

Call to compassion

I'm parked in a hospital parking lot, waiting to pick up a friend from an appointment. As I sit, I watch people walking in and out of the building, the automatic door sliding open and then closed, over and over.

I watch as each person passes through the doors. I can't tell who is a patient, who is an employee, and who might just be visiting someone today. No one - not even the woman carrying the balloon and gift bag - looks particularly happy, but I can't read the faces. I find myself wondering what their stories are and how I might be able to pray for them today.

One of them may have received heartbreaking news or just said goodbye to a loved one. Another may be worried about a diagnosis. One may have been given new reason for hope - or received a clean bill of health after a cancer battle.

From my seat in the car, I can't tell what they have on their minds. To me, they look like ordinary people doing ordinary things on an ordinary day - except they are at a hospital, so I suspect they might be thinking about medical issues. But obviously I don't know.

And, as they pass, it occurs to me: All day, every day, I encounter people - friends, family, colleagues, acquaintances, strangers. Yet, even when I think I know someone well, I have no idea what might be in that person's mind and heart.

Many people are carrying crosses we cannot see. The driver who cuts you off on the road might have just lost his job. The shopper who glares at your giggling child at the grocery store might be struggling with infertility. The colleague who brushes you off in a meeting may be going through a divorce. That waitress who seemed a little flustered may be counting the minutes until she can visit her father in hospice care.

None of us has God's infinite wisdom and understanding, of course, so we can't possibly know what is going on in others' lives or how it feels to walk in their shoes.

Of course, the truth is that I shouldn't need to know what is happening in someone else's life to be the loving person I am called to be. In reality, I should be the person

God created me to be without needing to pause and consider what burdens people are carrying. I should be able to be forgiving and open and ready to meet each person wherever he or she is.

“Wherever people are suffering make it your task to serve them,” St. John Paul the Great told us.

That sounds like a tall order.

But maybe serving those who are suffering starts with a simple approach. Maybe it begins with considering that the people we encounter every day may be in the midst of personal struggles. That small thought might be enough to remind us to be a little more understanding, and a little more merciful.

When I think of how we are all connected as the Church Militant here on earth, the Church Suffering in Purgatory, and the Church Triumphant in Heaven, I have to believe that a greater understanding of others who are on this earthly journey with us will only serve to strengthen us as a church. Can’t we all benefit from deepening our compassion for others? After all, don’t we expect others to show that same understanding to us?

Watching people as they walked through the hospital doors also reminded me that none of us is on this journey through life alone. Yes, we encounter pain and suffering on earth, but we walk with one another, and God is with us every step along the way.

“Just as a mother holds her child’s face in her hands to cover it with kisses,” said St. Jean Vianney, “so does God hold us.”