This book examines how the early Christian elite articulated and cultivated the affective dimensions of compassion in a Roman world that promoted emotional tranquillity as the path to human flourishing. Drawing upon a wide range of early Christians from both east and west, Wessel situates each author in the broader cultural and intellectual context. The reader is introduced to the diverse conditions in which Christians felt and were urged to feel compassion in exemplary ways, and in which warnings were sounded against the possibilities for distortion and exploitation. Wessel argues that the early Christians developed literary methods and rhetorical techniques to bring about appropriate emotional responses to human suffering. Their success in this regard marks the beginning of affective compassion as a Christian virtue. Comparison with early modern and contemporary philosophers and ethicists further demonstrates the intrinsic worth of the early Christian understanding of compassion.

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PASSION AND COMPASSION IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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The Catholic University of America
To Nicholas
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While working on the sermons of Leo the Great nearly ten years ago, I was struck by the references to compassion, suffering, and the emotions. I wondered how Leo’s observations about the human condition in the context of unsettling geopolitical changes related to the development of his christological views. Around the same time I began reading some of the many books on contemporary theories of the emotions. I wondered whether any connections could be drawn to the early Christian world.

This book has grown out of those initial reflections. It began as an attempt to find among the early Christians the compassionate emotional response that philosophers and ethicists have been discussing – namely, empathy. I was perhaps disappointed to learn that empathy, in the sense of feeling the same thing that another person feels, was not necessarily a priority for the early Christians. The commitment to empathy as an emotional response to human suffering came later.

What I found was that the early Christians were interested in challenging their listeners – the laity, churchmen, monks, and nuns – to see themselves in the suffering of others. In vivid imagery, the early Christians described the conditions under which the outcasts of society were marginalized and their suffering went unnoticed. Listeners were asked to connect such misery with Jesus’ healing ministry to the poor, the sick, and the outcasts. Empathy, in the truest sense of the word, was reserved to describe the thorough identification with the human condition that took place in the Incarnation, when God became a human being.

I also found that the early Christians were committed to combining this Incarnational model of compassion with the pagan philosophical model they had inherited. Among some of the early Christians, the difficulty of such a synthesis is articulated and worked through, while among others it recedes into the background. What emerges generally from the authors I consider here is the developing sense that affective compassion – feeling...
deep sympathy for the suffering of others – is a virtue Christians should strive for.

When I talk about ‘the early Christians’ I mean three groups of people, depending on the context. First, the phrase may refer to the authors I have included in this study. The elite of the late Roman world, they were the privileged few who attained a level of rhetorical and literary excellence to earn them a place among the intelligentsia. Their literary output represents the majority of our sources in the late Roman world. Second, ‘the early Christians’ may include everyone whom the elite addressed, such as the laity, churchmen, monks, and nuns. These were the diverse people who listened to the sermons and whose hearts and minds the elite wished to shape. Finally, ‘the early Christians’ may embrace both groups to include all the Christians of the late Roman world. How the destitute outcasts, the poorest of the poor, fit into this world is something that the early Christian authors reflected upon and addressed.

In making my selections from the vast corpus of early Christian authors, I have surely omitted texts that could have been included. Others will fill in the inevitable gaps, ask novel questions, and find new avenues for exploring what it meant to live as a Christian in the late Roman world.

While researching this book I have used the original sources in the original languages. I have also consulted translations of the sources when available and have often adapted the translations for my own use. I have tried to acknowledge all translations I have used in the footnotes and bibliography. In an attempt to keep the footnotes short, I have given only the basic information needed to consult the original sources. When the nuance of a text is particularly relevant to the discussion, I have given a more precise reference.

This book was a long time in the making. It has grown out of my work on Leo the Great, as well as a number of research articles I have published over the years on moral psychology and the emotions. I am grateful to the graduate students who have taken my seminars and enriched my thinking with their insight and dedication. Two in particular deserve special mention. Paul Brazinski helped me with the footnotes and bibliography, and Robert Wenderski corrected and proofread the text. Without their help this book would have taken another couple of years to complete. I am also grateful to Alexander Alexakis for his suggestions and comments. Finally, I appreciate the help, insights, and corrections I received from the two anonymous readers for the Press. I assume full responsibility for the finished product.

I dedicate this book to my son, Nicholas, for what he has taught me about compassion.
Maps

The following maps are taken from *The Cambridge History of Early Christianity to c.600*, A. Casiday and F. W. Norris (eds.) (2007).
Map 1. The Roman Empire c.400.
The Roman Empire c.400, cont.

Map 1 (cont.)
Map 2. Rome and the West c.600.