

PIETÀ

Most of us remember attending a fast and testimony sacrament meeting when we were young or first introduced to the Church. We see people getting up to the pulpit to share their testimony and think, “Why are people crying?” I am sure I asked my parents that when I was little. After many years of watching people bear testimony, as a teenager I went up to share things that I had really come to know. I don’t remember what I said, but I remember how I felt. I felt a powerful witness of the reality of what I was saying, and even when I finished and went to sit with my family on our bench, I was almost doubled over with tears. The image that came to mind, maybe from a song or a Bible verse, was being held in the bosom of Abraham. I was enveloped with a feeling of God’s love. And I remember hearing a sibling ask my parents why I was crying.

Tears are interesting. We can cry from sorrow. We can cry from joy. We can cry when we are scared or despondent. We can cry when we are

overcome with relief and gratitude. Sometimes tears can be an automatic emotional response. We talk of certain kinds of movies as “tearjerkers.” They tap into deep emotional responses. So, with the range and complexity of things that can bring us to tears, I can’t develop some equation between our love for the Savior and a response of crying. There is a difference between sentimentality and spirituality. There is a difference between having a heart-warming experience and receiving a spiritual witness. At the same time, some deep spiritual experiences can, on special occasions, bring people to tears.

HOW DO WE RESPOND?

The opposite of feeling a spiritual response is described in the Book of Mormon as hardening our hearts. Some people harden their hearts until they are “past feeling” (1 Nephi 17:45; Moroni 9:20). Crying in response to the manifestation of the love of God may not equate with spiritual health, but *not* feeling anything may be a symptom of spiritual sickness. If God’s mercy and love leave us cold, then that can be a warning that our heart has started to harden and we must make changes to retain our change of heart.¹

Christ explained this danger to the Pharisee named Simon. Simon was complaining about the woman who had intruded into his home to find Jesus and then “stood at his feet behind him weeping” (Luke 7:38). She was so overcome with love and gratitude that she washed Christ’s feet with her tears. Christ pointed out that, in contrast, Simon’s heart was so hardened that he had not even given Christ the normal courtesy due a visitor: “I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head” (Luke 7:44). Simon had been a cold and distant host, withholding hospitality, keeping himself removed from Christ. The woman’s emotional response, on the other hand, was extravagant and overwhelming. Christ’s diagnosis of Simon’s spiritual health was that he had not felt

the love of forgiveness. “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little” (7:47).

We don’t know the backstory of that woman or her relationship with the Savior, but her tears and her actions of worship manifest a love born of deep gratitude. She had experienced redemption through Christ. The burden of her guilt had been removed. Simon, a Pharisee trying very hard to live a holy life, looked at this woman, “a sinner” (Luke 7:39), and could easily believe that *she* needed forgiveness. His problem was that he could not believe that *he* needed forgiveness. So, as we see in this account, it is not the presence of Christ that brings love and gratitude so great that we would kneel to wash his feet with our tears. They were both with him, but each had a very different response to him. Only feeling the love and forgiveness of Christ can produce the love and gratitude that may produce those tears.

LEARNING TO RESPOND

In the later Middle Ages, devotional art and devotional texts consciously sought to model an appropriate response to Christ. There was a strong sense of how critical a response to him was for human salvation. There was a technical term for the response that devout late medieval Christians were taught to cultivate: *compassio*, or “compassion.” Christ’s suffering was his passion, and so the viewer or reader was encouraged to respond by suffering *with* him, *com-passio*. His suffering was an expression of his love for humanity, and in return humans needed to express their love for him.

To cultivate this response of “compassion,” individuals were encouraged to feel as though they were present with Christ during his suffering and death. Not only were they to imagine themselves into the scenes of the passion, but they were also encouraged to seek to suffer with him through this imaginative participation. In the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, a very influential devotional text, a description of Christ’s suffering is woven together with a direct appeal to behold the sufferings. The listener or reader is taught how to feel compassion through repetitive language that

echoes the Lord's experience. "The Lord is therefore stripped and bound to a column and scourged in various ways. . . . Again and again, repeatedly, closer and closer, it is done, bruise upon bruise, and cut upon cut, until not only the torturers but also the spectators are tired." The vivid narrative emphasizes the repetition of the blows. The text then explains the effect that pondering this account should have: "Here, then, *consider Him diligently* for a long time; and *if you do not feel compassion at this point*, you may count yours as a heart of stone."² The account seeks to make Christ's suffering present and moving to the audience.

The *Meditationes vitae Christi* continues to give clear directions on how to respond as the narrative continues: "Look at Him well, then, as He goes along bowed down by the cross and gasping aloud. Feel as much compassion for Him as you can, placed in such anguish, in renewed derision."³ By emphasizing the audience's role to "look" and "feel," this devotional text explains how to have personal involvement with Christ's carrying of the cross through imaginative and emotional participation.

Medieval theologians taught that sharing his suffering was the means by which the blessings of Christ's suffering were received. This started back in the era of monastic meditation on the suffering of Christ, laying the foundation for the Franciscans in the thirteenth century. Participation in Christ's suffering became imperative in twelfth-century Cistercian piety because their theologians understood it as the means by which one can experience God's love. Bernard of Clairvaux expresses this connection by exhorting the listeners: "Let us learn his humility, imitate his gentleness, *embrace his love, share his sufferings*, be washed in his blood."⁴

Participation in Christ's suffering not only allows an individual to feel Christ's love, but also opens up the path to eternal glory. Passages such as Paul's comment to the Corinthians give us a way to make meaning out of the sufferings that we go through in mortality: "As ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation" (2 Corinthians 1:7). Speaking for Christ, Bernard explains that "he who meditates on my death and, following my example, mortifies his members which belong to this earth, has eternal life; meaning, if you share in my sufferings, you

will partake of my glory.”⁵ Likewise, Peter explained, “inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy” (1 Peter 4:13).

The Cistercians’ emphasis on the suffering of Christ and the individual’s response to that suffering was a major shift in medieval theology and spirituality. When we understand this theological model, we can have a better appreciation for the dimensions of late medieval piety that included taking active steps to experience suffering, in imitation of Christ, by making their own bodies to suffer. Understanding their beliefs helps make it clearer why people would voluntarily seek out suffering as a way to feel closer to the Savior and receive his mercy.

One of the blessings of the Restoration is a clearer sense of “how to come unto him and be saved” (1 Nephi 15:14). Through the teachings of the Book of Mormon and the restoration of priesthood authority and ordinances, the doctrine of Christ is taught and enacted. So, while we can understand and appreciate the devotion of late medieval Christians, we do not need to join them in seeking out suffering with Christ. I have taken comfort through the years in Elder Neal A. Maxwell’s words affirming that we need not volunteer for suffering.

There are many who suffer so much more than the rest of us: some go agonizingly; some go quickly; some are healed; some are given more time; some seem to linger. There are variations in our trials but no immunities. Thus, the scriptures cite the fiery furnace and fiery trials (see Dan. 3:6–26; 1 Pet. 4:12). Those who emerge successfully from their varied and fiery furnaces have experienced the grace of the Lord, which He says is sufficient (see Ether 12:27). Even so, brothers and sisters, such emerging individuals do not rush to line up in front of another fiery furnace in order to get an extra turn!⁶

One of the greatest clarifications of the Restoration is not only the affirmation that Christ has suffered for us, but also the additional witness that he has truly suffered *with* us in all things (see Alma 7:11–13).

Even though we don't need to seek out suffering with Christ, the late medieval practice of seeking to make Christ's suffering real for us can be a benefit to us. Seeking to put ourselves into the stories of these events can be a valuable mental exercise. This is much like the practice of likening that Nephi encourages (see 1 Nephi 19:23). In emphasizing our response to Christ's suffering, we don't want to be emotionally manipulated or to manipulate others with this exercise, but we do want to learn from others and learn of Christ. Seeing how others have been changed by the love of God can help us come to understand the reality of these experiences. Seeing the impact that Christ had on them can allow us to consider our response to him.

As we try to keep Christ's atoning sacrifice alive for us, we can read scriptural accounts closely and take the responses of the participants as models of how to respond to Christ. Studying these texts with an eye to others' response to Christ can be like listening to the testimonies of others. Their responses to Christ can help us learn how to respond to our own experiences with Christ and his Spirit. Seeing others respond with love and gratitude can help us learn what having a softened heart can look like. Seeing them turn away and harden their hearts can be a warning.

MODELING RESPONSE

In late medieval devotional art, presenting models of response was a central aim. Mary was the ideal of compassion and the principal model of response. Perhaps the most widespread way Mary's compassion was portrayed was in her sorrow at the cross. There was an entire genre of hymns recounting how she felt to see her son on the cross and inviting the listener to feel with her, the most famous of which is "Stabat Mater dolorosa." Some visual artists, most strikingly Rogier van der Weyden, portray her swooning at the cross in a pose echoing Christ's curved body being taken down from the cross. In addition to this image of Mary at the cross, there were many other scenes, known as the Seven Sorrows of Mary, that depict her response of compassion.

In the New Testament, we learn that when Mary took the infant Christ to the temple, she met a man who recognized the baby Jesus as the Messiah. Simeon's prophecy was not only about Jesus's role as the Messiah but also about Mary's future as his mother. She was told that "a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also" (Luke 2:35). This prophecy was visually depicted with images of Mary with a sword pointed at her heart, or, in some depictions, seven swords. The tradition of the Seven Sorrows of Mary is drawn from seven mostly biblical scenes when Mary was a witness of the suffering of her son. These seven sorrows became a focus of devotional meditation that is still practiced and include Simeon's prophecy, the flight into Egypt, losing Christ at the temple, meeting Christ on his way to Calvary, seeing Christ on the cross, the descent from the cross, and the burial.

The most famous image of Mary's sorrow, the Pietà, is not described in the scriptural narrative, but stands as a moment of devotional reflection between Christ's descent from the cross and his burial. It is a private moment. Depictions of the descent and the lamentation portray many people looking at Christ's body, but in the Pietà, the dead Christ is held by his mother on her lap. Our focus is on her response to him. The term *pietà* is Italian for compassion or mercy. The most famous Pietà, of course, is Michelangelo's *Pietà*, which stands in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. It is made of white Carrara marble and depicts the solemn and beautiful sadness and submission of Mary as she feels compassion for Christ; we can feel compassion for her and through that increase our compassion for Christ. We see her loss as she cradles her dead son and presents him to us for our meditation and reflection.

Before this portrayal of sorrow in the perfection of human form and beauty by this master of the Italian Renaissance, earlier versions of the Pietà were widespread in Northern Europe. These depictions were usually carved in wood and painted, although some were also of alabaster and limestone. They provided a less elegant but even more evocative and emotional portrayal of both the dead Christ and Mary's grief. Part of the

elegance of Michelangelo's *Pietà* comes from the body of Christ being proportionately smaller than Mary so he can be easily held on her lap.

In the Northern wooden images Christ's body is often large and awkward. We see Mary straining to hold him as his body and head slump back. Her face looks on him and reflects her grief and sorrow. Rather

than being a pure white marble, these wooden images were painted vivid colors. Christ's wounds are often carved deep and sometimes the drops of blood are not only painted red, but also carved to an exaggerated size. Sometimes Mary's tears are also carved and elevated, dripping down her face. The immediacy of his death as well as her grief is present for those who meditate on this image.

In addition to the depictions of the devotional scene of the *Pietà*, another invitation to imitate the response of Mary can be found in a focus on Mary's and others' tears, often in scenes known in art literature as the Crucifixion, Deposition (or descent from the cross), and Lamentation. Especially famous for his de-



The image of the Pietà models a response of love and grief in response to Christ's death. Unnaer Pietà, about 1380. LWL-Museum für Kunst und Kultur, Münster.

piction of tears is Rogier van der Weyden. His depictions of sorrow can move the viewer to grief and prompt reflection on his or her own feelings



The tears shown in many devotional paintings modeled responses of sorrow, love, and gratitude for Christ's death on our behalf. Rogier van der Weyden, The Entombment of Christ, detail, ca. 1460–64 (taken in Maritshuis, The Hague). Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

about the suffering and death of Christ. How real is this for me? How much does this matter to me? Is his suffering and death present to me?

MODELS OF LOVE, MODELS OF RESPONSE

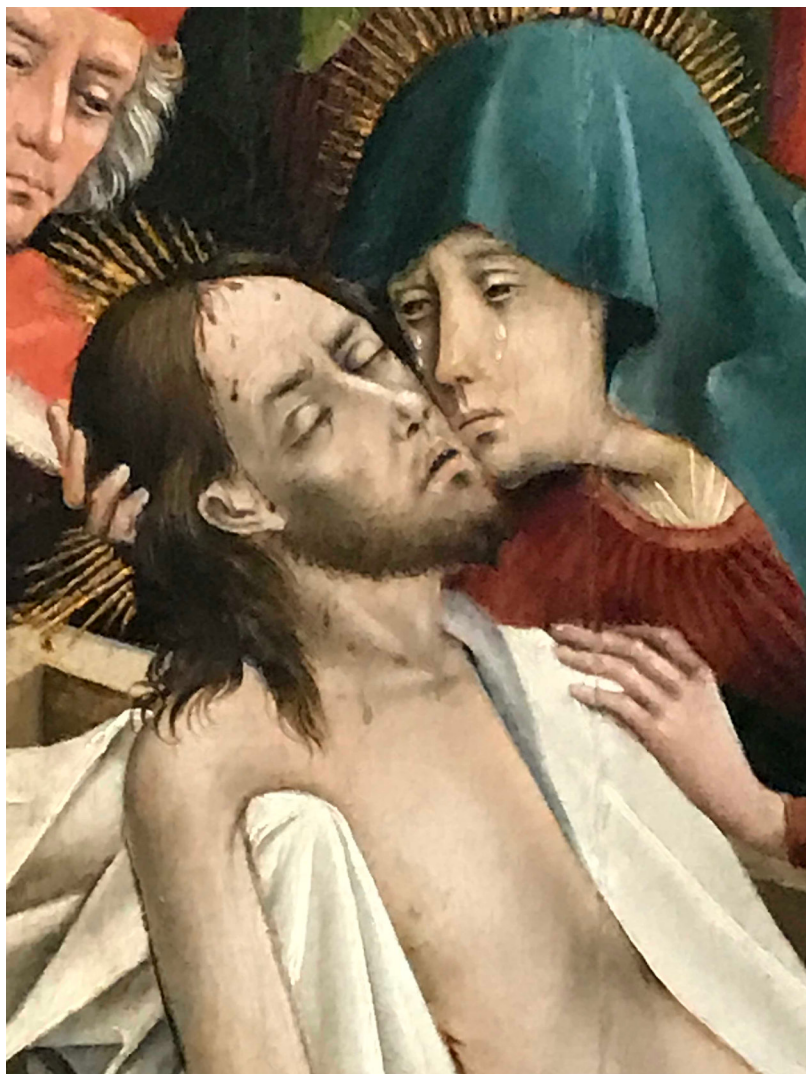
Learning who Christ is and what he has done for us is the study of a lifetime. We can learn from doctrinal discussions, but getting information is not the same thing as lived experience and personal witness. Coming to know Christ can sometimes be triangulated through knowing the love of someone else who is a witness of his love. That might be part of why the image of the Pietà is so powerful. We know doctrinally that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, but in the Pietà we can see the love of a mother who also gave her son. Seeing a mother holding her dead child can speak to deep human emotions of grief and loss.

As we seek to feel the love of God manifest in the suffering and death of Christ, sometimes the love and sacrifice of a mother can give us a framework and a model to feel and respond to God's love. The maternal images Christ connects with himself are not coincidental. For most of us, the foundational love that grounds our lives is the love of our mother.

Christ compares his open arms to the wings of a mother hen ready to protect her offspring: "O ye house of Israel whom I have spared, how oft will I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of heart" (3 Nephi 10:6). He asks, "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:15–16).

We know the gathering and protective love of a mother, and reflecting on that love can point us to the divine love that may transcend our understanding. His scarred hands bear witness to his love, but sometimes we can feel that love indirectly through other people.

I don't know that we need to take up the devotional image of the Pietà to appreciate the love of God, but Mary's response is a powerful



The image of Mary's love and grief helps us increase our love for Christ. Johann Koerbecke, Six Panels from Marienfeld, detail, about 1443/57. LWL-Museum für Kunst und Kultur, Münster.

model for us in our efforts to worship. I find it fascinating that in 1 Nephi 11 when Nephi sought to know the meaning of the tree of life, the first thing he is shown is the Virgin Mary alone and then again holding the Christ child.

Only when Nephi sees Mary and her child Jesus does the angel say unto him: “Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father! Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?” (1 Nephi 11:21). It was at that point that Nephi could respond: “Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things” (11:22).

Mary’s willingness to be the mother of the Son of God and then to watch him die as the Lamb of God gives us a model to reflect on and to emulate: “Behold the handmaid [servant] of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38). Her love as a mother can point us to Christ. Through her role and her example, we can receive a revelation of the love of God.

TEXTUAL MODELS OF RESPONSE

One fall semester at Brigham Young University, the year before I served a mission, I remember sitting on a little grassy hill on campus, talking with some friends. It was a sunny, pleasant afternoon and we were relaxed, talking about the semester, life, and the future. As our conversation wound along, I mentioned how I wanted to more fully understand Christ’s Atonement and what it meant for me. Within the next couple of weeks President Benson gave powerful talks in general conference that worked on me and motivated me to start studying the Book of Mormon daily. As they do for most people, the early stories in the Book of Mormon came alive to me with the accounts of Nephi’s faith and diligence. I started to see how he responded to the Lord and to the promptings of the Spirit. What I was reading helped me think about my own life and helped me learn to respond to promptings that I was starting to recognize. Nephi’s model of response was invaluable for my spiritual growth.

Textual models of response may be one of the great gifts we have in scriptures. In addition to doctrine and teachings, we see how people change as they come to know and understand Christ and his atoning sacrifice. This is particularly true in the Book of Mormon. It truly serves

as another testament of Jesus Christ from the first to the last chapters by showing us how individuals responded to Christ. In a way similar to reflecting on devotional art, in the text of the Book of Mormon other people's feelings can help us learn how to feel. Other people's examples can help us learn how to act.

The Book of Mormon is in many ways a manual of how to respond to Christ, with both positive and negative models. We can see this from the very beginning in the lives of Lehi and Nephi and the choices they make to respond to what they come to know. Lehi "fear[ed] exceedingly" for Laman and Lemuel when he saw they would not come to the tree (1 Nephi 8:4). Nephi was "grieved because of the hardness of their hearts" and he "cried unto the Lord for them" (1 Nephi 2:18).

The people of King Benjamin "[view] themselves in their own carnal state" (Mosiah 4:2), cry out for mercy through Christ's atoning blood, and then witness that because of the influence of the Spirit they "have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2). We see an example of how to respond to Christ in the examples of the converted Lamanites who are "overpowered with joy" (Alma 19:14) and are so determined to break from their past that they bury their weapons deep in the earth and swear not to fight again.

Some of the most compelling examples of responding to Christ and the message of his Atonement are found in the accounts of Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah. We can see how they lived before they came to know Christ and how feeling the love and mercy of Christ changed their hearts. We see them knowing of Christ but rejecting him and teaching others to reject him. Then later we are able to see the results of them turning to Christ in faith, asking for mercy. As Alma remembered his father's teaching "concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world" (Alma 36:17), he cried within his heart, "O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death" (36:18). As we seek to learn for ourselves what mercy

is and how to receive it, this plea can help us learn the only way to find redemption.

Much of the Book of Mormon is composed of the extensive accounts of the life and service of Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah. We see their response of faith in a time of crisis. We are able to watch the change in their lives, their complete conversion, how they lived the rest of their lives to bring others to know the joy of redemption.

Because of their faith in Christ and the repentance it brought, we can see that it is possible to have one's feelings and motivations dramatically changed: "they could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble" (Mosiah 28:3). These examples of response to Christ's atoning sacrifice model a life of discipleship and conversion for us. Just as those seeking to learn how to respond to Christ had models in late medieval devotional imagery and texts, we have been blessed with a volume of scripture that shows us "how to come unto him and be saved" (1 Nephi 15:14).

Having a change of heart is one of the primary themes of the Book of Mormon, and it pushes us to watch ourselves to see our response to Christ. Are we becoming hardened, coarsened to things of the Spirit? Are we becoming less grateful? Are we feeling more entitled? Are we feeling casual about the things of God? Viewing and considering responses to Christ can help us consider our own response. We can deepen our ability to respond by pondering and emulating responses of gratitude, love, and awe at his sacrificial death. As our love and gratitude deepen, we move from responses of feeling love to living out the love we feel.

NOTES

1. Dale G. Renlund, "Preserving the Heart's Mighty Change," *Ensign*, November 2009, 97–99.
2. *Meditationes vitae Christi: Meditations on the Life of Christ; An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century*, trans. Isa Ragusa, ed. Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B.

Green, Princeton Monographs in Art and Archeology XXXV (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 328–29.

3. *Meditationes vitae Christi*, 331.
4. Bernard, “In Praise of the Virgin Mother,” homily 3:14, in *Magnificat: Homilies in Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. Marie-Bernard Saïd and Grace Perigo, Cistercian Fathers Series 18 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1979), 44; emphasis added.
5. Bernard, *De diligendo Deo*, chapter IV: 11; *On Loving God*, trans. Emero Stieglman, Cistercian Fathers Series 13 B (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1973), 13.
6. Neal A. Maxwell, “From Whom All Blessings Flow,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 11–12.