

## One Parable, Two Interpretations: Pope Francis and William Langland on the Good Samaritan\*

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Interpretations of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) focus on its theology, ethics, ecclesiology, and even moral psychology. The parable has much to say regarding holiness. It treats how to become holy and distinct acts of holiness, the exemplar of holiness, and the reality and effects of sin. In the history of interpretation, the parable is taken to offer a model of the relationship between the fallen man and grace, the devil and the garment of virtue, the law and love, Christ and the Church. In short, the parable allegorizes salvation history.<sup>1</sup>

I focus conversation about this parable through two interpretations—Pope Francis’s *Fratelli Tutti* [FT], promulgated October 3, 2020, and William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* [PP] circulating circa 1380. Some might hold that Francis’s interpretation of the parable is ethical while Langland’s is theological.<sup>2</sup> Both interpretations of the parable are works of moral theology that intimate distinct understandings of what it means to embody

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Smith, *Traditional Imagery of Charity in Piers Plowman* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), 74–77.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Mahoney, “Brothers without Borders: Pope Francis’s Quasi-Humanitarian Manifesto,” *Catholic World Report*, October 10, 2020, catholicworldreport.com/2020/10/10/brothers-without-borders-pope-franciss-quasi-humanitarian-manifesto/.

the Gospel and answer the universal call to holiness. In this essay, I outline the parable of the Good Samaritan as treated in *Fratelli Tutti* and *Piers Plowman* (first section), compare the major figures of the parable (second section), and compare their visions of charity (third section). In sum, I argue the encyclical sidelines crucial elements in the medieval figuration of the parable. Pope Francis elides critical issues of sin, agency, Christology, and the Church traditionally associated with this parable—all center on the Samaritan as Christ.

## Two Interpretations in Outline

### Fratelli Tutti's *Parable of the Good Samaritan*

Pope Francis's third encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, is unique in its genre. The encyclical includes all brothers and sisters in its scope of fraternity and social friendship and is addressed to all (§1). The inspiration for the encyclical includes St. Francis's visit to the Sultan some eight hundred years ago and the 2019 *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, a statement signed by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. Indeed, the joint document plays a critical role in the encyclical, sharing a common framework of a doctrine of creation and doctrine of God (FT §5). Because Pope Francis includes all of humanity in the audience of this encyclical and its sources of inspiration are broadly humanitarian, it is fair to raise a question about distinctively Catholic elements to the encyclical.

The encyclical chapter devoted to the parable of the Good Samaritan (chapter 2 [§§56–86], treating Luke 10:25–37) intensifies these theological questions. Just as the encyclical is “addressed to all people of good will, regardless of religious convictions,” likewise the parable is of universal relevance as it “is one that any of us can relate to and find challenging” (§56). Francis's interpretation of the parable encapsulates *Fratelli Tutti*'s themes.

The subject of the parable is, according to Pope Francis, the age-old problem of neighborly love (§57).<sup>3</sup> The parable involves several figures: the wounded man lying on the wayside, the robbers, the passers-by, and the Samaritan.<sup>4</sup> The wounded are the subject of the encyclical's first chapter. Francis characterizes the wounded as those members of weaker and poorer regions whom the global economy exploits; the poor, disabled, and elderly

<sup>3</sup> Luke 10 is variously interpreted in light of Gen 4:9; Job 31:15; Lev 19:18; Matt 5:45; 7:12; Luke 6:36.

<sup>4</sup> Later I discuss the role for the *stabulum* (“stable”/“grange”) in *Piers Plowman*. *Fratelli Tutti* §78 holds that the Samaritan discovers a helpmate in the innkeeper, who agrees to assist in caring for the wounded man.

who seem no longer useful; children, women, and men of all ages who live under contemporary forms of slavery such as trafficking; and victims of economically driven violence including war, terrorist attacks, and racial and religious persecution (§§ 12, 18, 24–25). Francis admits that we feel like the wounded, “helpless because our institutions are neglected and lack resources, or simply serve the interests of a few” (§76). However, the primary identification of the wounded focuses on those pushed to the margins by profit-driven economic, technologically progressive, politically divisive, dehumanizing global forces (§76 briefly suggests our identification with the injured man).

The parable of the Good Samaritan brings these vast forces to bear on our everyday relationships—we all experience an interior struggle when we encounter anyone who suffers (§69). Its characters function at deeper levels of signification and meaning, giving rise to Francis’s questions: “Which of these persons do you identify with? . . . Which of these characters do you resemble?” (§64).

First, Francis invites us readers to see ourselves in the passers-by in our varied attempts to pass by others at a safe distance. We avoid problems by retreating inwards to immerse ourselves in distractions, to hide behind cultivated indifference (§§64–65, 73). Our own needs feel more pressing (§65). We become accustomed “to looking the other way, passing by, ignoring situations until they affect us directly” (§64). The passers-by are religious, showing that belief and worship are not enough to ensure authentic openness to God (§74).

Next, Francis treats robbers as rampant in our world—those who serve petty interests of power, gain, and division (§72). They drive the forces of myopic, extremist, resentful nationalism in a world that promotes individual interests and weakens the communitarian dimension of life; they are nascent forms of cultural colonization and the like (§§11–14). These forces shape individual encounters and concrete relationships. Francis sharpens the knife, suggesting that robbers find secret allies in those who pass by—between those who cheat society and those who live off that system and its benefits, those who use institutions for personal and corporate gain and those who abnegate responsibility in cynicism (§75). As passers-by, our own inhumanity and lack of compassion is so harmful that it may even make us robbers (§67: “Any other decision would make us either one of the robbers or one of those who walked by without showing compassion for the sufferings of the man on the roadside”). “They” robbers become “we” robbers.

Finally, there is the Samaritan’s good example. He sets aside his own plans, needs, commitments, and desires to care for someone in need (§63). He knits

his existence to others in a new social bond, rebuilding human community (§§66–67). The Samaritan is, of course, Samaritan in a Jewish context, lending “a universal dimension to our call to love, one that transcends all prejudices, all historical and cultural barriers, all petty interests” (§83). Francis summarizes: “The parable eloquently presents the basic decision we need to make in order to rebuild our wounded world. In the face of so much pain and suffering, our only course is to imitate the Good Samaritan” (§67).

Having laid out possibilities for us to identify with various figures in the parable, Francis narrows the distinction to “only two kinds of people: those who care for someone who is hurting and those who pass by” (§70). Each of us is either a Samaritan or a passer-by. Our contemporary situation is distilled into this basic choice in the parable. It centers on how a Good Samaritan identifies with the vulnerability of others, perseveres in love, and rebuilds an inclusive community directed toward the common good (§67). It is a summons to build a new social bond and social teaching on how to rebuild our wounded world (§§66–67). We must embody charity ourselves. In sum, “today we have a great opportunity to express our innate sense of fraternity, to be Good Samaritans” (§77).

#### Piers Plowman’s *Parable of the Good Samaritan*

In the dramatic culmination of *Piers Plowman*, William Langland reenacts the parable of the Good Samaritan allegorically. This episode from the poem contains the answer to the protagonist’s questions regarding salvation and charity alongside a powerful representation of sin. I retell it briefly here.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the poem, we follow the protagonist Will, who simultaneously represents an ordinary plain person, a personification of the power of the soul, and ostensibly the first name of the author of the poem.<sup>6</sup> Since passus 1, he has been on a quest for salvation (“How may I save my soul?” [1.80]). In passus 19, he has finally met two figures that may help—Faith/

<sup>5</sup> Scholars lavish attention on these passages. There are additional considerations attending this episode, e.g., Will’s having lost *Liberum Arbitrium* (PP 18.180), a shift to the history of the covenant with Faith (18.190), its setting on a mid-Lent Sunday, the relationship of law and love (19.11), Langland’s minor changes to the parable. Interpretations that I find amenable include: David Aers, *Salvation and Sin: Augustine, Langland, and Fourteenth-Century Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009); Kate Crassons, *The Claims of Poverty: Literature, Culture, and Ideology in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010); Mary Clemente Davlin, *The Place of God in Piers Plowman and Medieval Art* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), esp. ch 3; Smith, *Traditional Imagery*, 79.

<sup>6</sup> George Kane, *Piers Plowman: The Evidence for Authorship* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

Abraham and Hope/Moses. For all their teaching, they are completely ineffectual with the wounded man along the roadside. Commentaries abound on this constellation of figures and representations, but for now it suffices to note that Abraham and Moses—*these*—are the passers-by.

The Samaritan alone rushes to the aid of the wounded man. The action of the poem runs:

But as soon as the Samaritan caught sight of this poor man,  
 He dismounted [his mule] immediately and held on to the reins  
 And went to this man to look at his wounds,  
 And perceived by his pulse he was in danger of dying  
 And unless he made quick recovery he'd never get up,  
 And unbuckled his bottles and opened both up;  
 Knowing how to soothe his wounds with wine and with oil,  
 Anointed him and bandaged his head and set him on his mount  
 And led him forth to *lavacrum-lex-dei*, a grange,  
 That is six or seven miles away from the new market,  
 And left him there for healing, to live if he might. (PP 19.63–73)<sup>7</sup>

The Samaritan's actions are vital and salvific: "Knowing how to soothe his wounds with wine and with oil / Anointed him and bandaged his head and set him on his mount / And let him forth to *lavacrum-lex-dei*, a grange." He carries him on his mule to a "grange" where he makes provisions for his care.<sup>8</sup> Thus the Samaritan offers bodily and sacramental care, ushering him into the healing space of the Church. Langland treats the virtues and love, yet they come in a scandalous and particular incarnation. He traces questions of agency throughout the poem and into the Church and sacraments.

We also have the figure of *semyuief* (Latin *semivivus*), who is literally half-alive. Medieval exegesis shares this perspective on *semyuief*—that the man beaten, stripped, and left for dead represents all of humanity wounded by sin.<sup>9</sup> For example, Thomas comments on the wounded man in Luke 10:30:

<sup>7</sup> I use a modern verse translation for readers of this journal: *William Langland's Piers Plowman: The C Version, a Verse Translation*, trans. George Economu (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). For *lavacrum-lex-dei* (bath of the law of God), see Tit 3:5.

<sup>8</sup> Smith notes: "Langland's choice of the term *grange* may reflect commentaries on the *stabulum* of the parable, where the church is sometimes compared to a stable rather than to an inn; . . . the term is universally glossed as the church" (*Traditional Imagery*, 79).

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Gorran, Nicholas of Lyra, Denis the Carthusian; see Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, 88–99. It may be worthwhile to note that the *latrones* are variously interpreted as the Devil, demons, the ancient foe, passions, and evil men.

“The man was going down into the defect of sin, and he was stripped of his gifts and wounded in his nature.”<sup>10</sup> Thomas variously signifies this state as corrupted nature (*natura corrupta*), fallen nature (*natura lapsa*), vitiated nature (*natura vitiata*), and wounded nature (*natura vulnerata*). In this state, Thomas writes:

A man falls short even of what he is able to do in accord with his nature, so that he is unable to fulfill the whole of this sort of good through his natural power. Yet since human nature has not been totally corrupted by sin in such a way as to be totally deprived of the good of nature, a man is able even in the state of corrupted nature to accomplish some particular goods through the power of his nature, e.g., to build houses and plant vines and other things of this sort, even though he is not able to accomplish the whole of the good that is connatural to him in such a way as to be lacking in nothing—in the same way that a sick man is able to have some movement on his own, but cannot, unless he is assisted by medicine, move perfectly with the movement of a healthy man.<sup>11</sup>

Sin renders us *semyuief*, half-alive, unable to help ourselves or do the whole good in accord with our nature (*PP* 19.55). The wound of sin remains after baptism. Accordingly, *semyuief* represents not just Adam or non-baptized people, but all Christians fallen into sin; this is not just original sin, but post-baptismal sin.<sup>12</sup> Within the parable, *semyuief* must “be poulticed with patience when temptations excite him,” showing how the work of sacraments is completed by virtue (19.89). *Semyuief* is humanity who needs grace to accomplish the good of virtue.

### Comparisons of the Figures from the Parable

*Fratelli Tutti* and *Piers Plowman* invoke rival accounts of conversion, agency, habituation, grace, the Church, and Christ. These issues are focused in

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [*ST*] I-II, q. 85 a. 2, sc. Cf. the gloss on Luke 10:30 in *De malo*, q. 5, a. 5, 11, and the *Catena aurea*.

<sup>11</sup> *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 2, resp.

<sup>12</sup> This is common to the medieval witness. Again, Aquinas, Nicholas of Gorran, Nicholas of Lyra, and Denis the Carthusian are cited in Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, specifically for Christians in 90–91. Aers adds Augustine’s treatment of the parable as consistent with the medieval tradition to counter semi-Pelagian readings of *Piers Plowman* (92–97).

three of the figures in the parable: the passers-by, the wounded man, and the Samaritan.

### *The Passers-By*

First, consider the passers-by. From Langland's perspective, the progression of Abraham/Faith and Moses/Hope to the Good Samaritan presents several traditional patterns. Ben Smith writes:

At least four thematic patterns may be seen to underlie the figurative progression in *Piers* from Abraham-Faith and Moses-*Spes* to the Good Samaritan: the fulfillment of the Old Law in the New; the perfection and operation of faith and hope through the operation of charity; the salvation of the just men of the old dispensation through the supreme act of charity, Christ's sacrificial offering of himself; and, finally, the salvation of mankind, not through his own efforts, but by the unearned gift of divine grace.<sup>13</sup>

Langland participates in a long tradition of theological discourse regarding agency, salvation, and ecclesiology. For now, we focus on how Langland is consistent with orthodox medieval theology in showing how the passers-by cannot effect good on their own. We see this failure within the action of the poem, when Langland's Abraham and Moses recoil from the wounded man. Langland writes:

Faith had first sight of him, but he flew away  
 And wouldn't come nearer to him than the length of nine fields.  
 Hope came hopping after, he who had bragged about  
 How with Moses' commandment he had helped many men,  
 But when this sick man came into sight, he drew himself aside  
 And with dread then backed away from him and dared not go nearer.  
 (PP 19.57–62)

Their collective struggle to respond compassionately reveals their limitations and sin.

Will also plays a part in this figurative progression. Leading into it, he shows that he is not listening closely, as usual, when he asks, "What need then to bring a new law?" (19.32). Will joins Abraham and Moses in being steeped in doctrine. Indeed, they prefer the Trinity to the law of love

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Traditional Imagery*, 88–89.

(19.42–43). They are all theologically literate and yet do not recognize the ways they are limited. Langland emphasizes the inability of the passers-by to help due to their own woundedness. Langland shows how incapacitated they are by sin.

Langland's striking characterization of the passers-by as wounded raises critical questions about agency. Namely, if we are wounded, how might we take meaningful action? Is it enough to summon goodwill to imitate the Samaritan, as intimated in §67 of *Fratelli Tutti*? To muster willingness to face the wounds of others? (See §70.) In Francis's interpretation, we choose to be the passers-by because of our own willful neglect, inattention, or indifference (§73). Francis refers repeatedly to the necessity of deciding: we need to make a basic decision; we need to decide whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders (§§67, 69–70). It seems we can help, but choose and decide not to. Yet Langland emphasizes that even a decisive act of will cannot shift us out of a place of habitual resistance. A decision, an insight, even a willingness to help—are not enough. Rather, the passers-by too need help. In sum, for Langland, the only answer for intractable issues of the conversion of the will and agency is Christ.

### *The Figure of the Wounded, Semyuief*

Second, our considerations bring us to the wounded man, *semyuief*. Langland describes the first encounter with the man, writing:

In a wild wilderness where thieves had bound  
A man and given him a very bad time, it seemed to me then;  
For he could neither step nor stand nor stir a foot or hands  
Nor help himself in any way, for he seemed *semyuief*,  
And as naked as a needle and no help about. (*PP* 19.52–56)

The wounded man “could neither step nor stand nor stir a foot or hands / Nor help himself in any way.” *Semyuief* is alive in holding onto a thread of his humanity; and yet not mostly dead as Reformers would go on to hold.<sup>14</sup> He is equal parts alive and dead. The wound that he sustains is mortal, and he is “in danger of dying” (19.66).

Francis captures Langland's “wild wilderness” vividly in chapter 1 of *Fratelli Tutti*, describing the violence and cruelty of the world. The encyclical

<sup>14</sup> For medieval commentators, such wounding does not take away our humanity (half-alive), nor does it leave us mostly dead (half-dead). Aers compares this inflection to Calvin and Luther (*Salvation and Sin*, 212–13 n62).

offers a penetrating and incisive account of the wounded in our context, the twenty-first century Church. In many ways, Francis traces out the natural outcome of Langland's world—nearly 650 years of the market economy, urgent questions of justice set on a global scale, the individual and collective consequences of sin on every level.

We see the social and personal effects of sin in the wounded man. We already witnessed how Abraham and Moses fly away and draw back in dread. The narrative also signals that Will lacks confidence in describing what he sees: "It seemed to me then"; "he seemed *semyuief*" (PP 19.53; 19.55). Langland emphasizes the unqualified inadequacy of all passers-by in this moment. By contrast, "as soon as the Samaritan caught sight of this poor man," he springs into action, and immediately "perceived by his pulse that he was in danger of dying" (19.63; 19.66). The reality and urgency of the situation is seen, grasped, and understood only by the Samaritan. Only the Samaritan sees. Only divine vision discloses *semyuief*.<sup>15</sup>

As the narrative moves forward, Will witnesses the loving actions of the Samaritan. The Samaritan also answers Will's many doctrinal questions, giving sense to the Samaritan's actions. Even so, Will returns to his habits of resistance in the very next passus (20.1–5). In this sequence, Will struggles to understand what has happened with the Samaritan and then struggles to remember all he has seen. Going into and out of the Samaritan episode, we see a condensed version of *Piers Plowman's* preoccupation with formation, habituation, and epistemology. Awareness of sin becomes an epistemological achievement wherein agents adequate themselves to reality, coming to a genuine self-knowledge in light of Christ. Such a configuration is consistent with twentieth-century developments in moral philosophy that claim we act only within a world that we see.<sup>16</sup> Langland's theological inflection of these themes illustrates a crucial existential aspect of sin: the old pull back into familiar habits, ways of seeing and not seeing, an inability to love properly.

Along with Will, we are not only passers-by; we also are *semyuief*. Being wounded by sin highlights our manifest limitations and inability to act

<sup>15</sup> This presentation of the seriousness of sin in passus 19 contrasts Langland's satirical treatments in the prologue. Thus it "corrects, places, and supersedes many previous utterances in the poem . . . It leaves us with what I have called a haunting image" (Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, 100–101).

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Lawrence Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Iris Murdoch, *Sovereignty of the Good* (London: Routledge, 1970); Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Prentice Hall, 1958).

meaningfully on our own. Sin wounds all of humanity in our deep, habitual patterns of feeling and acting. This is a different configuration of our agency, with layers of the theological interpretation for every figure to accrue deeper meaning—the beast is the Incarnation, the care is sacramental, the inn is the Church.<sup>17</sup> *Semyuief* can be helped only by divine intervention. He needs the supernatural care of the sacraments for healing. He is borne into the Church. Langland's retelling of the parable enacts crucial configurations of agency.<sup>18</sup> Langland intimates that *semyuief* serves as a more accurate picture of who we are and what we can accomplish on our own.

Langland also develops a robust account of sin and evil that is curiously lacking in *Fratelli Tutti*. Other readers point out that the term “sin” is mentioned only once within the encyclical, indexed to the Church’s “own experience of grace and sin” (§278). Francis does address “concupiscence,” deeming it a “human inclination” that “can be overcome with the help of God” (§166).<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the encyclical lacks a robust treatment of Christ overall and Christological anchors that typify this genre of moral teaching.<sup>20</sup> Arguably, these serial failures regarding sin, agency, and Christ are of a piece. As Francis’s interpretation of the parable is thin on an account of grace-enabled agency, it is correspondingly thin on an account of sin and evil. These failures in *Fratelli Tutti* may recall earlier episodes in *Piers Plowman* where sinners were confident in their allegorical map and directions to Truth, unaware that as sinners they lack the necessary resources, individually and collectively (passus 7). “The guide seems to have forgotten the reason for the Samaritan’s journey into this land made unfit for human life,” into the wild wilderness, writes David Aers, “his journey to Jerusalem.”<sup>21</sup> Will’s serial mundane failures reveal to the Samaritan the necessity of Christ, who shows us the way of Charity and joins us on that path (19.48). Christ is the key to diagnosing sin and enabling Christians to act.

<sup>17</sup> Again Langland aligns with conventional medieval interpretation of the parable. E.g., Augustine holds that “his beast is our flesh, in which he has condescended to come to us. To be placed on the beast is to believe in the Incarnation of Christ” (in Aquinas, *Catena aurea* [Taurini: Marietti, 1953]), trans. mine).

<sup>18</sup> Contrast Robert Adams, “Piers’s Pardon and Langland’s Semi-Pelagianism,” *Traditio* 39 (1983): 367–418.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Weinandy, “*Fratelli Tutti* and the Preaching of the Good News,” *Catholic World Report*, October 23, 2020, catholicworldreport.com/2020/10/23/fratelli-tutti-and-the-preaching-of-the-good-news/.

<sup>20</sup> Douglas Farrow, “Reading *Fratelli Tutti* on Mars Hill,” *Catholic World Report*, October 14, 2020, catholicworldreport.com/2020/10/14/reading-fratelli-tutti-on-mars-hill/.

<sup>21</sup> Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, 103–4.

*The Figure of The Samaritan*

Thirdly and finally, the Samaritan. Langland situates his retelling of the parable of the Good Samaritan within a larger discussion in *Piers Plowman* of learning to love (22.208). Langland sets up his retelling the parable in 19.11–15:

“Let’s see your letters,” I said, “we could know the law.”  
 He plucked forth a letter patent, a piece of hard rock  
 On which two words were written and glossed in this way:  
     *Love God and thy neighbor.*  
 This was the text truly, I took a very good look.  
 The gloss was written gloriously with a gilt pen:  
     *On these two commandments dependeth the whole law.*

The opening query of the parable, “who is my neighbor?” from Luke 10:29, is set within the context of Jesus’s conversation with the lawyer and his identification of the twofold commandment to love in Luke 10:27. Even the invocation of Luke 10:27 sets the “passers-by” into an academic debate over the need for a new law on grounds that are theologically suspicious or even specious (19.32–45). The poem continues: “And as we went on our way thus discussing this matter, / We then saw a Samaritan come sitting on a mule” (19.46–47). The Samaritan shifts the conversation from abstract doctrine to embodied charity.

Langland’s Samaritan springs into action, and only later explains the necessity of his intervention. This dialogue by the Samaritan is characteristic of Langland’s writing in suggesting multiple identifications and layers of meaning:

“You’ll have to excuse them,” said the Samaritan, “they’re not  
     much help,  
 Nor can any medicine under the moon restore the man to health,  
 Neither Faith nor fine Hope, his wounds are so festered.  
 He’ll not be saved without the blood of a child,  
 A child that must be born of a maid,  
 And with the blood of that child anointed and baptized.  
 And though he stand up and take a step, he’ll never get strong  
 Till he has eaten all that child and drunk his blood,  
 And moreover be poulticed with patience when temptations  
     excite him,  
 (For no man ever came this way that wasn’t robbed,

Except myself truly and those I love),  
 And further unless they believe loyally in that little child,  
 That his body will heal us all in the end." (19.81–93)

Langland's Samaritan underscores the inefficacy of Faith and Hope. (He says, gently: "You'll have to excuse them, they're not much help"). The man is too gravely wounded for "any medicine under the moon" to restore his health. Only supernatural medicine can save him—the miracle of the Incarnation, Virgin birth, Crucifixion, and Real Presence. The Church's sacraments are healing salve, balm for the soul.<sup>22</sup> The Samaritan rehearses familiar territory, for we just witnessed his salvific actions toward *semyuief*: "Knowing how to soothe his wounds with wine and with oil/ Anointed him and bandaged his head and set him on his mount / And let him forth to *lavacrum-lex-dei*, a grange" (19.69–71). These passages allude to anointing of the sick, baptism, Eucharist, penance. These practices are universally needful (19.90: "For no man ever came this way that wasn't robbed") and efficacious (19.93: "His body will heal us all in the end"). The Samaritan alone provides vital loving care—care that is bodily, sacramental, and ecclesial. Communicants are literally in-corporated into the loving community.<sup>23</sup>

Will struggles to internalize the Gospel witness, hinting at our own difficulty in taking it all in. Will's limitations become more apparent as he flounders to see multiple identifications—the Samaritan and Piers Plowman, Piers and Jesus, Piers and Christ, the Samaritan and Christ, even Christ and Jesus (20.8 and throughout passus 21).<sup>24</sup> This epistemological difficulty is seen more locally in the passage above from passus 19, which creates a paradox of mutual indwelling in the sacramental descriptions of the "blood of a child," which must be drunk and his body eaten (19.84, 86, 88).<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the Samaritan, whose actions and presence are so palpable

<sup>22</sup> A search for "salve" in the Middle English Dictionary ([quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary)) yields the following for "salve, n. 1": "1 (a) A medicinal ointment for external use; a medicine, remedy; also, an ointment taken internally. . . (c) a spiritual or religious remedy; (2) an aromatic ointment for baptism, preserving dead bodies, etc." Langland draws on multiple meanings of the root "salve."

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), 36–37; see also John Bossy, "The Mass as a Social Institution, 1200–1700," *Past & Present* 100, no. 1 (1983): 29–61.

<sup>24</sup> The presence of Christ is more elusive than in other medieval texts; see David Aers, *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 47–48.

<sup>25</sup> See Davlin, *The Place of God in Piers Plowman and Medieval Art*, Chapter 3. This presence/absence motif differentiates Langland's writing from much other medieval

in this sequence, is “hurried to ride the right way to Jerusalem” and promises his return (19.77, 75). Thus the Samaritan’s actions are clouded by absence, questions, and uncertainty. It is not enough for us simply to witness the Samaritan and listen to his teaching on doctrine and ethics. Our willful habits are critical stumbling blocks to taking in his loving witness. True conversion of will includes eradicating the forces of recidivism within the soul, redirecting the will as well as intellect, cultivating new supernatural habits—in short, true charity.

It becomes clear why some interpreters claim that Francis’s Samaritan is solely moral.<sup>26</sup> Francis regards the Samaritan as remarkable in his counter-cultural willingness to give his time, attention, and resources to someone in need (§63). His actions show how each individual’s welfare is tied deeply to that of others (§66). His radically inclusive love builds social bonds and human community (§62). To be sure, “the parable clearly does not indulge in abstract moralizing, nor is its message merely social and ethical. It speaks to us of an essential and often forgotten aspect of our common humanity: we were created for a fulfillment that can only be found in love” (§68).

The encyclical mentions the Samaritan and Jesus with equal frequency, but they are not identified with each other.<sup>27</sup> Rather, the Samaritan exemplifies Jesus’s moral exhortations—we are called to imitate the Good Samaritan and thus imitate God (§§67, 59). Jesus is a moral teacher who guides the way through telling the parable, making narrative choices, including a provocative choice of whom to include (§§72, 80–81). He answers the question “who is my neighbor?” (§80). “In his parable,” writes Francis, “Jesus does not offer alternatives; he does not ask what might have happened had the injured man or the one who helped him yielded to anger or a thirst for revenge. Jesus trusts in the best of the human spirit; with this parable, he encourages us to persevere in love, to restore dignity to the suffering and to build a society worthy of the name (§71).” Jesus’s conclusion of “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37) continually challenges us to be Good Samaritans (§81). Thus, for Francis, both Jesus and the Samaritan are moral exemplars who convey critical aspects about what it means to be loving, responsive, and attentive to the suffering of others. This exhortation may sound timely in a world that is suffering from polarization and compassion fatigue. Yet one might better

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theology that fixates on the bloody sacrifice of Christ; see Aers, *Sanctifying Signs*, 45.

<sup>26</sup> See Mahoney, “Brothers without Borders.”

<sup>27</sup> Weinandy, “*Fratelli Tutti* and the Preaching of the Good News.” To be clear, for Francis, this parable does not invoke or allude to the sacraments, and he does not treat the sacraments in any detail. *Fratelli Tutti* cites only baptism once: 1 Cor 12:13.

characterize *Fratelli Tutti's* Samaritan as *inadequately* moral. I extend this conversation into the next section on charity.

### Two Charities and Two Samaritans

At the outset, I claimed that these two interpretations of the parable of the Good Samaritan are equally works of moral theology. Each bears its own account of conversion, agency, habituation, grace, the Church, and Christ. Each also charts its own path of charity, two distinct ways of enacting the twofold commandment to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). In this section, I extend the two interpretations of the parable into two interpretations of charity.

It would be better said that *Fratelli Tutti* is about politics and offers two keys to interpret politics: the charity of the Good Samaritan and the principles of Francis's 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, rooted in the Church's social doctrine (§222–37).<sup>28</sup> Francis treats charity for the first time in *Fratelli Tutti* in the wake of his treatment of the parable of the Good Samaritan chapter 3 (“Envisaging and Engendering an Open World.”). The portion that follows the Good Samaritan takes up charity as the path for us to be Good Samaritans, to move beyond ourselves and become neighbors to others. Openness, gift of self, communion, and fraternity mark charity. Francis alludes to foundational principles of fundamental moral theology: “If the acts of the various moral virtues are to be rightly directed, one needs to take into account the extent to which they foster openness and union with others. That is made possible by the charity that God infuses” (§91).

For the rest of the encyclical, the universal scope of charity preoccupies Francis—as social friendship, universal communion, universal love, fraternal gratuitousness, social charity, political charity. Charity makes political and social life possible. Its field extends to the social, economic, and political realms (§181). Indeed, Francis elevates politics:

Once more, I appeal for a renewed appreciation for politics as “a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good.” Every commitment inspired by the Church's social doctrine is “derived from charity, which according

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<sup>28</sup> See Bill McCormick, “Pope Francis Wants ‘Fratelli Tutti’ to Move Us to Action—Like the Good Samaritan,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, October 5, 2020, [americamagazine.org/faith/2020/10/05/pope-francis-wants-fratelli-tutti-move-us-action-good-samaritan](http://americamagazine.org/faith/2020/10/05/pope-francis-wants-fratelli-tutti-move-us-action-good-samaritan).

to the teaching of Jesus is the synthesis of the entire law (cf. Mt 22:36–40).” . . . For this reason, charity finds expression not only in close and intimate relationships but also in “macro-relationships: social, economic and political.” (§§180–81)

Here, after quoting *Evangelii Gaudium* (§205), Francis cites §2 of Pope Benedict XVI’s 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* twice in quick succession. This appears a moment to acknowledge charity’s theological grounding. In those original passages, Benedict writes, “everything has its origin in God’s love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it.”<sup>29</sup> Benedict identifies the origin of charity in God; God is Love. However, Francis takes another direction by teasing out political charity as encompassing the social dimension of life.

Francis’s emphasis on political charity is intensified when he characterizes it as “true charity.” He writes:

True charity is capable of incorporating all of these elements in its concern for others. In the case of personal encounters, including those involving a distant or forgotten brother or sister, it can do so by employing all the resources that the institutions of an organized, free, and creative society are capable of generating. Even the Good Samaritan, for example, needed to have a nearby inn that could provide the help that he was personally unable to offer. (*FT* §165)

A “more efficient worldwide organization” can realize fraternity, for Francis (§165).<sup>30</sup> The question of neighborly charity preoccupies Francis, yet the primary object of charity often recedes into the background to the point that his account of true charity does not mention God.

A question opens of whether fraternity needs charity. Francis admits

<sup>29</sup> The surrounding material in *Caritas in Veritate* § 2 reads: “Every responsibility and every commitment spelt out by that doctrine is derived from charity which, according to the teaching of Jesus, is the synthesis of the entire Law (cf. Mt 22:36–40). It gives real substance to the personal relationship with God and with neighbour; it is the principle not only of micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups) but also of macro-relationships (social, economic and political ones). For the Church, instructed by the Gospel, charity is everything because, as Saint John teaches (cf. 1 Jn 4:8, 16) and as I recalled in my first Encyclical Letter, ‘God is love’ (*Deus Caritas Est*): everything has its origin in God’s love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it. Love is God’s greatest gift to humanity, it is his promise and our hope.”

<sup>30</sup> Francis’s discussion of efficiency, the effective management of resources, and evaluation of different courses of action sounds like the virtue of prudence.

that reason is limited, by itself, in establishing fraternity (§272). Francis here roots this fraternity in “the Father of all,” within whom there are “solid and stable reasons for an appeal to fraternity.” Francis appeals to *Caritas in Veritate* §19, where Benedict writes:

Reason, by itself, is capable of grasping the equality between men and giving stability to their civic coexistence, but it cannot establish fraternity. This originates in a transcendent vocation from God the Father, who loved us first, teaching us through the Son what fraternal charity is.

Benedict construes charity as love received and given by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. He draws out charity’s Trinitarian and Christological elements (see *Caritas in Veritate* §5). Benedict’s context is Christological, whereas Francis’s is the order of creation and God the Creator.<sup>31</sup> One scholar writes: “In *Fratelli Tutti*, there is no such Christological anchor. The appeal is strictly to God’s work as maker and sustainer of the world, and not at all to his eternal generation of the Son or to the gift of the incarnate Son as a man among men, through whom knowledge of the Father and of God’s way of seeing things is mediated.”<sup>32</sup> Francis’s fraternal charity is founded in broadly shared religious convictions (*FT* §272; cf. §277).

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis offers the qualified admission that, “without charity, we *may perhaps* possess only apparent virtues,” alluding to Augustine, Thomas, and Bonaventure’s complex discussion of false and counterfeit virtues (§91; emphasis added).<sup>33</sup> Yet, along with Langland, these original sources share a clear intention to tether the true meaning of virtue to our final and perfect good.<sup>34</sup> There is no true virtue without charity, and there is no charity without Christ. Thus, questions about agency that seem so urgent within the encyclical—namely, that we become good samaritans ourselves—are never resolved in the tradition’s terms. The encyclical offers little on growth in love through formation, transformation, and cooperation with grace. Christ is the key to recognizing our sin, for being nourished in sustaining sacramental practices, for being the loving Church.

The picture of charity that emerges from the encyclical is curious in traditional terms: a charity unmoored from its theological origins, political charity

<sup>31</sup> This is consistent with its opening salvo citing the 2019 *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* eight times.

<sup>32</sup> Farrow, “Reading *Fratelli Tutti*.”

<sup>33</sup> Citing Thomas from *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 7, and “Secundum acceptionem divinam” *In III sent.* d. 27, q. 1, a. 1, conc. 4.

<sup>34</sup> See *ST* I-II, q. 65; Overmyer, *Two Guides*, 88–90.

being one of its highest forms, and true charity as commanding resources well. In the history of exegesis, "If the moral sense is not considered in reference to Christ," writes Susan Wood, "it refers to a 'natural morality' rather than a morality which takes Christ as the model and norm of morality."<sup>35</sup> This seems to suggest a "natural charity" along the lines of Ockham and Scotus. In all, it is not so much that theological moments are absent from *Fratelli Tutti*, but that they are just that—moments. Its theological allusions appear inessential to the project of solidarity, openness, fraternity, and charity.

With Langland's help, I argue that charity of the Good Samaritan can hardly be realized if shorn of its fullest Incarnation in Christ (cf. *FT* §6). Langland's re-figuration of the parable has been an answer to Will's poem-long quest for salvation. Will gradually refines this question as he asks, "Charity . . . that is a thing indeed / That masters praise much; where can it be found?" (*PP*, 16.284–85), and, "Dear Free Will . . . I trust, as I hope, / You could tell me and direct me to Charity, as I live?" (18.1–2).

Earlier, I explored Langland's identification of the Samaritan with Christ, Christ the Samaritan. This figuration is consistent with conventional medieval interpretation of the parable—Honorius of Autun, Hugh of St. Victor, Hugh of St. Cher, Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Gorran, Nicholas of Lyra, and Denis the Carthusian.<sup>36</sup> However, Langland goes further than his contemporaries, while remaining wholly orthodox, in rendering the Samaritan the personification of Charity.<sup>37</sup>

This figure is better called Samaritan-Christ-Charity. As usual, Langland does not maintain strict, univalent allegorical correspondences but plays with identifications that are multifaceted, pliable, and varied.<sup>38</sup> The *Samaritan* who appears in passus 19 is the incarnation of charity. The figure of *Christ* is the form of the virtues and the basis for genuine community. *Charity* takes meaningful action where Faith and Hope are ineffectual. There is no answer to repeated questions of what love looks like within the poem without Samaritan-Christ-Charity who reveals himself in his loving sacramental actions.

Only the Samaritan can give Will the community that he has longed

<sup>35</sup> Susan Wood, *Spiritual Exegesis and the Church in the Theology of Henri De Lubac* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 27.

<sup>36</sup> D. W. Huppé and B. F. Robertson, *Piers Plowman and the Scriptural Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951); Smith, *Traditional Imagery*, 81, 88–89; Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, 91.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, *Traditional Imagery*, 81, 88–89.

<sup>38</sup> David Aers, *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory* (London: Edward Arnold, 1975), 111.

for. The Samaritan reorients Will's individualized and solipsistic quest for salvation toward a new community in the Church enlivened by charity. The sacraments are the practices that sustain and cultivate charity. In his doctrinal meditations in the remainder of passus 19, the Samaritan shows Will that participation in the sacraments requires communicants to embody forgiveness and enact kindness. The sacraments call on the community to participate in corporal works of mercy.<sup>39</sup> Kate Crassons observes how the Samaritan moves from the sacramental moment to the form of life it entails. The Samaritan episode "clearly emphasizes the absolute centrality of baptism, penance, and the Eucharist for *semyuief's* health and rehabilitation. The mode in which the poem teaches this theological lesson is important, however. In retelling the Samaritan parable as an allegory of sacramental theology, the poem simultaneously constrains the allegorical dimensions of the episode to present the sacraments literally as a form of social relation constituted by one person's charitable aid of another."<sup>40</sup> The Samaritan is the path of charity—this is what meaningful action looks like, its ground of possibility, and its ultimate goal. Again, the multiple identifications are variations on a theme: Christ who is Charity works through charity to establish a community that is Charity.

### Conclusion: One Samaritan

Langland's treatment of the parable is rooted in its scriptural source and rests in conventional medieval interpretation. His complex allegorical figuration of the parable is Christological, with a model of sin and salvation based on Christ.<sup>41</sup> Aers writes:

Allegory centers on Christ, who both unlocked and created the divine meaning of the Old Testament. His acts were the culmination of God's work in time, and in the Incarnation he reveals that "he is the whole content of Scripture, as he contains it all in himself." Christ is the exegete, Christ is the exegized, and the Incarnation becomes the key to the theory of Christian allegory.<sup>42</sup>

This demonstrates careful attunement to traditional methods of Christian exegesis with a Christological interpretation of Scripture. It incorporates

<sup>39</sup> Crassons, *Claims of Poverty*, 66.

<sup>40</sup> Crassons, *Claims of Poverty*, 65.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, *Traditional Imagery*, 75–77.

<sup>42</sup> Aers draws on Henri de Lubac's *Exégèse médiévale in Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory*, 4.

Henri DeLubac's study of medieval exegesis, describing how the tropological sense follows from the allegorical, uniting the soul to Christ through charity.<sup>43</sup> Echoes in the contemporary Church reverberate from multiple magisterial works, including *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, the Pontifical Biblical Commission's documents, and Joseph Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth*.<sup>44</sup>

These sources collect traditional methods of scriptural interpretation that can help mount a second approach to *Fratelli Tutti*. Let us grant Langland's insight that the parable of the Good Samaritan communicates a message that is best discerned in light of Christ and his Church—the allegorical sense. Readers may move from that Christological grounding and foundation into its implications in charity as Francis outlines—the moral sense. This is not to suppose that the allegorical and moral sense can be clearly separated, nor should they be.<sup>45</sup> Rather this complementary approach yields a charitable reading of the encyclical by furnishing it a wider context and deeper footing within the tradition.

Such a reading is at home within both the longstanding exegetical tradition and the encyclical tradition. Finally it weaves together two outstanding threads that form the basis of comparison in this article. Up to this point, this article outlines two Samaritans who embody love differently. One thread is Langland's Samaritan, Christ the Samaritan, who is the very ground of all agency, who is divine Love, and reveals love most deeply by his care for us. The other thread is Francis's samaritan, who is an activist marked by political love and universal fraternity, attentive toward others' suffering and effective in deployment of worldly resources.

Yet there are not two distinct Samaritans—there is one Samaritan. Both interpretations of the parable are set along a shared horizon and single teleology, wherein the ultimate divine reality animates the earthly. Christ is the Samaritan in whom we live and have our being, and who makes possible our good-samaritan activity.

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<sup>43</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, vol 2. (Paris: Aubier, 1961), 554.

<sup>44</sup> *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943); Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993); Joseph Ratzinger / Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007); see also Geoffrey Wainwright, "Gospel Hermeneutics in Joseph Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth*," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 7, no. 1 (2009): 7–18.

<sup>45</sup> Indeed, *Piers Plowman* is a model in this sense—it very much moves from the retelling of the parable (19.46–93) to forms of life that the parable entails (19.94–329). Aers discusses difficulties that result from sharply differentiating typology and allegory in *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory*, 1–14.