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Gerasim's Compassion in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

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Abstract

In this article on Gerasim, from Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, David Urban examines this character's example of compassion in the face of his master's terminal illness. Urban suggests that all humans would do well to follow Gerasim's example, especially in light of everyone's mortality.

Keywords

Tolstoy, Leo Tolstoy, Gerasim, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, David Urban, Compassion

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Gerasim's Compassion
in Tolstoy's
The Death of Ivan Ilyich

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In a recent article on Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Leland Ryken discusses what Tolstoy's novella can teach us about suffering, facing death, and both the conviction of sin and the path to salvation to which suffering can lead us. In the course of his article, Ryken briefly notes the character of Gerasim, the young peasant who, in contrast to "the indifference and deceptiveness of Ivan's family and acquaintances regarding his illness," instead speaks forthrightly to Ivan about his condition, "shares his suffering," and offers him assistance and comfort (Ryken, par. 1). In my article, I will focus on Gerasim, specifically his compassion toward Ivan, and also reflect on what Gerasim can teach us about the virtue of compassion in the face of others' hardships.

Gerasim appears prominently in chapter VII of *Death*. The assistant to Ivan's butler, he enters the dying and bedridden Ivan's life to perform the unenviable task of cleaning out Ivan's excretions from his chamber pot. The fact that someone else has to perform this task tortures Ivan. Tolstoy writes that this situation was "a torment to him every time -- a torment from the uncleanliness, the unseemliness, and the smell, and from knowing that another person had to take part in it." But Tolstoy continues with the following line of wonderful irony: "But just through his most unpleasant matter, Ivan Ilyich obtained

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comfort." Ivan obtains that comfort through and indeed *in* the person of Gerasim, whom Tolstoy describes as "a clean, fresh peasant lad, grown stout on town food and always cheerful and bright."

Significantly, Ivan's relationship with Gerasim is brought about by Ivan's extreme fragility and vulnerability. When Gerasim first comes to perform his duties, Ivan's self-consciousness betrays itself immediately. Tolstoy tells us that seeing the clean, healthy Gerasim "engaged on that disgusting task embarrassed Ivan Ilyich." And yet Gerasim approaches his work dutifully and cheerfully, even as he is mindful to show deference to Ivan's condition by "restraining the joy of life that beamed from his face." The text suggests that what Tolstoy calls Gerasim's "consideration" for Ivan's "feelings" is what inspires Ivan to reach out to him:

"Gerasim!" said Ivan Ilyich in a weak voice.

Gerasim started, evidently afraid he might have committed some blunder, and with a rapid movement turned his fresh, kind, simple young face which just showed the first downy signs of a beard.

"Yes, sir?"

"That must be very unpleasant for you. You must forgive me. I am helpless."

Ivan's words here give me pause, for I find them remarkably courageous. It would have been natural for Ivan, at this point, to wait in silent shame for Gerasim to finish his work and leave. But instead he speaks words of extreme vulnerability to a youth of low standing. But if Ivan's condition humiliates him, Gerasim's considerate demeanor empowers Ivan to risk putting into words the distastefulness of Gerasim's task, and even more significantly, to risk entering into relationship.

Gerasim's response to his vulnerable master demonstrates the decency and compassion that exemplify his character:

"Oh, why, sir," and Gerasim's eyes beamed and he showed his glistening white teeth, "what's a little trouble? It's a case of illness with you, sir."

Gerasim's compassion is remarkable precisely because he embraces the reality of Ivan's condition and articulates not merely resignation as he performs an unpleasant task, but an implicit joy as well.¹ Moreover, and I think most significantly, Gerasim downplays and indeed dismisses the disgusting nature of his task and instead matter-of-factly states that it is only "a little trouble," recognizing that the situation is brought about by Ivan's "illness," and reassuring Ivan that performing the task, quite simply, doesn't bother him a bit.

Gerasim's understated reassurance—his second display of compassion for Ivan—once more inspires Ivan to risk further vulnerability. He asks Gerasim to assist him in getting up; the youth does that and, without being asked, pulls up Ivan's trousers; Ivan then requests that he lead him to the sofa, a task Gerasim again performs cheerfully. Tolstoy's words state explicitly how Gerasim's kindness affects Ivan: "Gerasim smiled again and turned to leave the room. But Ivan Ilyich felt his presence such a comfort that he did not want to let him go." Gerasim's compassion and kindness are such that that his very presence, over and above his specific tasks of service, genuinely minister to Ivan.

Ivan's next series of requests may seem unusual, but they exemplify both Gerasim's compassion for him and the vulnerability in Ivan that this compassion continues to elicit. After Gerasim fulfills Ivan's request to raise his legs onto a chair and then higher under a cushion, Ivan recognizes "that he felt better while *Gerasim* was holding up his legs" (my emphasis). And so Ivan asks Gerasim himself to hold up his legs higher, a task which, significantly, Ivan does not explicitly request him to perform at length until Gerasim assures the insecure sufferer that he has performed nearly all his other duties and that he has "plenty of time." At this point, "Ivan Ilyich told Gerasim to sit down and hold his legs, and began to talk to him. And strange to

say it seemed to him that he felt better while Gerasim held his legs up." We as readers recognize that it is more Gerasim's presence than the elevation of Ivan's legs that so comforts Ivan. In the days that follow, the two regularly spend time together talking while Gerasim holds Ivan's legs up. We are told that "Gerasim did it all easily, willingly, simply, and with a good nature that touched Ivan Ilyich." And sometimes Gerasim would support Ivan's legs for the entire night, saying, "Don't you worry, Ivan Ilyich. I'll get sleep enough later on." Gerasim's compassion is remarkable because, once again, as he demonstrates that compassion amid a challenging situation, he neither calls attention to himself nor does he suggest that what he is doing is unusual or in any way a burden. Of course, it *is* unusual, as well as exhausting, to hold up a man's legs for an entire night. But again, it is Gerasim's downplaying of the situation, his continued recognition that Ivan is truly helpless and in need, and his recognition of their common humanity that makes his compassion so powerful and effective.

Gerasim's compassion toward Ivan also includes his honesty about Ivan's imminent death. While Ivan's family members and other associates avoid or deny this subject—an avoidance connected to their wish to deny their own mortality²—Gerasim addresses the matter forthrightly, stating during one of his all-night stays with Ivan, "We shall all of us die, so why should I grudge a little trouble?" These words, Tolstoy's narrator tells us, express "the fact that he did not think his work burdensome, because he was doing it for a dying man and hoped someone would do the same for him when his time came." Gerasim's honesty about both Ivan's and his own assured eventual death is perhaps the most powerful example of his recognition of their common humanity, one that inspires him to do unto Ivan as he would have others do unto him. And the compassion expressed through Gerasim's honesty allows Ivan to be honest with him, admitting his weakness to this safe and truly unlikely friend. By contrast, when Ivan's colleague Shebek comes to visit, Ivan feels the need to disguise the reality of his situation and assume a false dignity and discuss political matters when what he really wanted to do was weep and be cared for. "This falsity around him and

within him," Tolstoy writes, "did more than anything else to poison his last days." Truly Gerasim's compassionate honesty stands out in contrast from the disengaged deception and self-deception demonstrated by Ivan's family and other associates.

Gerasim has much to teach us. For one thing, he illustrates the importance of compassionate human presence in the face of human suffering. Gerasim's ministry to Ivan is not a one-time visit; it is a consistent, reliable incarnation, as it were, of Christ-like care and understanding. We might ask ourselves if we spend enough time with those in difficult situations or if we instead choose only occasional, brief interaction with the hurting, after which we perhaps congratulate ourselves for spending time with those whose presence offers us little obvious enjoyment. Gerasim also shows us that others' suffering should not be considered remarkable, but rather a manifestation of our common humanity. If we think we are doing something extraordinary to comfort someone who is hurting or dying, we should recognize that our own time will surely come, and that whatever difficulty we experience through our care for that person pales in comparison to the pain the person is experiencing. We should recognize that such difficulty is because of "a case of illness"—an illness we shall share soon enough. Finally, Gerasim teaches us that when we do care for others in a way that is compassionate enough not to "announce it with trumpets" (*New International Version*, Matt. 6.2) but rather recognizes such care as what the normal Christian life ought to look like, those we care for may indeed open up to us and desire a relationship closer than what we'd ever expected. That in and of itself may give us pause before we demonstrate true compassion—unlike Gerasim, we may not feel we have "plenty of time" to give to such individuals. I certainly count myself among the all-too-busy. But perhaps I and a few others reading this essay would do well to remember that when we offer such compassion we are not merely imitating, obeying, or "incarnating" Christ—we are, in a very real sense, encountering Christ himself. In Jesus' words, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (*New International Version*, Matt. 25.40).

NOTES

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1. For a discussion of how Gerasim's compassion toward the ill is reflected in the character of Sam in Fugard's *"MASTER HAROLD" . . . and the boys*, see Urban.

2. See Ryken, paragraphs 3-5.

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