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Remember compassion this holiday season

Sharon Abercrombie | Dec. 13, 2011 Eco Catholic

What if more of us were to go out of our way to do a compassionate deed, something out of the ordinary? Think how much better off our planet and all beings would be.

Case in point: On Sunday morning, I was driving down North High Street in Columbus, Ohio, on an errand. Abruptly, traffic came to a halt. Four blocks ahead, blue and red flashing lights from police cruisers blinked. What was wrong? A fender-bender?

Crowds of people rushed toward the commotion. Fuming, I turned down a side street, hoping to get around the traffic delay.

After winding through a series of little neighborhoods that ended up going nowhere, I turned toward High Street once again, hoping the way was clear. But no, there were those police cruisers again. Now I could see why. They were serving as escorts for marchers carrying an assorted group of flags representing Mexico and other countries as well as large banners depicting Our Lady of Guadalupe. One kid had made his own version, decorating the border around the lady with an oval frame of intricate curly-cues, cut from a humble brown box.

Suddenly, I calmed down. What were a few delayed moments when more than 1,000 men, women and kids, bundled against the cold, were processing down the street (3.7 miles, *The Columbus Dispatch* reported Monday morning [1]) on their way to a Spanish Mass in Mary's honor at a local parish?

Out of love and devotion for their lady, the Patron of the Americas, they were walking in the 25-degree cold to celebrate the 1531 appearance of this brown-skinned Mary to a poor Aztec peasant. In December of that year, Mary had something important to tell Juan Diego. He needed to pass her message along to the local bishop. She wanted a shrine built in honor of her and her son. Juan Diego delivered her request. The bishop said no. He wanted proof.

A few days later, on Dec. 12, during another appearance to her Aztec friend, Mary obliged the bishop by doing something unseasonable and extraordinary to get her point across. She caused wildflowers to grow around her feet, even though it was winter. Then Mary picked and arranged the posies inside Juan Diego's cloak. "Don't open it until you reach the bishop's house," she warned him. Of course we know what happened next. When Juan Diego presented his cloak to the prelate, its lining bore the image of Mary as a young, indigenous pregnant woman, the same woman he had seen on the hill.

Where am I going with this? Today in late 2011, here in the western hemisphere, we are living in the midst of both literal and metaphorical winters. Barrenness and disbelief, not to mention anger, cynicism and cruelty haunt us. On the other side of the world, even in tropical weather, the same societal conditions exist. Families are homeless, hungry. Stray animals starve because there is no one to take care of them. The planet is dying because corporations and governments are too greedy and stubborn to institute new sustainable energy policies.

But Mary's example remains with us today. Could each of us dare to follow her example by conjuring up our

own personal wildflowers of compassion, daring and hope?

Six Ohio women have done just that. A *Dispatch* story Sunday [2] told of their efforts to collect used toys for poor children in South Perry, an impoverished Hocking County community. The women themselves said that they have fond memories of kindhearted people who saw that they had something under their Christmas trees. Even if the gifts were a used pair of tap dancing shoes, or a doll with a broken foot, they were cherished because they had been given with love, recall Pam Roeder and Bev Stahr.

This year, these women have enlisted the help of friends and neighbors to brighten the lives of South Perry children. Said Kay Burns, one of the toy drive volunteers: "We can clean them. We can make them gift-able."

On the same day, CARE2 reported the touching saga of a woman in South Africa [3] who couldn't get the image of a starving pregnant dog begging for food out of her mind. The emaciated animal was languishing in front of a gasoline station. Cheryl Berstein bought pet food. She asked the garage attendant to feed the pup. But she sensed that he wouldn't and fretted all the way home, 100 miles away. By the time she arrived at her house, Berstein resolved that she would not allow herself to be paralyzed by inaction. The next day, she made a series of phone calls to nearby humane organizations. One of them was able to help.

After a couple of days, the dog's uncaring owner agreed to give her up. Berstein, the gasoline station activist, arranged transportation for little Lily to her far-distant home in the town of Gauteng. Lily gave birth to three puppies en route. Today, she is a happy, gentle, loving pet. "I hope she has forgotten the hard life she had in Lainsburg, where she was scavenging for food and fighting for survival on a daily basis," Berstein wrote.

Gift-ableness, persistence, devotion and compassion in the challenging face of cold, deprivation and neglect: Are these not spiritual wildflowers uniquely present inside each of our souls -- wildflowers that can change the threadbare cloaks of hand-to-mouth existence into something good, loving and wholesome? Perhaps in this season of birthing, we might dare to create and arrange a few wildflower bouquets of our own in situations that call out to our hearts.

Mary would like that. So would her son.

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