth of the matter, not what you wish for or what would

make you feel good. If these questions can be answered affirmatively, then one may have the second sign of the will of God.

The third sign is that the vocation which you are considering is a concrete expression of *agape*. Does this way of living and working meet a genuine need in the community? Is it a real way to give yourself away to other people, not just something that you find enjoyable or challenging? Think about Matthew 25. In what ways can you most fully give who and what you are and have another person receive who and what you are in a way that genuinely advances that other person?

Notice that these questions, like those dealing with the second sign, can only be answered in community with others. The decision about joy is probably best dealt with in conversation with friends and a good spiritual director. But, finally, only you can answer “yes” or “no” to the question of whether this vocation is a source of joy. Both you and others must determine whether you have the necessary ability and whether others need you to serve them in this way. For others may not need to be served *in this way* or to be served in this way *by you*.

Now, take those three qualities together, joy, ability/growth, and *agape*. What is it that allows you to find those three qualities? Look for genuine joy, a genuine ability to affirm the rightness of being and the goodness of being creature, of being finite. Give genuine attention to reality, a genuine pursuit of the truth, built on your abilities. Look for ways that allow a genuine capacity to give yourself away. When those qualities come together, that is your decision. And that’s the way in which, it seems to me, you discern your vocation.

No way of service is the only way or even the absolutely best way. You are not called to be Mother Teresa. *You* have to give *you*. You cannot give Mother Teresa for the simple reason that you are not she. You are a different person with different gifts and different abilities, with different weaknesses and different blindnesses. You have to discover what the best, richest, wisest way to give yourself is in your circumstances.

For example, for me the priesthood, the academic life and teaching are very important and fruitful ways that I can give myself in service to others. They provide wonderful channels for me to use what I think are most of my talents. Someone might say to me, “Why are you teaching? Why aren’t you cooking in a soup kitchen?” My response would be, “Because I would be a lousy cook!” Certainly, cooking in that kitchen is neither more nor less important than what I am doing. But for me it is not as good a way to give myself away in service to others.

There is no absolute route to perfect holiness, no simple, universal rule. There is no absolute pattern except *agape*, and what *agape* requires

in each circumstance, in each life, is very, very different. It may produce a Thomas Aquinas or a Dorothy Day, a Teresa of Avila or a Thomas More. It is astonishing to find all of the ways in which you, the unique and peculiar you, can give yourself away. That is why no one should simply follow another person’s pattern for holiness. What one can and should do is take encouragement from others to find one’s own pattern. There will be some ways in which you can model yourself on certain people and find common elements here and there. But you cannot and ought not become Francis of Assisi or Teresa of Avila, because if you did become Francis or Teresa, you would distort who you are. God has already given the world a Francis of Assisi. It does not need a second. Teresa of Avila did a splendid job of being Teresa of Avila. The world does not need a second, inadequate version. But the world has never had you and it does need you or God would not have made you, and so you have to discover the unique ways in which you can give yourself away in service to the world.

Another question to consider is: In what way do we work to change structures that are unjust as well as serve others? We have to capitalize on what is good in structures and we have to try to alleviate what is bad in them. Structures are neither as bad as we feel they are, nor ever as good as the people who made them think that they are. We could use the same basic statement of Augustine on restlessness as a way of dealing with structures: Even the best are going to be inadequate.

So there is a certain sense in which structures have to be accepted but at the same time criticized always. We have to allow the suffering of the poor to be the standard by which structures are criticized, that it’s always the people who are most marginalized who will give us the perspective from which the underside can most clearly be seen. We have to respond on every level to the demands of the gospel and to the demands to enter into fellowship with all of our brothers and sisters. That is going to mean entering into fellowship on both personal levels and on communal levels. Unless we can work on both levels, we are not entering into full communion with the poor.

That means very clear-eyed, careful analysis of social structures, and, at the same time, recognition that after we have built the best of those structures, they are going to be inadequate. It also means that we cannot let go of personal engagement, never being allowed to simply retreat to the level of being the executive who decrees structural change, but is not personally involved in the building of those new structures. We have to work on both levels.

III. SERVING GOD IN THE TANGLE OF OUR MINDS

The effort to discern how to give oneself away does not usually yield clear and irrefutable answers. Working through the discernment process is not like doing a mathematical equation in which you add so much joy plus an adequate amount of growth plus considerable *agape* and so arrive at one hundred percent. Seldom does one achieve that kind of clarity in life.

In his play about Thomas More, *A Man for All Seasons*, Robert Bolt has Thomas explain to his daughter Margaret why he is taking the difficult and dangerous position he does in opposition to the king. When she objects that she cannot understand how he can be so certain that he is right, More replies that he is by no means certain. But, he tells her, it is not his part to be certain. "God made the angels to show him splendor, as he made animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But Man he made to serve him wittily in the tangle of his mind!" That is, I think, precisely right. God does not want splendor or simplicity or innocence from us. God wants us to serve God in the tangle of our minds. Don't try to be an angel or, for that matter, a plant or an animal; be a human being. It is, in fact, much preferred to being an angel, let alone an animal or a plant. Isn't that, after all, the point of the incarnation? The one who is divine did not empty himself to become an angel but became human like all other human beings (Phil 2:6-7).

To be human is to be endlessly caught in a web of decisions among partial goods. It involves choosing between shades of grey, seldom if ever between absolute black and white. It means taking the risk of discerning the good and acting upon it insofar as you can see the good, knowing that you never see it with perfect clarity. To live and work and serve God and our brothers and sisters in the tangle of our minds demands infinite patience with ourselves and with one another. The most terrible thing that happens to people who are concerned about making moral decisions is that they kill other people who are concerned about making moral decisions but happen to make them differently. Remember, the inquisition was run by very good, really morally concerned people. If we realize that when we discern the good and make decisions, we do so in fear and trembling, knowing that we can never have full knowledge, perfect clarity, and final wisdom, then we may be less inclined to beat other people over the heads with the decisions that we have made. We must ceaselessly enter into conversations with others in the expectation that they too are trying to choose life rather than death (in the imagery of Deuteronomy 30:15), but, like us, are also puzzled about the various

ways of moving toward life and away from death. And those varied paths must be honored and respected even as we criticize one another's choices, because we must begin by assuming that all of us are trying to serve God in the tangle of our minds.

One of the besetting problems of the church is the assumption that, somehow or other, faith leads to clear and simple answers. In my experience, faith seldom provides answers—but it does raise questions and prods us to explore the truth.

If, for example, you are confronted by a terrible tragedy—let us say, the death of a young spouse and parent from cancer—and you believe that we live in an essentially haphazard universe, then the death may be very sad, but it presents no great problem for one's fundamental attitudes toward life. But if you are confronted by that death and also try to maintain that the universe is in the hands of an all-good, all-wise and all-powerful God, *then* you have a problem. Faith is not the resolution of that problem; faith is what makes it a problem. There would be no difficulty if you were not a believer. Faith is what makes the tragedy into a real dilemma.

I suspect that we believers have to be more and more willing to share with one another and with others who are not believers that we live in the tangle of our minds. We must be willing to share with others the immense difficulty of trying to be authentically human in our world in our time. There is a strange and powerful image for this in Genesis 32:23-33. Jacob is returning to Canaan with his now quite large family after years away. He knows that he will have to meet his brother Esau, now a powerful chieftain, whom he cheated and who has no reason to love him. He cannot sleep and paces the river bank late at night. And during that long, lonely night he wrestles with someone. Neither he nor his assailant can prevail over the other, until dawn when the unknown adversary gives Jacob a sharp blow bruising his hip. But Jacob will not let go until his opponent blesses him. Then God—for he is, of course, the wrestling partner—renames Jacob Israel, which Genesis interprets as "the one who struggles with God."

To admit that our minds are in a tangle is to admit that all of us are engaged in fighting that midnight battle with God. Like Jacob, we have to fight all through the night, we must serve in the tangle of our minds, and know that we cannot get out of that tangle unscathed. It would be splendid to cut through that tangle, but splendor is for angels. Innocence would not notice the tangle, but that is for animals. And we are neither angels nor animals. We are human beings who claim the name of the new Israel, and so we are the people who struggle with God in the long and sometimes lonely nights. We are the people who struggle with God until

we end up with a bruised hip, and it is that bruise which is the evidence that we have fought the good fight in the tangle of our minds.

For remember, the one undeniably true statement that we can make about God is that God is mystery. So we are people engaged in grappling with mystery, or perhaps better, people with whom mystery is grappling. The end of the story of Jacob's night of wrestling with God is that he left the Jordan bank limping because of his shattered hip (Gen 32:32). What a perfect image! Jacob goes limping across the Jordan into the promised land, and the limp is the proof that he has now become Israel, the one who struggles with God. The sign of being the true Israel is that you have been bruised in the struggle with mystery.

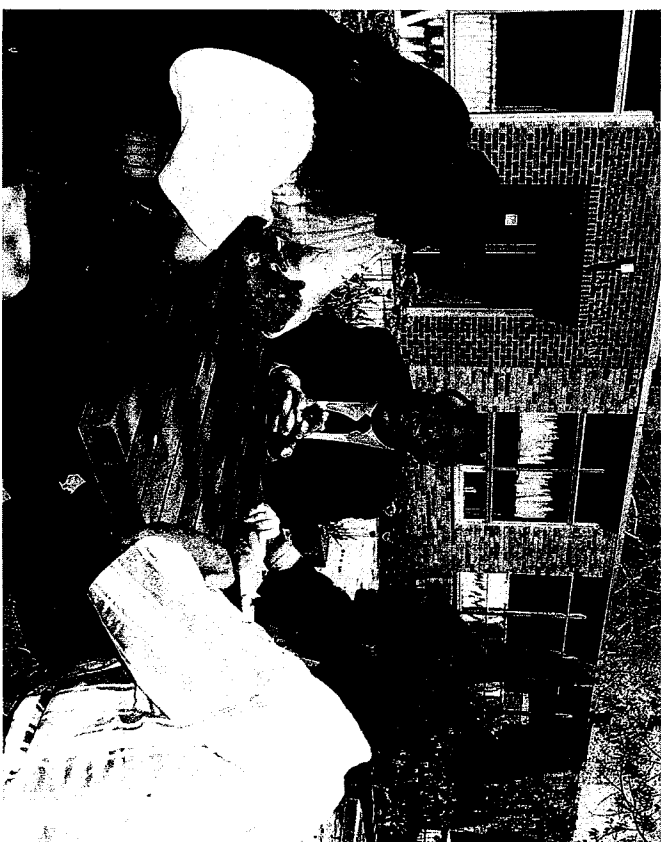
We must be willing to share the story of our limp with others by admitting in our teaching, in our relationships, in our service of others that we have not got a perfect and finished grasp of the truth but are eager to continue the struggle to clarify our partial vision. We may never find fully adequate answers, but the fight to find the answers is worth everything. For it is in the tangle of the mind that we become truly human and therefore also truly and authentically Christian. And the sign of that is that we approach the promised land limping.

In no aspect of our lives do we find our minds more tangled than when we grapple with the problem of evil. But everything we have said thus far is mere "whistling past the graveyard" unless we grapple with that mystery in Chapter 5.

Responses to Chapter 4

A group of four Notre Dame students met to discuss their reactions and connections to this chapter. These students refer to their participation in a variety of service experiences from which they find insight from Michael Himes.

Mike: The part of Father Himes' discussion of Dostoevsky that struck me was Father Zosima's advice to the woman who has confronted him with this rather engaging predicament. Father Zosima's advice is that you must go home and every day very concretely and practically set out to love those persons with whom you come into contact that day. If you do, bit by bit, you'll discover that you cannot "not" believe in God. This quotation speaks very clearly and specifically to my service experience which was to visit an elderly gentleman once a week for four months. What happened was we had a relationship that developed over a long period of time but did so in a very incremental way of forty-five minutes a week.



Student respondents to chapter 4 with Michael Himes (l to r) Sarah Keyes, Mike Barkasy, Katie Bergin and Bob Elmer