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In Matthew’s gospel we read the story of the scholar of the law who approaches Jesus with the question. Which commandment in the law is greatest? The answer Jesus gives is “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments” (22:36-40). Similar passages are found in the other synoptic gospels, Mark 12 and Luke10

From the very beginning of the Christian community, the expectation has been that the followers of Jesus were to be guided in their behavior by Jesus answer to the scribe’s question. The dual commandment to love God and one’s neighbor is the foundation of Christian life. We’ve all heard this before, and so the temptation is to move on quickly to other aspects of the Christian faith since this point is so obvious, Christians are called to love God and neighbor. But just for a moment, let’s not rush to move on but dwell on the centrality of the love commandment in the life of the disciple. By staying with this commandment, I want to begin by talking, first, about how surprising it would have been to the vast majority of those living in the Roman Empire in the early decades of the church’s life. Second, I’d like to point out how vital was the Christian witness to that command in the growth of the Christian community within the Empire. And, third, I want to also note how complicated the love commandment got as Christian disciples entered into the public life of the Empire.

So, first, the surprise that the love commandment would have been. The sociologist of religion, Rodney Stark wrote a fascinating book back in the mid-nineties, *The Rise of Christianity*,[[1]](#endnote-1) in which he sought to understand the factors that led to the tremendous growth of the Christian community from a very small sect within Judaism to the dominant religion of the entire Roman Empire in less than 300 years. In a fascinating chapter entitled “Epidemics, Networks, and Conversions’” Stark discusses the impact of two major epidemics upon the Empire.[[2]](#endnote-2) In the middle of the second century, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, from a fourth to a third of the entire population of the empire, including the emperor, died in what medical historians believe was the first appearance of smallpox in the West. Then in the middle of the third century a second devastating epidemic, this time possibly measles, led to significant mortality in rural as well as urban areas.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Through his careful study of both the patristic authors and pagan[[4]](#footnote-1) historians, Stark demonstrates that “pagan communities did not match Christian levels of benevolence during the epidemics, since they did not even do so in normal times when the risks entailed by benevolence were much lower.”[[5]](#endnote-4) What accounts for this difference? Stark’s reading of the literature at the time suggests that Christian values had from the outset encouraged moral norms of charitable service and communal solidarity. And this was due to the surprising claim of Christians regarding their God. “Something distinctive did come into the world” with the spread of biblical faith – both Jewish and Christian – and that was “the linking of a highly *social* ethical code with religion.” And what was new was “the notion that more than self-interested exchange relations were possible between humans and the supernatural.” In short, “the Christian teaching that God loves those who love him was alien to pagan beliefs.” For a pagan worshipper, the concern was what service the god might supply if coaxed to do so by sacrifice. There was no expectation that God would feel love in response to the offering. “Equally alien to paganism was the notion that because God loves humanity, Christians cannot please God unless they love one another.”[[6]](#endnote-5) These were surprising ideas to the pagan worldview.

Second, the Christian ethic helped the church to grow in consequence of the behavior of disciples. This for at least three reasons. During the epidemics, because of Christians care for one another they had lower mortality rates than the general population. Second, there is evidence that there was an increase in conversions to Christianity among pagan survivors of the epidemics in a spirit of gratitude for the charitable work of the Christian community in saving them. And, there was also an increased esteem among the general population for the kindness and care of Christians and this witness increased interest in the gospel message.[[7]](#endnote-6) Stark does not maintain that Christian behavior during the epidemics was the single or even most important cause for the growth of Christianity, but he makes a good case that the seriousness with which early disciples practiced the love commandment had real impact across the Roman Empire.

Regarding my third point, I wish now to move beyond the insights of Stark to illustrate how the love commandment became more complicated as Christians, individually and collectively, moved into new social locations within the Empire. Several things happened over the course of time that gradually began to affect how Christians thought about the love command. At the level of ideas, Christians wrestled with the meaning of love in a variety of settings. When attempting to be obedient to the central commandment of love, what do we mean by love? There are at least four options.

a) One ought not do any harm or evil to our neighbor (*primum non nocere*). It is essentially a negative obligation like not trespassing. One’s obligation is satisfied by not doing anything rather than doing something. As long as I don’t harm another, I fulfill the commandment to love.

b) A second option for understanding the duty to love is that one ought to prevent harm or evil to another person. So, if I see an individual placed at risk due to proximity to a live electrical wire, I ought to do what I can to warn off the individual from getting too close.

c) A more challenging interpretation is to consider whether my obligation to love another entails removing the evil that threatens or harms the person. So might I seek the eradication of an infectious disease through public health measures such as vaccination, better sanitation, use of antibiotics,

d) fourth, should I not only resist evil, must I also seek to promote the good of the person as well as limit harm? Ought I advocate for better housing, labor laws that secure safe work-sites and decent wages for laborers, and public literacy programs – all of which help persons to live richer and better lives.

While not suggesting that any particular patristic thinker laid out the options as I have, let me propose that there was a growing appreciation over time for the complexity of what strategies should be pursued in order for me to love my neighbor adequately. The meaning of neighbor love as not causing harm is the most obvious and this strategy was widely accepted.

The problem becomes more difficult when one has to sort through what love requires when the interests of two of my neighbors conflicts. Perhaps neighbor X is physically assaulting neighbor Y, what then? Here the second and third meanings of love as preventing or eradicating harm might justify using physical force against X in order to assist Y. Since the specific situation might not allow me to meet everyone’s needs, it may be that I should choose to protect the innocent party. Implicit here is some sense of justice, which allows me to determine who are the innocent and guilty parties. For instance, what should the Good Samaritan have done had he come upon the victim while the robbers were attacking him, rather than showing up after the assault. Might satisfying the second and third meanings of neighbor love toward the victim, permit the Christian to override the obligation to love the robbers in the first sense of cause no injury?

Another problematic arises with the fourth meaning of neighbor love, to promote the good. What does love require when my understanding of the neighbor’s interests conflicts with his or hers? This sounds paternalistic, but what about stopping the neighbor from some unwise action, e.g. excessive alcohol consumption coupled with driving a car, that might be against the neighbor’s will yet be in their true best interest? Might the fourth meaning of love – promoting the neighbor’s good – lead to measures that require some neighbors to care for the common good, even at the expense of overriding their belief in what is in their short-term good, e.g. a law preventing pollution of a nearby river even if there was some short-term financial advantage to dump waste in the river.

Now, let’s further complicate the matter by introducing not only diverse ideas about the meaning of neighbor love, but also consider how different social locations affect the requirements of love. Over the course of centuries, as individual Christians achieved various roles of prominence in the Empire or local region, and the church as a body attained legal standing to assemble in public, to own property, to build public buildings, a second reality came to the fore. What responsibility exists when Christians can stop harm to others but do not do so? To fail in the second and third meanings of love can be a failure not only to love, but also to be just. Is there a difference between killing Y and letting Y be killed, when we have the power to prevent Y’s death? In short, moral agents can bear responsibility not only for what they do, but also for permitting certain states of affairs to continue by inaction. The more influence and power one has, the greater the consequences of one’s actions and inactions. As Christians became local magistrates, public safety officials, governors, persons with significant wealth and property, even advisors to the emperor and members of the imperial court – did the requirements for love of neighbor change?

Take the case of a drowning person. If I cannot swim myself I have a different role to play than the person who is an excellent swimmer capable of saving the drowning individual without serious risk. As Christians acquired the means to assist more people in more extensive ways, they were also acquiring different and new responsibilities for loving their neighbor.

If the Good Samaritan had been, instead of a lone traveler who came upon a helpless victim, but been the director of public safety along the roads of Palestine, there might have been something more that he could have, even should have, done to prevent the harm to his neighbor; perhaps build a safer road from Jerusalem to Jericho with regular oversight by unmarked police cars cruising the road and providing better street lighting and convenient emergency call boxes. Or perhaps in the case of the drowning person, the supervisor of public beaches should have posted more signs about dangerous tides or assigned trained lifeguards to watch out for swimmers in trouble.

Throughout the New Testament, there is a working assumption that the Christian community holds minority status within the society in which it is located and that individual disciples are relatively powerless to influence and direct the behavior of public officials in society. A tiny band of Semites in Palestine had little or no influence in decisions of the Roman Empire. When the social status of the church and the individual disciple changed, however, so might the understanding of neighbor love and the strategies necessary to live that commandment faithfully.

Let me now stipulate my usage of three terms – love, charity, justice – to make sure we are clear about the matter.

In paragraph 77 of *Laudato Si’* we read that,

Creation is of the order of love. God’s love is the fundamental moving force in all created things: “For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made; for you would not have made anything if you had hated it” (*Wis*11:24). Every creature is thus the object of the Father’s tenderness, who gives it its place in the world. Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with his affection. Saint Basil the Great described the Creator as “goodness without measure,” while Dante Alighieri spoke of “the love which moves the sun and the stars.

St. Augustine wrote of our restless hearts that they could only find their rest in God, we are incomplete and restless without love. It is the reason for our existence, it is the experience that transforms and fulfills us. Even the preposition we use is telling; we speak of being IN love, not on love or with love or around love. When we are IN love we are located in a different space than when we are OUT of love. When we are IN love, it is not just that I love you, it is that life is transformed: the coffee tastes better, the annoying person at work is a bit more bearable, time moves slower or faster depending on whether I am in or out of love.

St. Paul tells us if we are without love then we are no more than clashing cymbals or noisy gongs. Even if “I have faith to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (1Cor 13:2). He reminds us that “faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love (1Cor 13:13). So without question, Pope Francis is merely reminding us of the centrality of love for all our lives. “God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God in them” (1Jn 4:16).

But how to remain in love, how to live in love? Here is where our other two words become important. Charity is the expression of love in direct encounter with our brothers and sisters. While justice is to be understood as the social expression of love. Charity is love expressed in acts of almsgiving, provision of direct assistance to someone in need, caring for the sick, comforting the sorrowful, reconciliation with the alienated. Without such direct and immediate acts of love, without charity, human life becomes unimaginably bleak and harsh.

However, the challenge of loving the neighbor is not exhausted by the sort of charity provided by the Good Samaritan. For, as Jesus’ parable suggests, there is no boundary line to be drawn between those who are Gentile and Jew, male and female, slave and free, near and far. So, for those close at hand, acts of charity are the obvious ways to demonstrate a commitment to love of neighbor. But how to love the distant neighbor? The neighbor who cannot hear our kind words, receive our gentle touch, see our smiling welcome?

How give expression to love of the neighbor who is beyond personal reach?

This is where our third term, justice, must be introduced into the life of the disciple. Benedict XVI in his social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* makes the important point that when love follows, what he calls the “institutional path” or the “political path” it is “no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbor directly” (7). Justice is to be understood as the political expression of love or the translation into institutional or structural vehicles of neighbor love.

What has happened is that in Catholic social teaching, charity continues to be used as it has throughout the tradition, but justice has received new appreciation as we have come to understand how societies work, how political, economic, and cultural systems can be influenced and utilized to promote the good of the neighbor. Hence, Francis writes in paragraph 158 in *Laudato Si’*: “In order to make society more human, more worthy of the human person, love in social life – political, economic and cultural – must be given renewed value, becoming the constant and highest norm for all activity.” And this is why Francis argues “we have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor”* (49).

In *Laudato Si’* chapter five contains numerous suggestions for policy changes and political action to address the environmental crisis. Then in chapter six, Francis writes about ecological spirituality, environmental education, sustainable lifestyle options, and personal conversion to care for the earth, in other words more personal and inter-personal measures after the previous chapter’s systemic approach. Both chapters reflect the vision of Francis who maintains in *Laudato Si’* that “along with the importance of little everyday gestures, social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a ‘culture of care’ which permeates all of society” (231). Francis is clear, social love (what I am calling justice) is the key to authentic development.

Just as earlier generations of Christians had to come to terms with what the commandment of love asked of disciples in particular circumstances, so must we consider our circumstances, which are very different than first century Palestine. With regard to our local context let us consider certain realities of the U.S. Catholic scene, and what they mean for our efforts at practicing love of neighbor.

In the latter half of the twentieth century the consequences of two public policies enacted in the first half of the century came to be seen. With the immigration reform act of 1924 written by the nativist Congressman Albert Johnson, there was the establishment for the first time of a quota to European immigration. Consequently, the Catholic church in this country saw the constant flow of new immigrants from European Catholic countries slow to a trickle compared to the period from 1820-1920. As second and third generation immigrants began to advance their economic and social standing there was not a substantial generation of new arrivals coming along to maintain the American Catholic church’s image as being a church of immigrants. Gradually, within the span of several decades, the Catholic community had dramatically rising metrics for per capita income and years of formal education.

The second public policy was the G.I. bill after World War II that provided many Catholic veterans with the means to go to college, greatly expanding the size of Catholic higher education institutions. The new law also provided access to financing for home mortgages that led to the shift of Catholics from ethnic enclaves in major urban areas to assimilation within the vast suburban tracts being developed in the fifties. The face of the U.S. Catholic church was becoming markedly different, even if comedians and commentators kept talking about blue collar ethnics as if Catholics in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s were largely unchanged from their grandparents and great grandparents who had come from Europe.

What this means, of course, is that sitting in many of our parish pews are people who are now more likely to sit on management’s side of the table than labor’s, who are as likely to attend elite universities as they are community colleges, and who are at least as well educated as the people preaching to them from pulpits. American Catholics must be provided an experience of church that is broadly participatory, consultative, and which employs methods of communication and education that reflect the changed social status of the Catholic laity.

A pastoral plan for environmental action that ignores these realities will simply be unable to capture the imaginations, hearts and minds of adult Catholics. Unless the church becomes a place where believers can find suitable opportunities for the formation of conscience and the cultivation of character, it will never be able to promote a theology and spirituality that actually has adherents beyond a scattering of academic theologians and social activists. The church must become a community of serious moral discourse that does not short circuit adult formation by practices that undercut honest questioning, genuine searching, and critical reflection on the part of all Catholics.

A few other items for consideration about a dialogue with our local context is that American public culture is pluralistic, secular, diffuse, and free. American Catholics live in a culture that requires we negotiate the values and practices of social life with hundreds of millions of others who do not share our faith. The broad diversity of American culture inevitably produces people who are wary of far reaching claims to authority and certainty. Having to learn how to live and work with others on our campuses, in our workplaces, at our recreational and cultural gatherings, it is difficult not to transfer such learned behaviors of forbearance and openness to religious and moral matters. The Catholic community in this country will be skeptical of any pastoral acrtivity that is not deeply respectful of the pluralism in our society.

Oursw is a secular society, by which I mean not a society that opposes religion, but a society that limits religion’s influence over other vital segments of social life. A sound theology should inform and shape our political, economic, judicial, educational and cultural institutions. But none of these arenas will be made subject to religion for they have their legitimate autonomy. The Catholic church must develop a theology and spirituality that engages the various realms of social life by speaking insightfully and persuasively. The church has a right and duty to speak in public but its influence will only be as great as the wisdom of its message. The presumption must be that we will speak a useful word; it cannot be presumed we will have the final word.

We are living in a period of significant concentration of power and control of communications at the corporate level, with a few companies becoming conglomerates of many formerly independent organizations. Yet at the same time we are seeing a remarkable diffusion of voices through new communication tools that are changing public discourse. Consider the emergence of blogging and its impact on electoral politics, or the daily check of *Facebook* or *Instagram* to find videos that range from the revealing expose to the pointed satire.

The ways in which people communicate and learn today are constantly shifting and being recast. In order to promote a pastoral plan for our regional church that cares for creation, we will need to become more adept in the use of new media. Relying upon doing the same thing in the same way is not a formula for getting new results. Developing pastoral strategies that arise from the lived experience of people in this nation will necessitate improvement in our present approaches to communication.

A final attribute that I would mention about our social location is the level of individual freedom people have with regard to church membership. We live in a culture that does not coerce people on the issue of church participation. Few people today suffer discrimination in the workplace, ostracism from family, or marginalization from social life, because they drop out of the church. Today if people attend church it is increasingly a matter of personal choice and preference rather than family, peer, or cultural pressure. This suggests that people will approach church membership as being similar to membership in voluntary associations that they join. In large part this will mean that the church will have to demonstrate that active involvement in a faith community is a path toward authentic human development and a better society.

This does not necessarily suggest that churches become therapy groups or associations for political action. It does mean that calls to sacrifice, invitations to service, and prophetic challenges to change, will need to be integrated into a theology that offers a comprehensive vision of what true personhood and authentic community look like along with a practical hope for how individuals and groups might be transformed so as to achieve those goals.

For a pastoral plan to be successful in this context it must be one that promotes a hope for historical change, builds alliances across differences for the sake of seeking shared goods, and pledges to work with other individuals and institutions in a cooperative manner even if those others do not share our faith commitments. This is in reference to the church’s external mission to the world around us. Internally, the church must, of course, continue to be a community that gathers to hear the word of God and celebrate the sacramental life. But it will also need to create structures and spaces that allow for all segments of the church to participate and deliberate in the creation of a Catholic approach to caring for our global home. We need to build inclusive and broadly participatory gatherings for social analysis and theological reflection at a level that is truly grassroots.

But no regional church can be bound to its local context alone. As part of a universal church, the various regional approaches that are developed must take us to another place, one that transcends the region not by ignoring the local but by bringing the local into dialogue with the other regional churches of the global church. And that is to return, once again, to *Laudato Si’*, a document of the universal church that needs to be part of any conversation by American Catholics of how we are to be obedient to the Lord’s commandment of love.

If my interpretation of love, charity, and justice is a reasonable interpretation of the mind of Pope Francis and the evolution of Catholic social teaching, then we can see the ministry of justice is the community of disciples’ effort to apply the Gospel command of love to complex human relationships. Whereas charity is love in the context of personal and interpersonal settings requiring care and compassion in direct engagement demanding immediate attention. Justice is love’s expression in the context of human relationships dealing with human dignity and political, economic, and cultural systems. The work is aimed at institutions and public policies that will take time to reform and renew. Justice is the virtue that governs and guides the evaluation of social institutions and policies. Catholic social teaching, as exemplified by *Laudato Si’* reflects the development of how Christian disciples in this place and at this time can analyze and enact the implications of the command to love the earth and one another through our works of charity and justice.

1. Princeton University Press, 1996. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. 73-94. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. 73. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I use the word “pagan” in a non-pejorative sense. Christianity was mainly an urban movement. Hence, the Latin word, *paganus*, meaning a country or rural inhabitant came to be the term referring to non-Christians. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
5. Ibid. 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. Ibid. 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. Ibid. 91ff. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)