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Hugs are an outward sign of inward grace

Michael Leach | Feb. 14, 2012 Soul Seeing

Vickie Leach is a serial hugger. When a party is over it takes us an hour to say goodbye. Don?t even mention weddings.

Ponie Sheehan, our friend, is the Wonder Woman of huggers. When she and Vickie get together they disappear into each other. Don?t sit in the same pew as Ponie if you panic at the kiss of peace.

Vickie and Ponie are adult children of a kinder, gentler time. It is their loving habit to express a truth of our existence: We are all literally in Love. We live and move and have our being in Love (Acts 17: 28), and nothing can separate us from that Love or from each other (Romans 8:38-39). Can anyone separate a wave from the ocean? Our purpose in life is to come to see and to show what we really are in Christ. A hug is an outward sign of an inward grace. It expresses our spiritual oneness with God and each other. What could be more beautiful?

Jesus hugged children, embraced cripples and kissed lepers. St. Paul asked Christians to ?greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss? (1 Thessalonians 5:26.) A holy kiss is synonymous with a hug today: a warm, friendly, respectful gesture of unity and loving regard. Paul repeats the suggestion to four other communities, as does Peter when he asks his followers to ?greet each other with a kiss of Christian love? (1 Peter 5:14). The kiss of peace at Mass comes from this ancient tradition.

Isn?t it ironic that not only coworkers but priests and catechists have grown afraid to hug? Hugging, a sign of peace, could get you in trouble. Fr. Joseph Girzone, who is 81 years old, observes, ?These days so many people who work for the church are afraid, it?s sad.? When Father Joe helped out in a Maryland parish for the past eight years, he stood outside the church after Mass on Sunday and hugged everyone. Kids told their parents, ?I want to go to the 9 o?clock Mass so I can get my hug.? Big men walked up to Girzone and said, ?I didn?t get my hug today.?

?Hugs are as natural as praying,? Girzone says. ?And they?re healing.?

When Jesus embraced cripples, they walked again. When he kissed the cheek of a leper, scales fell from his face. When he hugged a child, the child felt not fear but safety.

Family therapist Virginia Satir confirms, ?We need four hugs a day for survival. We need eight hugs a day for maintenance. We need 12 hugs a day for growth.? Research shows that hugging for only 20 seconds lowers blood pressure and increases oxytocin, a hormone that relieves stress. A lot of hugging reduces the risk of heart disease. And everyone knows that hugging makes babies (and grownups) cry less.

Pastoral ministers will tell you that hugs are as essential to their tool kits as holy water. Fr. Matt Hoffman taught us seminarians that the best thing to say to someone who is grieving is nothing. ?Hug them!? he told us. None of us know what to say when visiting the sick, and that?s why we don?t visit them enough -- we?re afraid. But a hug says it all, and is all the ill and despondent want. An old saying goes, ?A hug is a universal medicine. It is how we handshake from the heart.?

A few years ago I was on a two-day retreat with 15 of my classmates from the seminary. It was my turn to make a presentation and I chose the topic of suffering, because bad things happening to good people always baffle me. At the end of the talk, Tom Smith said, ?I have to talk to you guys about something.?

Tom told us about his beloved daughter, who had recently died by suicide. He was sitting on a desk chair that was like a cross pinning him down, but he gave us his wounded heart, and at just the right moment Johnny Pritcher stood up and said, ?All right, guys, group hug!? We all rose and embraced and tears flowed and love passed from one guy to another to the whole world. We held it for more than a minute.

And understood everything we would ever need to know about hugging and the overwhelming love of God.

[Michael Leach edits Soul Seeing for *NCR*. He says if you see him on the street, you?ll know what to do.]

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