Our capacity to suffer because of the suffering of others and to rejoice for their joy has gone through a very rapid decline in a few decades. The consumer and comfort-focused society confuses well-being with the reduction of all forms of suffering, forgetting one of the most profound and ancient truths: that there are many good pains in human life, as there are many evil pleasures, too.

And so television, this new postmodern totem, promises us a happier life, making us move on from the latest massacre in France to the latest game show in a matter of seconds, resulting in a flattening out of the events which generates a downward levelling of our emotions and feelings.

The great achievements of democracy, rights and freedoms are the mature fruit of millennia of civilization and faith, where we learned to suffer and become indignant for new and different things: for the denied freedom of others, for their crushed rights, for the injustices towards people who were not our relatives or friends. Without these new pains we would not have been able to come out of regimes, we would not have broken free from the pharaohs or the many forms of slavery and servitude.

This type of social emotions is partly natural, but its intensity and quality are the result of culture and the education of character. Of course we feel a sense of discomfort when we come in contact with those suffering around us, but to feel it so strong as to move us to action, to rush to their aid something more than natural is needed. Experiencing discomfort because of a victim that we meet along the way is natural; taking care of them is called culture.
Empathy is natural; compassion isn’t because it comes from the cultivation, on an individual and collective level, of some special emotions and higher feelings. Social norms, as Adam Smith reminded us already in the mid-eighteenth century, are generated by the capacity that human beings have developed to approve and blame the actions and feelings of others (and their own), using the faculty he calls ‘sympathy’. Social balance is the result of the spontaneous order of the dynamic of feelings, just as the market is the result of the dynamics of interest.

This balance of feelings, however, can get stabilized either at low levels (for example, in a bandits’ society) or at a high levels, when people develop religions, art, philosophy, beauty and pietas. But also the ‘high’ moral order of feelings, like all things fragile (because delicate), can be shattered overnight due to a lack of care and care giving. And as with almost all abilities and virtues, if compassion and indignation are not cultivated and practised they get wasted and regress to lower moral levels.

Constant exposure to the economic ideology and that of consumption turns us into animals less and less able to sympathize and become indignant: only twenty years ago we were much better at it. We are facing a world where we will be increasingly capable of natural and easy emotions towards kittens and puppies, but we will not be able to show solidarity and feel pain over the poverty and injustice around us. Globalization did not empower these feelings, but crushed them and reduced their intensity and effectiveness, making us more capable of simple, ‘low-cost’ emotions but less capable of complex and ‘expensive’ ones. In the western part of the world this latter type emotions were the result of a complex process, where biblical Christianity and humanism have played a key role.

Looking at the statues and stories of martyrs and saints we have learned to feel differently in our soul as we observe and meditate about the paintings and frescoes of the Nativity, the parables, the crosses and the resurrections in the churches. During mass, our grandparents did not understand all the words, but they understood the gospel of the images very well - we can see this even today, when children come to church, and are much more capable than us to enter into a dialogue with the paintings and the faces around them.

If we want to seriously respond to this crisis in our ability to feel and suffer about great and high things, we have to work harder and differently with our young and our children today, recognizing a special role of the school, which is one of the few global public goods that still remained. Literature, art and music are essential to form the emotions and the deepest and greatest kind of feelings in all but especially in children and young adults. The first fairy tales, a famous poem, the stories of Don Rodrigo, the prodigal son or St. Martin have all given us as a free gift the letters with which we wrote down the first few sentences of our consciousness and indignation, the ones with which we have learned to cry for the sorrows and joys of others, to suffer and rejoice for people we have never met and who never existed (but are more real and true than many of our neighbours). If we do not encounter at least one poet who loves the naked truth (Giacomo Leopardi, for example) while we are still young, as adults we won’t be able to free ourselves from ideologies, and will surrender to some idol offering simple answers to our even simpler questions.
Today our children grow up being educated mainly by the television and mobile phones, in the company of new soap operas for kids, which do not represent anything more on the screen than what the boys live every day, without any ability to make them dream and wish for greater things than what's already in their heart. The television stories of my childhood were 'Pinocchio' by Collodi, played by Comencini and 'Michael Strogoff' by Decourt, adapted from Jules Verne. Not long ago I listened to the soundtracks of those films again and suddenly I had a flashback of those days and my first emotions about good and evil by others - I learned it without a teacher’s help that a father can sell his only jacket to be able to send his son to school and that a poor farmer may donate his only horse for a greater ideal.

There is little hope for a change of course in television, whether public or private, as it is increasingly in the hands of profit oriented sponsors. What about school, though? Western governments are reducing the space of art education and humanities, in all types of schools and in all grades. In a culture where faiths and the great collective narratives have lost their space, if young people are also systematically deprived of literature, art, loud music and poetry, it will only produce people without those passions and feelings that are the more important for living together in peace and freedom. If we do not react to this anorexia of compassion, our children will quickly pass through the city centre of Warsaw but will not 'revisit' the ghetto with its 450 thousand Jews who were deported and killed there, they will not get into that synagogue and cry there for shame. And that would be an awfully sad day. The capacity for compassion for one's people is an immense resource of the peoples. It is no less valuable than oil or technology. Starting to talk about its deterioration is the first step to try to reconstitute this heritage that's in ruins now.