



Love of God and Neighbor: Living Charity in Aquinas' Ethics

Meghan J. Clark

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of charity in the moral life by focusing on the nature of charity and its requirements. What does it mean to say that someone has charity? Through an examination of the virtue of charity: subject, object and order, I will establish the necessary way in which charity functions as love of neighbor, including the love of God through love of neighbor. Focusing then on love of neighbor, I will examine what, for Aquinas, is constitutive of living charity through mercy, beneficence and almsgiving. Throughout, I will argue that one cannot have charity without living charity through love of neighbor.

Keywords

Aquinas, charity, virtue, ethics

What is the center of the moral life? According to Aquinas, the goal of the moral life is to be in right relationship with God, to love God above all things; "Now it is charity that unites us to God, who is the last end of the human mind, since *he that abideth in charity abideth in God, and God in him* (1 Jo. iv. 16). Therefore the perfection of the Christian life consists radically in charity" (II-II.184.1.corpus)¹ and since "the perfection of the Christian life consists simply in charity, but in the other virtues relatively... It follows that the perfection of charity is paramount in relation to the perfection of the other virtues" (II-II.184.1.ad2). While charity is primarily love of God, it also includes love of neighbor. The question of what constitutes a moral life, for Aquinas, is intimately bound up with his understanding of the nature of charity and its requirements.

¹ All references to Aquinas *Summa Theologica* will be internally cited and refer to the following edition: Aquinas, St. Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1991. 5 volumes.

II. The Virtue of Charity

What is charity? Moreover, why is it a virtue in Aquinas' ethics? According to Aquinas, charity is among the theological virtues, "first, because their object is God inasmuch as they direct us aright to God: secondly, because they are infused in us by God alone: thirdly, because these virtues are not made known to us, save by Divine revelation" (I-II.62.1.corpus). Furthermore, while human persons are created with a natural inclination to God in their reason and will, this natural inclination is not sufficient to direct one to supernatural happiness in God (I-II.62.1.ad3) therefore charity must be infused by God in the soul (II-II.23.2). An infused theological virtue, charity is the form of all the virtues, theological and moral. Charity as form is the mode by which all the other virtues are directed towards God. Aquinas states both "that all other virtues depend on charity in some way (I-II.62.2.ad3) and that "charity is the mother and root of all the virtues, in as much as it is the form of them all" (I-II.62.4.corpus). In what way is charity both love of God and love of neighbor?

Charity is both love of God and friendship with God. In the theological virtues, God reveals his happiness to us. As friendship, charity places us in proper relationship with God and neighbor. Based on this, Aquinas states, "the love which is based on this communication is charity: wherefore it is evident that charity is the friendship of man with God" (II-II.23.1.corpus). Despite being imperfect it is still friendship with God (II-II.23.1.ad 1). While charity is primarily friendship with God, charity also includes friendship with neighbor, even extending to enemies. Aquinas explains, "Friendship of charity extends even to our enemies, whom we love out of charity in relation to God, to whom the friendship of charity is chiefly directed" (II-II.23.1.ad 2). This is why Aquinas can say that while one is supposed to hate sin, one is to love the sinner for God's sake (II-II.23.1.ad 3). Furthermore, Aquinas states, "the charity whereby formally we love our neighbor is a participation of Divine charity" (II-II.23.2. ad 1). Throughout this section, Aquinas establishes the basis of charity within a relationship. This is important for the role of charity in the moral life, given the way Aquinas places charity in the person who loves, who engages in friendship, and ultimately, in the person who does acts of charity.

Charity is love, friendship and it is virtue. Aquinas is clear; charity is founded on the goodness of God, participation with God, and it unites us with God. Therefore, it is a virtue. In response to the objection that since charity is friendship, it is not a virtue, Aquinas explains, "For we might say that it is a moral virtue about works done in respect of another person, but under a different aspect from justice. For justice is about works done in respect of another person, under the aspect of legal due whereas friendship considers the aspect

of a friendly and moral duty, or rather that of a gratuitous favor” (II-II.23.3. ad 1). Not only is it a virtue, it is the form of the virtues because, “charity is included in the definition of every virtue, not as being essentially every virtue, but because every virtue depends on it... in this same way prudence is included in the definition of the moral virtues” (II.23.4 ad1). If charity is a special virtue, it raises questions about the formal relationship between charity and the other virtues. Given that, one can only have charity when God infuses it through grace; the relationship of charity to the other virtues is integral to the comprehensiveness and coherence of Aquinas’ virtue theory. He separates the infused and acquired virtues by carefully delineating an actions relationship to a proximate end and the final end. Insofar as an action is directed to the final end, one cannot have virtue without charity because charity is what unites us with God. However, in relation to the proximate end, it is possible to have virtue without charity. And yet, according to Aquinas, “it is charity which directs the acts of all the other virtues to the last end, and which consequently, also gives the form to all other acts of virtue: and it is precisely in this sense that charity is called the form of the virtues” (II-II.23.8. corpus). Through charity as form, all of the other virtues can be directed towards the final end. Justice, prudence, etc. cannot be directed towards union with God except as formally accomplished by charity.

As stated above, charity is friendship with God and this friendship supercedes humanity’s natural capacities, it transcends nature. The natural cannot unite us with the supernatural. He explains, “Therefore charity can be in us neither naturally, nor through the acquisition of natural powers, but by the infusion of the Holy Ghost, who is the love of the Father and the Son, and the participation of whom in us created charity” (II-II.24.3. corpus). Friendship, fellowship, participation, all of the words or images which Aquinas uses in his attempt to explain the relationship of a human person to God created with charity all clearly involve a sense of communion or community with the divine. It is evident, within the framework of Aquinas’s anthropology, that it is divine action, which makes this communion possible. The extent to which a human person is capable of friendship with God depends solely upon the infused virtues and does not depend on the natural capacity of an individual. According to Aquinas, “charity is given not according to our natural capacity, but according as the spirit wills to distribute his gifts” (II-II.24.3. corpus). Having charity depends entirely on grace.

Since it an infused virtue and depends on grace, one either has charity or does not. Charity cannot increase by addition, according to Aquinas, “charity increases only by its subject partaking of Charity more and more... Therefore charity increases by being intensified in its subject, and this is for charity to increase in its essence; and

not by charity being added to charity” (II-II.24.5. corpus). One can participate more fully or more intensely in fellowship with God, but one cannot increase charity in the manner one collects coins. Furthermore, it is God that increases charity; for Aquinas, “This is what God does when He increases charity, that is He makes it to have a greater hold on the soul, and the likeness of the Holy Ghost to be more perfectly participated by the soul” (II-II.24.5. ad 3). Once again, this increase is an increase by God. Aquinas repeatedly emphasizes that the virtue of charity depends on God. This raises a question about the efficacy of acts of charity or living out charity. However, Aquinas does not want to dismiss the importance or relevance of acts of charity. He explains, “charity does not actually increase through ever act of charity, but each act of charity disposes to an increase of charity, insofar as one act of charity makes man more ready to act again according to charity” (II-II.24.6. corpus). Making oneself more disposed to charity is important because, for Aquinas, “man advances in the way to God, not merely by actual increase of charity, but also by being disposed to that increase” (II-II.24.6. ad 3).

Aquinas is clear about the infusion and increase of charity – God/Holy Spirit is the primary actor. If God is the only cause of charity, how does charity decrease? Since God alone causes charity, Aquinas argues, “it follows that even when its act ceases it does not for this reason decrease, or cease altogether, unless the cessation involves a sin” (II-II.24.10. corpus). This is precisely because, “by sinning mortally, a man acts against charity, he deserves that God should withdraw charity from him,” (II-II.24.10. corpus). Even the loss of charity through mortal sin is the revocation of charity by God in this system. Aquinas is clear that every mortal sin is contrary to charity, because charity is friendship or union with God. (II-II.24.12).

While charity is primarily friendship or communion with God, it is not limited to one’s relationship with God but also one’s relationship with one’s neighbors. In Question 25, Aquinas delineates how far beyond only God charity applies examining how charity applies to other people, one’s self, one’s body, etc. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the object of charity as it applies to our relationships with other people. From the beginning, Aquinas is clear that charity extends to one’s neighbors, by which he means the entire human community. It is clear that one is to love one’s neighbor as part of charity. Aquinas argues, “the aspect under which our neighbor is to be loved, is God, since what we ought to love in our neighbor is that he may be in God . . . Consequently, the habit of charity extends not only to the love of God, but also to the love of neighbor” (II-II.25.1. corpus). For Aquinas, we love others always in some relation to God (II-II.25.1. ad 2). This love of neighbor is related to God but must always be properly ordered as “it would be wrong if a man loved his neighbor as though he were his last end, but not, if he loved

him for God's sake; and this is what charity does" (II-II.25.1. ad 3). The relationship of charity, as stated, is one of friendship and fellowship. It is evident how this applies in general to our neighbor, but since charity is ultimately related to God, how does charity apply to sinners? In accordance with his general optimism concerning human nature, Aquinas points out that while charity can be lost through sin, nature is not (II-II.25.6.sed contra). It is, then, according to Aquinas, "our duty to hate, in the sinner, the sin and to love in him, his being a man capable of bliss; and this is to love him truly out of charity for God's sake" (II-II.25.6.corpus). The emphasis on continuing to love the sinner in relation to God in charity establishes a basic level of fellowship among all persons demanded by charity regardless of one's personal moral standing.

Charity is love of God and love of neighbor. This requires charity to be ordered in reference to God, the first principle structurally and in specific instances, is spelled out in the order of charity (II-II.26.1). God is to be loved above all else, and all other things are to be loved in relation to God. Even though God is to be loved first and above all given that God is our last end; one cannot love God without loving neighbor. Aquinas explains:

for since our neighbor is more visible to us, he is the first lovable object we meet with, because *the soul learns from those things it knows to love what it knows* not as Gregory says in a homily (In Evang. xi). Hence, it can be argued that if any man loves not his neighbor, neither does he love God, not because his more lovable, but because he is the first thing to demand our love: and God is more lovable by his goodness. (II-II.26.2.ad1).

While it is obvious then, that one must love God more than one loves one's neighbor, the love of neighbor is integral to loving God. Therefore, a secondary level is needed to differentiate between neighbors – since neighbor as applied to charity includes all other persons – family, friends, strangers, enemies, etc. Through the order of charity, Aquinas establishes guidelines for applying charity in one's encounters with others. This order provides a basic structure from which to live charity and guide acts of charity – in relation to the self, family, and strangers.

Charity, as explained by Aquinas, is union not self-deprecation. In accordance with his ethical theory as a whole, Aquinas maintains the importance of love of self and the value of oneself. He explains, "God is loved as the principle of good, on which the love of charity is founded; while man, out of charity, loves himself by reason of his being a partaker of the aforesaid good, and loves his neighbor by reason of his fellowship in that Good" (II-II.26.4.corpus). The reference point for charity is always ultimately God, one loves out of a relationship with or participation in the Divine. It is also the

mandate given by Jesus in the love commandment, where he says, “You are to love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like to it; You should love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:37–39, cf: Lk 10:27–28, Mk 12:30–31). The important element which Aquinas is emphasizing here is that implicit within the love command is the command to love oneself. While he does not cite this here, it is the operative framework behind the entire treatise on charity. Love of oneself is a priority for one’s personal relationship with God and one’s soul. And it is out of this that Aquinas can justifiably say, “therefore man, out of charity, ought to love himself more than his neighbor: in sign whereof, a man ought not to give way to any evil of sin, which counteracts his share of happiness, not even that he may free his neighbor from sin” (II-II.26.4. corpus).² This self-love is connected to love of neighbor and the order within love of neighbor. Stephen Pope explains,

Love of charity for the self refers first to one’s spiritual nature: one is not to commit sin even if by doing so one were able to free the neighbor from sin. Yet charity gives rise to very important forms of self-denial. Indeed, the welfare of the neighbor’s soul takes priority over concern for one’s own body, since the neighbor’s soul is closer to one’s own soul than is one’s soul to one’s own body.³

What then is the structure or order to love of neighbor? By what criteria does one love one neighbor more than one loves another? It is impossible, and Aquinas recognizes this, to love all with charity in the same way and to the same degree. He establishes two separate criteria to structure our love of neighbor. First, charity is measured in relation to God, and therefore one should love those closer to God more (II-II.26.6.ad2). Aquinas states, “Now the object of charity’s love is God, and man is the lover. Therefore the specific diversity of the love which is in accordance with charity, as regards the love of our neighbor, depends on his relation to God, so that, out of charity, we should wish a greater good to one who is nearer to God” (II-II.26.7. corpus). Second, we should love those more closely related to us (our family, friends, etc). Aquinas explains, “Now the inward affection of charity ought to correspond to the outward effect. Therefore charity regards those who are nearer to us before those who are better” (II-II.26.7.sed contra). Furthermore, we love those nearer to us more through natural inclination, in more ways and with more intensity than strangers. Throughout Question 26, Aquinas examines a number

² It is relevant to note that Aquinas is talking about oneself focusing on the soul. He does not prioritize one’s body over one’s neighbor. He states one ought to love one’s neighbor over one’s own body (II-II.26.5).

³ Stephen Pope. *The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994. P. 60–61.

of different cases, which indicate the priority of biological and social relationships in the order of charity. Even within the bonds of family and friends, there is an order to charity which Aquinas examines (i.e. the various familial responsibilities of parent/child, father/mother, and parents/wife) (II-II.26.8–11). Stephen Pope comments:

Thomas did not view the order of charity as a simple system of concentric circles (somewhat like the system of concentric spheres that marked the medieval cosmos), in which family and members of one's own household come first, next close friends, neighbors and associates and finally others in an outwardly radiating gradation of various relations to the self. . . His interpretation of the order of charity recognizes the importance of different spheres of life and acknowledged the need for different schemes of priority, depending on the various matters that are the basis of the different connections people share.⁴

This is the basic order of charity as Aquinas lays it out. How this order functions and its adequacy in living charity will be examined next.

III. Living Charity

In an article on charity and prudence, James Keenan states, "Charity alone serves as the moral description for the morally good person."⁵ The most common correlation between charity and the moral life is that only through charity do our virtuous actions contain merit. This fact highlights two important aspects of charity. First, charity perfects the virtues and makes one meritorious. Second, there is an integral connection between charity and virtuous action. Charity is manifested in acts, it is known through action. Aquinas explains that the principal act of charity is to love, not to be loved. He clearly states, "now to be loved is not the act of charity of the person loved; for this act is to love; and to be loved is competent to him as coming under the common notion of good as another tends toward his good by an act of charity" (II-II.27.1). Being loved points to an act of charity on the part of the person who loves. It is clear, then that an act of charity, is an act of loving. What does this look like? In addition, what is its relation to the moral life? Are acts of charity constitutive of having charity? In what, if any situations, is one morally obligated to perform an act of charity? Focusing on mercy, beneficence and almsgiving, this section will argue that acts of charity are an integral part of having the virtue. Furthermore, one

⁴ Stephen Pope. *The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love*. P. 64

⁵ James Keenan, S.J. "Distinguishing Charity as Goodness and Prudence as Rightness: A Key to Thomas's *Secunda Pars*" *the Thomist* 56 (1992) p. 411.

cannot have charity without living charity, to a significant extent, through mercy, beneficence and almsgiving.

Aquinas examines the effects of charity by separating them into interior and exterior effects. The interior effect of charity, which directly relates to love of neighbor, is *mercy (misericordia)*. Mercy is “man’s compassionate heart for another’s unhappiness” (II-II.30.1); it is always related to another person and not oneself. Aquinas states, “Pity is sympathy for another’s distress, it is directed, properly speaking, towards another and not to oneself, except figuratively like justice . . . a man does not pity himself, but suffers in himself” (II-II.26.1.ad1). Just as charity has multiple degrees – those one which we love those closest to us and to which we love all our neighbors as persons in relation to God, mercy or pity has differing degrees or motives. According to Aquinas, one is moved to pity and mercy, “either because one looks upon another’s defect as one’s own, through being united to him by love, or on account of the possibility of suffering in the same way” (II-II.30.2. corpus).

Mercy, then, is the internal disposition by which motivates one to show compassion for another person, but the way in which this occurs determines whether mercy is an emotion or virtue. Aquinas explains, “Mercy signifies grief for another’s distress. Now this grief may denote, in one way, a movement of the sensitive appetite, in which case mercy is not a virtue but a passion; whereas, in another way, it may denote a movement of the intellectual appetite, in as much as one person’s evil is displeasing to another” (II-II.30.3.corpus). Unlike the other interior effects (or the exterior, which will be examined next), mercy is described not only as an effect of charity but a virtue in itself – requiring both the virtue of charity and the other person suffering (II-II.30.3.ad2); it is, for Aquinas, “a moral virtue having relation to the passions” (II-II.30.3.ad3). While to be a virtue, it must be guided by reason, mercy as a virtue has this added aspect found in the emotions.

If mercy is a virtue, what then is its relationship to charity? How is it related to charity as love of neighbor? Aquinas explains its relationship to charity stating, “the sum total of the Christian religion consists in mercy, as regards external works: but the inward love of charity, whereby we are united to God preponderates over both love and mercy for our neighbor” (II-II.30.4. ad2). Furthermore, Aquinas goes on to explain, “Charity likens us to God by uniting us to him in the bond of love, wherefore it surpasses mercy, which likens us to God as regards similarity of works” (II-II.30.4. ad3). Given the explanation of charity above, the boundary and distinctions between mercy and charity are blurry. External works of mercy are then also acts of charity. Charity in and of itself is distinct, and the governing structure is the order of charity, however, the external effects of charity are acts of mercy, however, he denies the objection that an

act of charity is not an act of charity but only an act of mercy (II-II.31.1.obj3). In dealing with the relationship between mercy and charity, Aquinas is somewhat ambiguous; however, he establishes mercy as a subset of charity emphasizing it as a particular aspect of acts of charity.

The first of charity's outward effects, which Aquinas examines, is *beneficence*. An act of friendship or charity, for Aquinas, "beneficence simply means doing good to someone" (II-II.31.1. corpus). It is an effect of love (II-II.31.2. corpus). When examining a specific case, an act of beneficence, it seems, can also belong to another virtue. He explains, "if the good which one man does another, be considered under some special aspect of good, then the beneficence will assume a special character and will belong to some special virtue" (II-II.31.1. corpus). He is clear, however, that beneficence is not a special virtue itself but an act of charity (II-II.31.4. corpus). Comparing charity with mercy and justice, Aquinas maintains that beneficence is an act of charity. Countering the objection that doing good for another is either mercy or justice, not charity, Aquinas clearly argues that "just as friendship or charity sees in the benefit bestowed, the general aspect of good, so does justice see therein the aspect of debt, while pity considers the relieving of distress or defect" (II-II.31.1.ad 3). Beneficence then is an act of charity, which consists in doing good for another.

Given that charity extends to all our neighbors, to specify what a moral life in accordance with charity looks like and what charity requires of us. Aware of our limited capacities, Aquinas acknowledges that "absolutely speaking, it is impossible to do good to each and every single one: yet it is true of each individual that one may be bound to do good to him in some particular case... Hence charity binds us, though not actually doing good to someone, to be prepared in mind to do good to anyone if we have time to spare" (II-II.31.2. ad1). The requirements of charity in the moral life are realistic. One cannot help everyone, but this does not lessen the requirements of charity. Aquinas is clear that in a particular case, one may be bound in charity to aid another and if one is living charity, one must have an openness or readiness to help another in those situations. The strength of charity's requirements to beneficence and the emphasis on need is evident in Aquinas's approach to sinners. A mere internal openness, which does not translate into action, is not sufficient. One example is Aquinas' approach to beneficence toward sinners and those excommunicated from the Church. Aquinas clearly states "if their nature be in urgent need of succor lest it fail, we are bound to help them: for instance, if they be in danger of death through hunger or thirst, or suffer some like distress, unless this be according to the order of justice" (II-II.31.2. ad 3). Throughout the examination of beneficence, the emphasis is placed on need in the requirements of

charity. This criterion holds when determining whether or not one owes beneficence to one's family or a stranger. In general, as our friendship and fellowship is closer to those connected to us, we ought to be the most beneficent to them, all things being equal. However, the issue of need is always central in external acts of charity. Aquinas clearly states "in certain cases one ought, for instance to succor a stranger in extreme necessity, rather than one's own father, if he is not in such urgent need" (II-II.31.3. corpus). Therefore, one is bound to help a stranger who is in dire need over a family member who is not in such need. A general openness to charity, the removal of obstacles to charity is what Aquinas requires in charity, but this openness does not or cannot exist if it is not turned into action. If when faced with someone suffering greatly, and one does not aid the person through an act of charity (provided they have the means), then one cannot legitimately say that they are open to charity. Furthermore, if one is not open to charity through love of neighbor, then can one be said to love God? Beneficence as an act of charity is at the center of the moral life and the fact that maintaining friendship with God requires friendship or fellowship with neighbor. Pope explains, "Love for the poor involves not simply the donation of money or material goods but also and more importantly the love of friendship – the deeper giving of self that involves affective union and communication as well as benevolence."⁶ Beneficence is thus directly connected to almsgiving in living out charity as love of neighbor.

Beneficence is by doing good for others; almsgiving is giving to those in need. This second external act of charity is characterized according to motivation. According to Aquinas, "external acts belong to that virtue which regards the motive for doing those acts. Now the motive for giving alms is to relieve one who is in need" (II-II.32.1. corpus). Almsgiving is an act of mercy, which for Aquinas is an effect of charity. The central concern in external acts of charity, for Aquinas, is determination of need. Is all almsgiving an effect of charity? Is it almsgiving when someone without charity gives to those in need? Aquinas answers this objection clarifying that, "accordingly almsgiving can be materially without charity, but to give alms formally, i.e. for God's sake, with delight and readiness, and altogether as one ought, is not possible without charity" (II-II.32.1. ad1). Almsgiving without charity is not almsgiving for the love of God, and love of neighbor in relation to God.

There are two different kinds of alms – spiritual and corporeal. Aquinas offers detailed account of both, however, for the purposes of this paper; I will focus on almsgiving as tending to corporeal needs. Despite the fact that Aquinas prioritizes spiritual alms over

⁶ Stephen Pope, "Aquinas on almsgiving, justice and charity: an interpretation and reassessment" *Heythrop Journal* 32 (April 1992) p. 168.

corporal, this preference for the spiritual only applies in general, all things being equal. For charity, the concern of need takes ultimate preference. He explains, after arguing for the priority of spiritual alms, “Secondly, we may compare them with regard to some particular case, when some corporal alms excels some spiritual alms: for instance, a man in hunger is to be fed rather than instructed, and as the Philosopher observes, for a needy man money is better than philosophy, although the latter is better” (II-II.32.3 corpus). Corporal needs are either that which all human persons need to survive or a specific need of a particular person (II-II.32.2). The requirements of almsgiving for corporeal needs are straightforward in Aquinas.

The first and obvious requirement of almsgiving is that the recipient must be in need. He clearly explains,

The common need with regard to external help is twofold; one in respect of clothing, and as to this we have *to clothe the naked*: while the other is in respect of a dwelling place, and as to this we have *to harbor the harbor less*. Again, if the need be special; it is either the result of an internal cause, like sickness, and then we have *to visit the sick* or it results from an external cause, and then we *have to ransom the captive*. After this we give burial to the dead” (II-II.32.2. corpus).

As with the scope of charity itself, Aquinas is careful to set reasonable limits concerning the scope of almsgiving. It is not possible to give alms to everyone. While it is possible to give alms out of what one needs, because of the preference Aquinas shows for the common good over individual goods (II-II.32.6), it is not required. All that charity requires concerning almsgiving is that one give out of surplus. Aquinas is certainly conservative in his views on acts of charity and almsgiving. Included in what one needs is not, as we would hold today, simply what is necessary for a decent standard of living, but what is necessary to maintain one’s station in life. Therefore, what one is mandated to give alms out of, for a prince, is only that which he does not need to maintain the status of prince.⁷

Almsgiving, and beneficence, constitute love of neighbor. They are necessary conditions for love of neighbor, because, for Aquinas, “love of neighbor requires not only we should be our neighbors well wishers, but also his well-doers” (II-II.32.5. corpus). Charity requires action. As to the requirements of this almsgiving, Stephen Pope argues,

Alms deeds are normally considered by Thomas to be acts of mercy, as ‘fitting’ but not strictly obligatory. From the parable of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:41–43), however, Thomas argues that some are punished eternally for failing to give alms and that since no one is punished for

⁷ Pope, “Aquinas on almsgiving, justice and charity: an interpretation and reassessment” p. 178.

failing to do what is not commanded giving alms must be a matter of precept (II-II, 32,5).⁸

While, the language of moral debt is used in connection with almsgiving, the “debts” involved in almsgiving are not legal debts.⁹ This does establish the moral obligation involved as a weaker obligation than if it were a legal one. However, at the same time, Pope observes, “In extreme cases, in fact, one can be bound by a legal debt to give surplus goods to the poor (II-II, 228, 4, ad 2). Yet even this kind of debt is unenforceable in a court of law.”¹⁰ The question is, whether or not moral obligations are the domain of a court of law. Does it detract from the strength of the requirement to live charity that almsgiving, when morally necessary, is not legally enforceable? I do not think it does. As stated above, one can be judged and held accountable by God for the failure to give alms, for the failure to live charity. The possibility of eternal punishment is certainly graver than threat of punishment by a human court. If one can face eternal punishment for treatment of one’s neighbor, whether it is one’s father, friend, or a stranger, then one must say that living charity is a requirement of having charity.

IV. Conclusion: Evaluating Living Charity in Aquinas’ Ethics

To sum up, charity is love of God and love of neighbor. Charity is always primarily love of God, friendship with God, unity with God. It is always in relation to God. Love of neighbor is understood based upon relationship to God and not as a proximate end. There is no mechanism within Aquinas’s theory of charity whereby one loves one’s neighbor for the neighbor’s sake. Neighbor love *in se* would disrupt Aquinas’s total emphasis of all things being in proper relationship to God. Like Augustine, loving and resting in love of neighbor, for itself, represents a disorder in the *ordo amoris*. While it is true that not all love is charity, the other forms of love do not have the depth that charity has. Because of this, a criticism of Aquinas’ ordering of charity is the lack of love of neighbor as a proximate end. However, despite this Aquinas’ theory of charity is important for contemporary ethics because of the strong mandate to live charity through love of neighbor.

Defined based on the love command, love of neighbor remains an integral part of what constitutes having charity. The fundamental question becomes: what is necessary to live and retain charity? Is

⁸ Ibid. p. 171.

⁹ Ibid. p. 171–2.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 172.

failing to perform acts of charity enough to lose charity? Throughout this paper, I have attempted to argue that living charity is a necessary component of charity itself. That a purely internal openness to charity that is not manifest in actions if the particular situation arises, is incoherent. While granting that it cannot lead to action in every instance, one cannot perform acts of charity to all; an openness that does not lead to action cannot be a real attitude of openness to charity. Furthermore, Pope states, "Love of neighbor has as one of its major components the moral primacy of human need. While generally the nature of a 'friendly duty' or even a 'gratuitous favor', charity, in cases of real human deprivation, assumes the nature of a grave moral debt (a matter of precept), the omission of which places one in a mortally sinful state."¹¹ If a failure to act in charity can constitute a mortal sin, then a failure to live out charity is sufficient to lose charity. As Aquinas stated and was addressed above, charity is lost through mortal sin. Moreover, the fact that, for Aquinas, one can receive eternal punishment for the failure to give alms, which is the failure to live charity, illustrates that living charity is required to maintain charity.

Even though living charity is a requirement in Aquinas' ethics, there are elements of Aquinas' understanding of living charity, which, in my opinion, are inadequate for living charity today. In particular, there are two areas where Aquinas needs to be reinterpreted and pushed further to address contemporary concerns. First, the lack of social critique and social change as the work of charity in Aquinas' theory of charity is problematic and insufficient for addressing contemporary situations. And second, within the order of charity, there is an overwhelming emphasis on the natural model being based upon the mirroring of God as father. Despite these critiques in Aquinas' approach, the solutions, I contend, flow directly out of Aquinas' theology and re-interpreting Aquinas' rich understanding of charity in the contemporary context does not water down the requirement to live charity but in fact makes it even more stringent.

In his understanding of charity and the requirements of charity, Aquinas is socially conservative. It is clear that Aquinas is not mandating acts of charity in every case or equal charity to all. At one level, the basic requirement is openness to charity. Aquinas is not advocating strong social change or challenging the traditional hierarchical ordering of society, which involved stark inequalities. He did not, as stated above, require one to give out of the surplus after basic necessities, but included in necessities that which was necessary to maintain one's status in society. Yet, as Pope emphasizes, "it is critical to understand that in Thomas' social vision the ordering of the

¹¹ Pope, "Aquinas on almsgiving, justice and charity: an interpretation and reassessment" p. 186.

church and world is one of mutual service inspired by charity, not of the domination and exploitation of the lower by the higher (II-II, 183, 2).¹² Aquinas not only accepted the hierarchical social structure, but he also assumed a natural harmony and mutuality within the form of that system. These specific statements of charity and social change do not push the requirements of charity far enough for contemporary society. This is not a sufficient model for living charity today. Given the context of globalization and global poverty, any mandate for love of neighbor must include an examination of social sin and structural sin within the very makeup of contemporary society. As *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* comments, “Among the actions and attitudes opposed to God’s will two are very typical: greed and the thirst for power. Not only individuals sin in that way; so do nations and world-blocs. That is why we spoke of “structures of sin.”¹³ An explication of the requirements of charity today requires attention not only to justice and mercy but also to structures of sin and the injustice inherent in many contemporary social orders. While this is not found within Aquinas’ order of charity, it does flow out of Aquinas’ commitment to charity and justice. As Pope highlights, Aquinas’ own understanding that “charity works through justice – it is not an alternative to it”¹⁴ provides resources from which to offer a critique of current injustices based on charity and justice. The relationship between charity and justice also provides a starting point for pushing beyond simply individuals living charity but the presence of justice and charity within communities.

Within the order of charity, Aquinas clearly states that the order is always in reference to God (II-II.26.1). This manifests itself in the order in two ways – through greater love of those closer to God (i.e. the holier are closer to God) and in Aquinas’s ordering charity based upon our relationship to God as father (II-II.26.9–11). It must be noted that Aquinas pays attention to the particular dimensions of various familial relationships, showing preference for those closest to us over strangers. For example, he maintains the distinctions and importance within all family relations, stating, “the duty of children to their parents consists chiefly in honor: while that of parents to their children is especially one of care” (II-II.26.9. ad1). At the same time, however, “in this respect the better a thing is, and the more like to God, the more is it to be loved: and in this way a man ought to love his father more than his children, because, to with, he loves his

¹² Pope, “Aquinas on almsgiving, justice and charity: an interpretation and reassessment” p. 181.

¹³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 37. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html

¹⁴ Pope, “Aquinas on almsgiving, justice and charity: an interpretation and reassessment” p. 186.

father as his principle, in which he is a more exalted good and more like God” (II-II.26.9. corpus). While a feminist critique of Aquinas’s paternalism and the priority of God as father can be made, that is not the critique, which I wish to make here. Acknowledging the legitimacy of modeling relationship to God as holy and as creator, my critique lies in the fact that these are the only models within the order of charity. In evaluating who is closest to God, there is no preferential option for the poor in Aquinas. Aquinas just simply views the poor as needy. However, in a world where the structures of sin are so prevalent and the situation of the poor so grave, a simplistic understanding of the poor as *needy* is not adequate – it requires some form of the option for the poor as an integral part of living charity.

While Stephen Pope is accurate, that many understandings of the preferential option of the poor are not adequately defined, and “do not sufficiently attend to this need for a theologically and ethically grounded system of priorities.”¹⁵ I am not arguing for a particular understanding of the preferential option of the poor, or that such an option would trump Aquinas’ default priority to those closest to us as he explains it (which includes significant limits based on need). However, there must be greater attention to the complexities of poverty, as well as a stronger role of the poor in the order of charity, which is not found in Aquinas, but which is found in the Gospel. Out of Aquinas’ method within the order of charity an argument can be made for a stronger role of the poor (and one, which would be aided by the stronger attention to justice and mercy in structures highlighted above) within the order of charity based upon the poor’s relationship to God found within the Gospels. While not a focus within the order of charity (or the treatise on charity as a whole) of Matthew 25: 34–46, it is a text which would support greater attention to the poor in the order of charity and the strong requirements of living charity, which have been argued for throughout this paper. With globalization and the recognition of how far reaching the implications of one person or one nation can be living charity must be more than simply attending to the needy we meet. This requires further investigation into the relationship between charity and justice, including a fluid spectrum of responsibility that takes into account globalization and barriers to charity due to structural injustice. Living charity in the twenty-first century must begin with the mandate found in Aquinas and extend to explicitly incorporate Matthew 25, “as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”

Meghan J. Clark

Email: mclark@anselm.edu

¹⁵ Pope, “Aquinas on almsgiving, justice and charity: an interpretation and reassessment.” p. 187.

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