

The Call to Mercy: *Veritatis Splendor* and the Preferential Option for the Poor

MIGUEL J. ROMERO
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, IN

THESE REMARKS concern the relationship between the teaching of *Veritatis Splendor* and the principle in Catholic social doctrine called the *preferential option for the poor*. The goal is to locate the common vocation to preferential love for the poor within the anthropological and moral horizon indicated by Blessed Pope John Paul II's encyclical. And, in that light, to reflect upon the moral implications of Jesus's invitation to the rich young man into the perfection of charity called *mercy*: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor . . . then come, follow me" (Mt 19:21). Toward that end, the morality tale *Deutsches Requiem* by Jorge Luis Borges highlights for us an important gesture in *Veritatis Splendor* concerning the virtue mercy and vicious sloth (*acedia*): an inchoate thesis concerning themes addressed in Pope John Paul's encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (1980) and the apostolic exhortation *Salvifici Doloris* (1984). Throughout, St. Thomas Aquinas will help us specify key aspects of the option for the poor in relation to *Veritatis Splendor* and identify some of the important work that lies ahead.¹

Keeping that work in mind, it is worthwhile to pause and reflect upon the sorrow of the rich young man in his response to Jesus' invitation: "When he heard this, he went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions."² The young man's sorrow at Christ's call to mercy and his refusal

¹ Cf. Stephen Pope's recommendation for an account of the preferential option for the poor that draws upon the systematic and moral resources of Aquinas in "Proper and Improper Partiality and the Preferential Option for the Poor," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 268–71.

² *Veritatis Splendor* §§22–24. With thanks to Matthew Whelan for his generosity.

to relieve the misery of the poor indicate the moral significance of poverty, suffering, and the virtuous response to suffering in the Christian view of the good and authentically flourishing human life.³

I want to suggest that the sorrow of the rich young man in Matthew's Gospel arises from the same vicious fount that feeds the *malice* of implacable warmongering, the *rancorous spite* of inhospitality toward children and migrants, and the sensationalized *bourgeois "ressentiment"* against both those who defend the poor and the religious traditions of the poor.⁴ Despair, implacable malice, spiteful inhospitality, and *ressentiment* are all moral conditions rooted in that capital sin against charity called "sloth" (*acedia*)—a spiritual apathy arising from the fact that the good is sometimes difficult and that the truth has inconvenient implications.⁵ The difficulty and inconvenience of moral rectitude is one thing, but we should also ask what the young man was not able to perceive. For, as we will discuss, the call to mercy is an invitation to apprehend through Christ the beauty of what is good and true, and to participate in God's preferential love for the poor.⁶

³ See Walter Kasper's chapter entitled "Blessed are the Merciful" in *La Misericordia: Clave del Evangelio y de la Vida Cristiana*, Spanish translation by José Manuel Lozano-Gotor Perona (Cantabria, Spain: Sal Terrae, 2012), 131–52. See also Servais Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 24–27. Pinckaers writes: "Once the idea of obligation becomes dominant and determines the scope of morality, the consideration of suffering becomes marginal, since it is not a matter of obligation. On the other hand, if the idea of happiness is the initial consideration in moral theology, the place of suffering will be obvious, for it is precisely the reverse of happiness. Suffering will then be an element of moral theology from the very start. . . . Happiness only becomes real when we are confronted with suffering over the long haul. This is the indispensable experience that lends genuine authenticity to any moral theology based on happiness."

⁴ Cf. Patrick H. Byrne, "Ressentiment and the Preferential Option for the Poor," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 213–41. Christopher Franks, *He Became Poor: The Poverty of Christ and Aquinas's Moral Teachings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009); Matthew Levering, *The Betrayal of Charity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011). With thanks to Reinhard Hütter.

⁵ ST II–II, q. 35. Cf. Karol Wojtyła [Pope John Paul II], *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 144.

⁶ *Veritatis Splendor* §107: "The life of holiness . . . constitutes the simplest and most attractive way to perceive at once the beauty of truth, the liberating force of God's love, and the value of unconditional fidelity to all the demands of the Lord's law, even in the most difficult situations." With thanks to Roberto S. Goizueta. See Roberto S. Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

The *splendor of the truth* that Christians proclaim is the perfection of *love in truth* called *mercy*.⁷ For Pope John Paul and Aquinas, mercy is the historical revelation and morally perfect actualization of charity vis-à-vis the reality of evil.⁸ Properly understood as the love that overcomes evil with good, mercy “constitutes the fundamental content of the messianic message of Christ and the constitutive power of his mission.”⁹ In a world wounded by sin and the reality of evil, our most magnificent imitation of the One who is *rich in mercy* is a volitional participation in the mystical power of *salvific suffering*.¹⁰ Indeed, as an indispensable dimension of charity and “love’s second name,” mercy (*misericordia*) is the first and primordial name of the preferential option for the poor.¹¹ That last point, in

⁷ Cf. *Veritatis Splendor* §§18b, 24; and *Caritas in Veritate* §5b. In his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (1984), §13d–e, Pope John Paul provides a compelling formulation of this connection: “It is precisely because sin exists in the world, which ‘God so loved . . . that he gave his only Son,’ that God, who ‘is love,’ cannot reveal Himself otherwise than as mercy. This corresponds not only to the most profound truth of that love which God is, but also to the whole interior truth of man and of the world which is man’s temporary homeland. Mercy in itself, as a perfection of the infinite God, is also infinite.”

⁸ See *Dives in Misericordia* §7f: “mercy is an indispensable dimension of love, it is . . . the specific manner in which love is revealed and effected vis-à-vis the reality of the evil that is in the world.” Cf. *ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 4, resp.

⁹ *Dives in Misericordia* §6e. See also *ST* I, q. 21, a. 3.

¹⁰ See *Salvifici Doloris* §§28–30 [esp. 30]. Cf. *Libertatis Conscientia* (1986) §55, where then-Cardinal Ratzinger writes: “The perfection which is the image of the Father’s perfection and for which the disciple must strive is found in mercy.”

¹¹ *Dives in Misericordia* §8a–b: “[T]he cross of Christ, on which the Son, consubstantial with the Father, renders full justice to God, is also a radical revelation of mercy, or rather of the love that goes against what constitutes the very root of evil in the history of man: against sin and death. The cross is the most profound condescension of God to man and to what man—especially in difficult and painful moments—looks on as his unhappy destiny. The cross is like a touch of eternal love upon the most painful wounds of man’s earthly existence; it is the total fulfillment of the messianic program that Christ once formulated in the synagogue at Nazareth and then repeated to the messengers sent by John the Baptist. According to the words once written in the prophecy of Isaiah, this program consisted in the revelation of merciful love for the poor, the suffering and prisoners, for the blind, the oppressed and sinners.” Cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* §42b.

See also Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Press, 1988), xxvii. Gutierrez writes: “In the final analysis, an option for the poor is an option for the God of the kingdom whom Jesus proclaims to us. . . . This preference brings out the gratuitous or unmerited character of God’s love. The same revelation is given in the evangelical Beatitudes, for they tell us with the utmost simplicity that God’s predilection for the poor, the hungry, and the suffering is based on God’s unmerited goodness to us. . . . [As Christians] our commitment is grounded, in the final analysis, in the God of our faith. It is a theocentric,

particular, is worth expanding upon in light of the final end and perfect happiness of the human being.

Charity is the principle and purpose of Christ's personal invitation to every woman and man, and mercy is the revelation and act of charity in history.¹² What this means is that the truth of God's eternal love is manifest in God's gracious regard for the suffering of humanity under the guilt of sin (*malum culpae*) and the burden of evil (*malum poenae*).¹³ So conceived, divine love is experienced as mercy: the graced *freedom to perceive* the beauty of the truth of God's love in Christ and the graced *freedom to follow* Christ in the perfection of our nature, as the image of God.¹⁴ In other words, the natural aptitude of every human being for knowledge and love of God—our likeness unto God, according to the image of God—is elevated via the divine mercy of sacramental grace to a presently imperfect participation in the knowledge and love of the God “who alone is goodness, fullness of life, the final end of human activity, and perfect happiness.”¹⁵ As a gift coordinate with the extension of divine mercy in time, the call to merciful love of neighbor is an invitation to imitate the perfection of Jesus Christ in his preferential *option for* and *solidarity with* those who suffer in their experience of evil.¹⁶

The call to mercy is a life-long journey with Christ into the perfection whose measure is God: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36).¹⁷ Because the essential and primordial foundation of

prophetic option that has its roots in the unmerited love of God and is demanded by this love.”

¹² *Dives in Misericordia* §8c. The Pope writes: “In the eschatological fulfillment mercy will be revealed as love, while in the temporal phase, in human history, which is at the same time the history of sin and death, love must be revealed above all as mercy and must also be actualized as mercy.”

¹³ Cf. *ST* I, q. 21, a. 4, resp. Cf. *ST* I, q. 48, aa. 5, 6.

¹⁴ *ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 4. At the end of his remarks on the virtue *misericordia*, Aquinas writes: “On its own, mercy takes precedence of other virtues, for it belongs to mercy to be bountiful to others, and, what is more, to succor others in their wants, which pertains chiefly to one who stands above. Hence mercy is accounted as being proper to God: and therein His omnipotence is declared to be chiefly manifested. . . . [Of] all the virtues which relate to our neighbor, mercy is the greatest, even as its act surpasses all others. . . . 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. . . . 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.”

¹⁵ *Veritatis Splendor* §9c; cf. *ST* I, q. 93, a. 4, resp.; cf. I, q. 93, a. 8, ad 3.

¹⁶ *Dives in Misericordia* §13; *Salvifici Doloris* §28.

¹⁷ *Veritatis Splendor* §18b.

Christian morality is following Jesus (*sequela Christi*), we look to his life as the exemplification of “the Christian way.”¹⁸ As Pope John Paul explains, Jesus asks us to follow him—which is “the specific form of the commandment to love of God”—and “once one has given up one’s wealth and very self,” Jesus invites each one of us to imitate his non-exclusive, preferential love for those who suffer: a love consisting in self-denial and which “gives itself completely to the brethren out of love for God.”¹⁹ To be a disciple of Jesus Christ means to follow him along the path of a particular kind of love, specifically ordered toward our conformation to his likeness (as the perfect image of the Father), by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The individual process of this conformation is a moral catechesis in the implications of our personal encounter with Jesus and our graced response to his call to conversion.²⁰

More than a pastoral illustration, Pope John Paul’s meditation on the rich young man’s encounter with Christ in *Veritatis Splendor* provides a concrete frame of reference for a theological argument about the moral good and the fulfillment of human destiny. In the same way and with respect to the sorrowful response of the rich young man (which bears a striking resemblance to the spiritual apathy of *acedia*), it seems appropriate to reflect upon a contemporary description of *acedia* relevant to the call to mercy. The Argentine poet and author Jorge Luis Borges narrates in short story form the final testament of a vicious man who, after seeking the good, was faced with a call to conversion—and who underwent

¹⁸ *Veritatis Splendor* §19. Cf. Joseph Wawrykow, “Jesus in the Moral Theology of Aquinas,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 42:1 (Winter 2012): 13–33. Wawrykow writes: “Jesus is the model for authentic behavior, the great human exemplar who shows what is possible for those who are in correct relationship to God, who indicates in his own action how they might act as they move toward God as their end” (21, emphasis original).

¹⁹ *Veritatis Splendor* §§18, 19, 20.

²⁰ *Libertatis Concientia* §66, 75. Cf. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 118. Gutiérrez writes: “A spirituality of liberation will center on a conversion to the neighbor, the outcast person, the exploited social class, the despised ethnic group, the dominated country. Our conversion to the Lord implies this conversion to the neighbor. Evangelical conversion is indeed the touchstone of all spirituality. Conversion means a radical transformation of ourselves; it means thinking, feeling, and living as Christ—present in exploited and alienated persons. To be converted is to commit oneself to the process of the liberation of the poor and oppressed, to commit oneself lucidly, realistically, and concretely. It means to commit oneself not only generously, but also with an analysis of the situation and a strategy of action. To be converted is to know and experience the fact that, contrary to the laws of physics, we can stand straight, according to the Gospel, only when our center of gravity is outside ourselves.”

a distinctively modern form of moral catechesis under Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Spengler. This description can be taken as an imaginative, although quite regrettable, extension of the path chosen by the rich young man in his response to Christ. Borges helps us recognize important features of Christ's call to mercy in our time, in the light of *Veritatis Splendor*, and as formulated in the preferential option for the poor.

A Morality Tale: Conversion and the Murder of Mercy

In the fictional *apologia* entitled *Deutsches Requiem*, Borges presents a portrait of the consummate Christian anti-saint and anti-martyr.²¹ Like the despairing young man of Matthew's Gospel, Otto Dietrich zur Linde is a man who drinks from the well of *acedia*. As a young man, zur Linde first learned to despair of the divine compassion and evangelical hope announced in Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem* (1868), by interpreting the piece through the pessimism of Brahms' *Vier ernste Gesänge* (1896) and the distilled skepticism of Schopenhauer's *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1851).²² Decades later, zur Linde's conversion from despair to the pursuit of mercilessness is sealed in a sedentary hospital, when he identifies the purpose of his life: "On the windowsill slept a massive, obese cat—the symbol of my vain destiny."²³

Zur Linde is a Nazi war criminal condemned to die for his activities as subdirector of the Tarnowitz concentration camp. The *apologia* is no

²¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Deutsches Requiem* from *The Aleph* (1949) in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 229–34.

²² See Daniel Beller-McKenna, "Brahms on Schopenhauer: The *Vier ernste Gesänge*, op. 121, and Late Nineteenth-Century Pessimism." In *Brahms Studies* 1, ed. David L. Brodbeck (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 170–88. Although Beller-McKenna argues for a different interpretation of Brahms's response to Schopenhauer in *Vier ernste Gesänge* than the interpretation presumed in Borges's narrative *Deutsches Requiem*, Beller-McKenna's analysis displays the cultural background relevant to my description of the moral intuitions at work in Borges's morality tale—in particular, those which have to do with mercy, *acedia*, and *ressentiment*.

²³ Borges provides a reference to the amplified despair of *Vier ernste Gesänge*, which opens with songs that take their text from Ecclesiastes 3:19–22 (all is vanity and there is nothing beyond this life, no reward for good works) and 4:1–3 (the dead are most fortunate, for they have not witnessed the suffering of the oppressed, who weep without comfort). These gestures are a stark contrast with the themes of Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*, which begins with the promise of divine comfort expressed in Matthew 5:4 (blessed are those who mourn, for they will receive comfort) and ends with the hope expressed in Revelation 14:13 (blessed are the dead who rest from their mortal labors and benefit from the fruit of their good works).

apology. Zur Linde narrates his confession for posterity as the celebratory announcement—the good news—of a dawning new age:

I am to be shot as a torturer and a murderer. . . . I have no desire to be pardoned, for I feel no guilt, but I do wish to be understood. Those who heed my words will understand that . . . I am a symbol of the generations to come.

The new humanity anticipated by zur Linde is a transformed people, no longer tempted by “insidious compassion . . . [to perform] ancient acts of tenderness.” He explains that the secret justification of his life is constituted in his death, as he and Hitler’s Germany are crushed by the nations of the world and humanity takes upon itself the mantle of violence and faith in the sword. What matters, he writes, “is that violence, not servile Christian acts of timidity, now rules.”

Nationalistic warmongering is held forth as an “intrinsically moral act,” the new common school of humanity where “the old man, which is corrupt and depraved”—that is, the merciful and compassionate man—is stripped away in order that the merciless Overman take his place. The violence of nations and Nazi chauvinism, however, are only the incidental means to a higher purpose for zur Linde: perpetual war and secret prisons are crucibles in which implacable and merciless men are forged. In his own case, zur Linde “felt no calling for violence” and he admits that the tedious daily slaughter of human beings was not something he enjoyed. In that light, zur Linde reveals the purpose of his unhurried abuse and meticulous psychological torture of the impoverished poet named David Jerusalem: “I destroyed him in order to destroy my own compassion.”

Mercy for the poor and miserable man, according to zur Linde, is Zarathustra’s ultimate sin. Thus the destruction of the blameless poet was zur Linde’s great moral triumph over the pernicious temptation to compassion. His perfection in mercilessness and anarchic freedom is sealed in the murder of mercy.

Zur Linde takes his transfiguration into the merciless Overman to be the first fruits of a dawning moral order, and he senses in his imminent execution a ransom for the higher purpose of all mankind. Specifically, zur Linde viewed it as fitting that he and Hitler’s Germany be formally crushed in the name of truth, goodness, and love—so that war could be forever purified of servile Christian mercy. The invocation of those metaphysical notions in the call to war impart to zur Linde the “mysterious and almost horrific taste of happiness”—for their faithless utterance by his executioners signals the founding of the new order, beyond good and

evil, from which a merciless and insatiable humanity will arise. For zur Linde, the universal “will to power” incarnate in Nazi Germany, but beyond Nazi Germany in the violence of nations, is the principle truth of mankind.

The Moral Argument of *Deutsches Requiem*

In addition to its literary attributes, the moral insight of Borges’s *Deutsches Requiem* certainly includes his deft narrative inversion of the hagiographic formula: search, conversion, temptation, purification, and martyrdom.²⁴ As the Platonic ideal of a consistently Nietzschean Nazi apostle, zur Linde is the consummate Christian anti-saint and anti-martyr: he rejects the very notions of goodness and truth, and perceives only the will to power as beautiful.²⁵ The most notable moral insight of Borges, however, is the incidental instrumentality of violence in his formulation of the moral universe of zur Linde.

Within the narrative, it is an accident of history that violence and Nazi warmongering are the means by which zur Linde is transfigured into a merciless man of chaos. What matters is that the moral disposition that predicates and prefigures zur Linde’s “vain destiny” begins in spiritual despair, from which he is beckoned into a life of diabolical discipleship. Specifically, Borges depicts a moral conversion that is mediated by the personification of Aergia—the daimon, in Greek mythology, associated with indolence and sloth—a fitting symbol of *acedia*: a sleeping and morbidly obese cat. Because zur Linde was no longer content to die for the new implacable age of humanity, he dedicated himself to live for the annihilation of mercy: “At last I believed I understood,” zur Linde writes, “To die for a religion is simpler than living that religion fully.” He aspired to achieve the extraordinary lawlessness and mercilessness that Rodion Raskolnikov failed to realize in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*.

There is more than one way to become merciless, but it always begins with the spiritual apathy (that is, the deadly sin called sloth) which despairs at the difficulty and inconvenience of truth and goodness. Zur Linde had no taste for violence, but efficiently and joylessly performed his brutal duties in the Tarnowitz concentration camp as a discipline ordered toward

²⁴ Donald L. Shaw, *Borges’ Narrative Strategy* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1992), 87. Shaw writes: “*Deutsches Requiem* . . . has as its macroscopic or multiple subtext the whole of what we know as *Lives of Saints*. Zur Linde is a parodic or inverted saint, one who sacrifices and mortifies himself for the Nazi ideal as a saint normally sacrifices and mortifies himself for the Christian ideal.”

²⁵ Jorge Luis Borges and Richard Burgin, *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 21–22.

the annihilation of his apparently native disposition to compassion. Mercilessness and lawlessness, not violence and war, were his goal.

Borges's inversion of the Christian saint is not formulated according to a Manichaean cosmology of good and evil. If that were the case, zur Linde would not be content that "England is the hammer and [Germany] the anvil," for only victory and domination would then suffice. Like Aristotle, Borges recognizes that unnerving viciousness still takes its reference from what is virtuous and noble; only beasts and "gods" live according to the absolute lawlessness toward which zur Linde aspired.²⁶

On the Christian view and for Borges, the opposite of the good is not evil as such—evil is the privation of the good and is therefore always parasitic upon a more determinative good. For that reason, the inversion of Christian morality is depicted by Borges as an amoral *ressentiment*—a distinctively modern attitude diagnosed by Max Scheler that takes root in the sorrow of *acedia*, but exceeds both spiritual apathy (*desperatio*) and rancorous spite (*malitia*) in the devaluation of spiritual goods by way of staid indifference.²⁷ In that way, *ressentiment* can be understood as the settled disposition to maintain a moral universe that ceaselessly reconfigures itself to accommodate the arbitrary preferences, desires, and whims of the modern subject.²⁸ Moreover, with *ressentiment*, the entropic disintegration and disorder of human sociality are not sought as ends in themselves—even Raskolnikov, for example, murdered the shopkeeper for

²⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a1–5, 25–38.

²⁷ Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 143–44; cf. Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, trans. Lewis B. Coser and William W. Holdeim (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1998), 29. Scheler describes the phenomenon of *ressentiment* in this way: "Ressentiment is a self-poisoning of the mind which has quite definite causes and consequences. It is a lasting mental attitude, caused by the systematic repression of certain emotions and affects which, as such, are normal components of human nature. Their repression leads to the constant tendency to indulge in certain kinds of value delusions and corresponding value judgments." See also Ramsey Lawrence, "Religious Subtext and Narrative Structure in Borges's *Deutsches Requiem*," *Variaciones Borges* 10 (2000): 119–38. Concerning despair and malice, see *ST* II–II, q. 35, a. 4.

²⁸ *Veritatis Splendor* §99. Pope John Paul cites Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Libertas Praestantissimum* ("On the Nature of Human Liberty," 1888): "If one does not acknowledge transcendent truth, then the force of power takes over, and each person tends to make full use of the means at his disposal in order to impose his own interests or his own opinion, with no regard for the rights of others." Cf. Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 41. "Lowering all values to the level of one's own factual desire or ability . . . construing an illusory hierarchy of values in accordance with the structure of one's personal goals and wishes—that is by no means the way in which a normal and meaningful value consciousness is realized. It is, on the contrary, the chief source of value blindness, of value delusions and illusions."

what he viewed as the greater good of society. Rather, social disintegration and disorder are the consequence of a cultural ethos which is indifferent to truth and, as a consequence, indifferent to the pursuit and protection of superficially unpleasant moral and spiritual goods.

Mercy and Indifference

Strictly speaking, the radical inversion of merciful neighbor-love is not contempt and abuse of the poor but habituated indifference to truth and goodness. This is a point that warrants further explanation. In particular, and in view of the moral teaching of *Veritatis Splendor*, what does *acedia* indifference have to do with the subversion of mercy and the misery of the poor?

Although every vice is aversive to the spiritual good of its opposite virtue, the vice of *acedia* is uniquely opposed to the divine good of charity.²⁹ So conceived, *acedia* is *not* the mere recognition that there are difficulties associated with our participation in the divine good (that is, the challenges of moral rectitude). Rather, *acedia* is a dispositional despair at the fact that moral goodness and our participation in the divine good are demanding.³⁰ Aquinas suggests that revulsion at the moral good and the truth of the divine good becomes habituated indifference when the lack of joy in spiritual pleasures is supplemented by intemperate sensual or bodily pleasures.³¹ For example, the sensual pleasures attached to gluttony, drunkenness, lust, anger, and curiosity (the wandering of the mind after unlawful things) can all be understood as ways to avoid the sorrow of a dispositionally unhappy life.³² That is to say, the despairing sorrow of those who live a life bereft of the happiness called mercy.

According to Aquinas, participating in the goodness of God is our greatest happiness, and our love for the divine good is the gift of charity.³³ The internal effects of charity are joy, peace, and mercy. Different from joy and peace (which are spiritual goods proceeding from charity), mercy is a virtuous disposition oriented towards particular kinds of action.³⁴ As described above, for Pope John Paul and for Aquinas, mercy

²⁹ ST II-II, q. 35, a. 2, resp.

³⁰ ST II-II, q. 35, a. 3, ad 2.

³¹ ST II-II, q. 35, a. 4, ad 2 and ad 3.

³² Cf. Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, trans. Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 345. "For whenever a man is discontent in the more central and deeper strata of his being, his striving acquires a certain disposition to replace, as it were, this unpleasant state with a conative intention toward pleasure . . . someone who is at heart in despair 'seeks' [hedonistic] happiness in every new human experience."

³³ ST II-II, q. 23, a. 4, resp.

³⁴ ST II-II, qq. 28-30.

is the historical revelation and morally perfect actualization of charity in time, given the reality of evil.³⁵ As recipients of divine mercy and participants in the divine good, mercy is the greatest of all the virtues pertaining to the love of neighbor—uniting the baptized with God as participants in God’s merciful regard for both humanity and the suffering of humanity.

Aquinas describes two ways that mercy (*misericordia*) can be understood: as a passion and as a virtue.³⁶ On the one hand, as a passion, mercy is the sensual grief that human beings ordinarily experience, by way of affective identification, when we recognize that someone is suffering. On the other hand, the virtue mercy is a rational disposition to act upon that grief as if the suffering were experienced in one’s own person. The virtue of mercy is principally concerned with mitigating the experience of evil being suffered.³⁷ Even when nothing can be done, upon recognizing the suffering of another, the “heartfelt misery” of mercy is the settled disposition to *do something*; or, more precisely, the connatural inclination that *I must do something*. The virtue of mercy is the moral impulse to personally address the physical or spiritual cause of the experience of evil—by removing the cause of the misery or by providing what is missing.

So conceived, the virtue mercy is ordered toward a particular set of external acts. Aquinas calls the acts of merciful love *almsdeeds*—“almsgiving is an act of charity through the medium of mercy”—and the particular need with which we are confronted in the person of our neighbor determines the alms that are due to him or her.³⁸ It is important to note that for Aquinas merciful acts are a matter of moral precept in the case of extreme need, and neglecting to perform merciful acts out of one’s surplus of resources or capacities is a grave mortal sin.³⁹

Aquinas identifies two classes of need that oblige acts of mercy, the traditional “works of mercy” enumerated in Matthew 25:34–46. Some needs are corporal (affecting the body), such as hunger, thirst, nakedness, homelessness, the loneliness of the sick, the ransom of captives, and the burial of the dead. Mercy responds to corporal needs by supplying what

³⁵ *Dives in Misericordia* §7f; ST II–II, q. 30, a. 4, resp.

³⁶ ST II–II, q. 30, a. 3, resp.; cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Carus Publishing Company, 1999), 119–28.

I am grateful to Jean Porter for her comments on an earlier draft of these remarks.

³⁷ ST II–II, q. 30, a. 1, resp.

³⁸ ST II–II, q. 32, a. 1, resp.; cf. Stephen Pope “Aquinas on Almsgiving, Justice, and Charity: An Interpretation of Reassessment,” *Heythrop Journal* 32 (1991): 167–91, esp. 176–80.

³⁹ ST II–II, q. 32, a. 5, sc.

is deficient or by removing the cause of the miserable condition.⁴⁰ Other needs are spiritual (affecting the soul). Mercy responds to spiritual needs with an analogous provision of support: for example, to pray for God's help, to comfort those who grieve or who are afflicted; to relieve deficiencies of the speculative intellect through instruction and deficiencies of the practical intellect through counsel; and to forgive the debt of personal injury.⁴¹

It is important to underscore that acts of mercy are predicated upon one's capacity to recognize evil and to be affectively moved by the misery of a fellow human being.⁴² Throughout the question on mercy, Aquinas formulates the prudential judgments necessary to an act of mercy as directing *both* the passions of the sensitive appetite *and* the operations of the intellectual appetite.⁴³ This is to be distinguished, for example, from Aquinas's formulation of the virtue justice, which is only about operations of the intellectual appetite, as justice applies the will to its proper act in accordance with the good.⁴⁴ What this means is that justice remains a virtue regardless of whether or not one delights in justice. As it relates to the good of one's neighbor, one further difference between the virtue justice and the virtue mercy is the role of *beauty* and our *delight at beauty*. Aesthetic sensibilities and affective inclination are part of what distinguishes the performance of mercy and its gratuitousness from the strict obligations of legal justice.⁴⁵

For Aquinas, beauty and goodness differ only in aspect—what beauty (or aesthetic perception) adds to goodness is a reason-directed and reason-directing sensitivity to the affective pleasure experienced when a particular good is apprehended (or, as the case may be, the displeasure when evil is apprehended).⁴⁶ Because the “heartfelt misery” of *miser cordia* is moved

⁴⁰ *ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 2, resp.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² See, for example, *ST* I–II, q. 9, a. 2, *resp.* Regarding human acts in general, Aquinas writes: “that which is apprehended as good and fitting, moves the will by way of object. Now, that a thing appear to be good and fitting, happens from two causes: namely, from the condition, either of the thing proposed, or of the one to whom it is proposed. For fitness is spoken of by way of relation; hence it depends on both extremes. And hence it is that taste, according as it is variously disposed, takes to a thing in various ways, as being fitting or unfitting.”

⁴³ *ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 3, resp.

⁴⁴ *ST* I–II, q. 59, aa. 4, 5.

⁴⁵ Cf. Jean Porter, “The Virtue Justice (IIa IIae, qq. 58–122),” *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 282–84.

⁴⁶ *ST* I–II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3.

to act by signs of evil present to the senses of particular persons, the individual affective inclinations of those confronted by human misery are integral to the operation of practical reason and merciful regard.⁴⁷ For Aquinas, the virtuous man or woman is one who has been habituated to judge what is right by inclination to the good and through a connatural intimacy or sympathy with the divine good.⁴⁸ So conceived, the ability to recognize evil and to be moved by the misery of the poor is a skill of aesthetic perception which must be formed and trained.⁴⁹

In his book *Aesthetic Perception: A Thomistic Perspective*, Kevin O'Reilly attempts to reconstruct the aesthetic theory at work in the background of Aquinas's life work, toward what he calls a "Thomistic theory of virtue aesthetics."⁵⁰ Among the fruits of O'Reilly's close attention to Aquinas's aesthetic presuppositions is the light it shines on the affective dispositions coordinate with acts of mercy. And, moreover, how the *acedic* indifference characteristic of our time makes it difficult to recognize the proper place of the preferential option for the poor within the anthropological and moral horizon of *Veritatis Splendor*.

Because affectivity limits and controls what sensory information is relevant to the cognitional deliberations of the intellect, choice is influenced by the natural and connatural inclination of the subject toward or against what is apprehended—hence, a better affective inclination means that one will have a better grasp of reality.⁵¹ On the terms provided by O'Reilly, for Aquinas the ability to recognize evil *as evil* and human misery *as a sign of evil* is an affective inclination that is acquired through habituation into communal practices corresponding to what is good and true (or, as the case may be, lost through mal-habituation).⁵² For that reason, physically capable persons who are not able to recognize evil and

⁴⁷ *ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 1.

⁴⁸ *ST* I, q. I, a. 6, ad 3; II–II, q. 45, a. 2, resp.

⁴⁹ *ST* II–II, q. 24, a. 11, resp. Aquinas writes: "It is proper to a habit to incline a power to act, and this belongs to a habit, in so far as it makes whatever is suitable to it, to seem good, and whatever is unsuitable, to seem evil. For as the taste judges of savors according to its disposition, even so does the human mind judge of things to be done, according to its habitual disposition."

⁵⁰ Kevin E. O'Reilly, *Aesthetic Perception: A Thomistic Perspective* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007). O'Reilly outlines what he takes to be the principal themes for any inferential reconstruction of Aquinas's inchoate aesthetic theory: the unity of human nature, the three formal criteria of beauty (proportion, integrity, and clarity), and the dynamic interplay of *visio* and *claritas* in the unified operation that O'Reilly calls *aesthetic perception*.

⁵¹ *ST* I, qq. 80, 81; O'Reilly, *Aesthetic Perception*, 68–73.

⁵² O'Reilly, *Aesthetic Perception*, 79–82.

are unmoved by human misery may have, on Aquinas's terms, what O'Reilly would describe as an "affective moral disorder."⁵³

When it comes to the performance of the moral perfection called mercy in our time, far too many Christians have been affectively conditioned (through desensitizing media consumption, technological distraction, and insulating social customs) into a state of moral disorder—a condition that zur Linde could only realize through the torture and psychological mutilation of the poet David Jerusalem. Specifically, in modern society it is now possible in an unprecedented way to cauterize one's capacity to recognize and to be moved by human misery and poverty; the sensual grief of the passion mercy is silenced. And this to a degree that the despair of the rich young man described in Matthew could be viewed as a *moral achievement*—albeit qualified—insofar as one must first desire the spiritual good of merciful love before the difficulty of that spiritual good can be despaired. From the perspective of individual moral rectitude, *acedic* indifference and affective moral blindness to human misery is worse than misanthropic hatred—because, at the very least, those who hate still recognize the humanity of their enemy.⁵⁴

Pope John Paul is clear that although far too many Christians fail to respond to the universal call to mercy, it would be irresponsible to issue a generic indictment of contemporary Christianity.⁵⁵ However, it is wholly appropriate to call to task those of us who have found a way to numb both the sensual grief of mercy and our capacity to be moved by human misery. In particular, I have in mind those of us who are no longer capable of moral

⁵³ Ibid., 73–75. Thinking with Aquinas, an "affective moral disorder" would not describe the perceptive faculties of persons who are cognitively impaired or who are afflicted with a congenital mental disorder. For example, Aquinas is keen to distinguish between, on the one hand, physical conditions like "mindlessness" and "madness" (i.e., *amentia* and *furia*), which hinder the ordinary exercise of reason and, on the other hand, morally vicious dispositions that hinder the exercise of reason and arise from the withdrawal of supernatural grace, willful inattention to the good, or the distraction of disordered loves (concupiscence) (cf. *ST* II–II, q. 15, a. 1, resp.). See my essay "Aquinas on the *corporis infirmitas*: Broken Flesh and the Grammar of Grace," *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 101–51.

⁵⁴ Cf. *ST* II–II, q. 34, a. 4. Aquinas does not fail to note, however, that "as regards the hurt inflicted on his neighbor, a man's outward sins are worse than his inward hatred."

⁵⁵ In *Dives in Misericordia*, Pope John Paul appropriately highlights the merciful and liberating work of Christians in history and throughout the world, which should not be minimized or disregarded. In doing so, however, he maintains that the moral witness of the Church to the preferential love of God for those who suffer remains compromised in troubling ways.

sorrow, like the sorrow attributed to the rich young man in Matthew's Gospel. Remorseless in our greed, gluttony, and lust, we live indifferent to human misery that does not meet us on our terms and according to our schedule. Our lives unfold unaffected and unmoved by affliction and poverty—and we artfully explain our individual exemption from Christ's call to mercy with an ease and boredom that Nietzsche would envy.

Recall from Borges's morality tale that the condemned Nazi did not seek violence and murder as ends in themselves; these were the means to a deeper purpose: zur Linde sought to excise compassion from his soul so that he would be free to live as he pleased, beyond good and evil, beyond human limitation and weakness. In our time and on Aquinas's terms, too many Christians (and Christian moralists) nurture a promethean indifference to the moral demands coordinate with our constitutive creaturely limitations (*defectum*), postlapsarian wounds (*infirmum*), and the infinitely variable poverties that afflict and are inflicted upon our near neighbor (*privatio boni*).⁵⁶

The principle enemies of those who are afflicted, impoverished, and oppressed are the desensitizing instruments of distraction and insulation that consume the moral sensibilities of those who are circumstantially capable, but unwilling, to be merciful—these are the powers, principalities, and spiritual dominions of this present darkness. It is certainly a matter of moral precept for Christians to expose the contemptuous abuse of the poor as we encounter it and, to the extent that we are able given the order of charity, to provide what is needed and to protect the vulnerable.⁵⁷ Likewise, it is a matter of moral precept and among the spiritual works of mercy to admonish and correct those who harm themselves and who harm others through sin or vice—that is to say, the act of charity that Aquinas calls “fraternal correction.”⁵⁸ In this way, the culpable indifference and affective moral blindness of our time calls for a timely work of mercy: virtuous women and men moved to act by the signs of evil evident in the

⁵⁶ Cf. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, xi–9. In reference to contemporary moral philosophy, MacIntyre asks what difference it would make if the fact of human vulnerability and affliction, and the related fact of the dependencies coordinate with our biological constitution, where to be recognized as central to any coherent account of the moral life. Analogously, it seems worth asking what difference it would make if Catholic theologians and moralists consistently recognized the place of creaturely limitation, woundedness, and poverty in the Christian understanding of human happiness and human flourishing—as recommended by Pinckaers above (n. 3).

⁵⁷ *ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 5, concerning those instances when almsgiving (i.e., the works of mercy) are a matter of moral precept and are obligatory. Cf. II–II, q. 118, a. 4.

⁵⁸ *ST* II–II, q. 33, aa. 1, 2.

lives of those who are remorseless in their greed and indifferent to human misery. It is the “heartfelt-misery” of *misericordia* that not only follows Jesus in his ministry to the poor but reiterates the demanding implications of Christ’s invitation to the rich young man for our time: asking the culpably indifferent *Why are these people impoverished, afflicted, and oppressed?* and, when necessary, declaring in merciful love: *Repent, because your vicious sloth is the reason these people are impoverished, afflicted, and oppressed.*⁵⁹

The Option for the Poor and the Moral Horizon of *Veritatis Splendor*

In *Veritatis Splendor* Pope John Paul reflects on the “whole of the Church’s moral teaching,” the “foundations of moral theology,” and the “principles of a moral teaching based upon sacred scripture and the living apostolic tradition.”⁶⁰ Although the “lack of harmony” connected with certain theological errors was the occasion of the encyclical, the renewal proposed for the discipline of moral theology centers on the radical recovery of a Christian morality rooted in a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the revelation of truth and it is in Christ crucified that the Church receives its clearest picture of authentic freedom and the properly human good.⁶¹ Embodied in the ordinary activities of the Christian disciple’s daily life, the evangelical morality of Christ’s Church entails a call to conversion that is personal and extends to our family, social, and political life.⁶² As Pope John Paul explains in *Veritatis Splendor*, the personal renewal of Christian discipleship is one that must be lived:

Faith is a decision involving one’s whole existence. It is an encounter, a dialogue, a communion of love and of life between the believer and Jesus Christ, the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. It entails an act of trusting abandonment to Christ, which enables us to live as he lived, in profound love of God and of our brothers and sisters.⁶³

⁵⁹ *Veritatis Splendor* §104–5. “It is quite human for the sinner to acknowledge his weakness and to ask mercy for his failings; what is unacceptable is the attitude of one who makes his own weakness the criterion of the truth about the good, so that he can feel self-justified, *without even the need to have recourse to God and his mercy*. . . . The Pharisee [from Luke 18:9–14] represents a ‘self-satisfied’ conscience, under the illusion that it is able to observe the law without the help of grace and *convinced that it does not need mercy*. All people must take great care not to allow themselves to be tainted by the attitude of the Pharisee, which would seek to eliminate awareness of one’s own limits and of one’s own sin” (emphasis mine).

⁶⁰ *Veritatis Splendor* §4–5.

⁶¹ *Veritatis Splendor* §§84–85.

⁶² *Veritatis Splendor* §101; cf. *Caritas in Veritate* §5.

⁶³ *Veritatis Splendor* §88.

The vocation to which every person is called by Christ is a discipleship oriented by charity toward justice, solidarity, truthfulness, and mercy.⁶⁴ Indeed, Pope John Paul is clear that this radically renewed social existence is not limited to a small group of elite individuals. Rather, Christ invites every man and woman to “go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor” (Mt 19:20).

The radical dispossession of personal property and goods, and the redistribution of personal wealth and benefits, is held forth as an aspect of moral perfection by Pope John Paul. Which is to say, the self-effacing dispossession and redistribution of personal property is described as an integral part of the good life and flourishing human life according to the Christian Way.⁶⁵ Moreover, by linking christoformic neighbor-love to radical personal and social renewal, Pope John Paul forecloses upon attempts to separate *the spiritual detachment from individual wealth*, on the one hand, from *the personal redistribution of individual wealth*, on the other hand.⁶⁶ In other words, for Christian disciples, a holy detachment from the excess goods and privileges we sometimes enjoy is morally meritorious primarily when the goods are personally distributed or made available for the benefit of those who suffer (vis-à-vis the corporal and spiritual works of mercy).⁶⁷ In that way, according to Pope John Paul, the call to self-giving acts of merciful love for those who suffer, along with the teleological promise (treasure in heaven), bring out “the full meaning of the commandment of love for neighbor, just as the invitation which follows, ‘Come follow me,’ is the new, specific form of the commandment of love of God.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *Veritatis Splendor* §98.

⁶⁵ Cf. Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 70. “When Francis of Assisi kisses festering wounds and does not even kill the bugs that bite him, but leaves his body to them as a hospitable home, these acts (if seen from the outside) could be signs of perverted instincts and of a perverted valuation. But that is not actually the case. It is not a lack of nausea or a delight in the pus which makes St. Francis act in this way. He has overcome his nausea through a deeper feeling of life and vigor! This attitude is completely different from that of recent modern realism in art and literature, the exposure of social misery, the description of little people, the wallowing in the morbid — a typical *ressentiment* phenomenon. Those people saw something bug-like in everything that lives, whereas Francis sees the holiness of ‘life’ even in a bug.”

⁶⁶ *Veritatis Splendor* §98–100. With thanks to Luis Vera.

⁶⁷ ST I–II, q. 114, a. 3, ad 3. For a discussion of Aquinas on the connection between the ordination of grace, good works, merit, and beatitude, see Joseph Wawrykow, *God’s Grace & Human Action: “Merit” in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 180–86.

⁶⁸ *Veritatis Splendor* §18.

Addressed as it is toward the vocational holiness of Christian activity, the Church's social doctrine is a proper part of Catholic moral teaching and the discipline of moral theology.⁶⁹ On the basis of that integral correspondence, Pope John Paul understood preferential love for the poor to be a moral principle for reflection, as a criterion for judgment, and as a directive for action.⁷⁰ In particular, the option for the poor is held forth as the love that recognizes and responds to human misery, in all its forms—be it material deprivation, social marginalization, oppression, physical impairment, or mental illness—respecting the limitations reflected in the order of charity.⁷¹

Although human misery is individually and unequally experienced, the miseries of the human condition display the universal woundedness of humanity that is a consequence of original sin—and these miseries are indicative of our need for reconciliation with God in Christ. So conceived, preferential love for the poor recognizes and responds to the human experience of evil and our postlapsarian woundedness, taking the suffering individual as the object of its act. Among the activities associated with this preferential love on the part of the Church, then—cardinal Joseph Ratzinger identified direct relief, defense of the poor, and work for integral liberation.⁷² For Ratzinger, the preferential love to which Christian's

⁶⁹ *Veritatis Splendor* §99b. In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* §41g, Pope John Paul II stipulates that the main aim of the Church's social doctrine "is to interpret these realities [i.e., the complex realities of human existence], determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of the Gospel teaching on man and his vocation, a vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent; its aim is thus to guide Christian behavior. It therefore belongs to the field, not of ideology, but of theology and particularly of moral theology." Cf. *Libertatis Conscentia* §72, where then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger writes: "The Church's social teaching is born of the encounter of the Gospel message and of its demands—summarized in the supreme commandment of love of God and neighbor—in justice with the problems emanating from the life of society. This social teaching has established itself as a doctrine by using the resources of human wisdom and the sciences. It concerns the ethical aspect of this life. It takes into account the technical aspects of problems but always in order to judge them from the moral point of view. Being essentially orientated toward action, this teaching develops in accordance with the changing circumstances of history . . . the Church offers by her social doctrine a set of principles for reflection and criteria for judgment and also directives for action so that the profound changes demanded by situations of poverty and injustice may be brought about, and [does] this in a way which serves the true good of humanity."

⁷⁰ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* §§41e, 42b.

⁷¹ *Libertatis Conscentia* §68a. See also Stephen Pope, "Aquinas on Almsgiving, Justice, and Charity: An Interpretation of Reassessment," *Heythrop Journal* 32 (1991): 167–91; and idem, "Proper and Improper Partiality and the Preferential Option for the Poor," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 242–71.

⁷² *Libertatis Conscentia* §72.

are called is characterized by concrete efforts to see that individuals are liberated from sin, the wounds of sin, and the effects of sin in society. The scope of this integral liberation is coordinate with human nature, is oriented by the twofold end of the human being, and is directed toward the goods constitutive of authentic human flourishing.⁷³

On the presumption that “the preferential option for the poor is intrinsic to the Christological faith of the Church,” it would seem to follow that how we identify the “who” of “the poor” has much to do with how we understand the precise poverty from which we are liberated by Christ.⁷⁴ A clear picture of the christological foundation for the preferential option for the poor is given in 2 Corinthians 8:9, where Christ did not become poor in order to privilege poverty as such (in either epistemic or material terms); rather, in a demonstration of his grace, although he was rich, *for our sake* he became poor, so that through his poverty we might become rich with him. As a mode of relating, the mercy modeled in Christ addresses a lack *of* another *for* the sake of the other. This act of address is predicated upon the means, on the part of merciful Christ, to redress the lack (that is, the poverty) experienced by those who suffer. So, in what poverty are we met by Christ?

In *Caritas in Veritate* Pope Benedict reminds the Church that through Christ we are liberated from the greatest oppression, our great poverty, which is original sin.⁷⁵ This baptismal restoration of the freedom of divine grace entails the call to liberated men and women to imitate Christ in his preferential love for those who suffer.⁷⁶ Called by God, Christian men and women are made free to witness to the goodness of

⁷³ Aquinas on the order of charity: *ST* II–II, q. 26. Cf. *Dives in Misericordia* §14d. Pope John Paul writes: “Thus, the way which Christ showed to us in the Sermon on the Mount with the beatitude regarding those who are merciful is much richer than what we sometimes find in ordinary human opinions about mercy. These opinions see mercy as a unilateral act or process, presupposing and maintaining a certain distance between the one practicing mercy and the one benefiting from it, between the one who does good and the one who receives it. Hence the attempt to free interpersonal and social relationships from mercy and to base them solely on justice. However, such opinions about mercy fail to see the fundamental link between mercy and justice spoken of by the whole biblical tradition, and above all by the messianic mission of Jesus Christ. True mercy is, so to speak, the most profound source of justice. If justice is in itself suitable for ‘arbitration’ between people concerning the reciprocal distribution of objective goods in an equitable manner, love and only love (including that kindly love that we call ‘mercy’) is capable of restoring man to Himself.”

⁷⁴ Apostolic Address of Benedict XVI, Aparecida, Brazil (2007), 3i.

⁷⁵ *Caritas in Veritate* §§34, 77; cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* §9; *Libertatis Conscientia* §37.

⁷⁶ *Caritas in Veritate* §§5a, 13, 17; cf. *Spe Salvi* §3.

God in Christ through the suffering love of charitable self-sacrifice; likewise, they are empowered to receive the sufferings of others into their own bodies.⁷⁷ It follows, according to Pope John Paul, that we are enriched by Christ's poverty only when we *personally* respond to the misery and sufferings of *particular persons* with acts of mercy. This is the perfection into which we are called by Christ. Those who have been liberated from sin, regardless of their station, are called to the work of integral liberation—which includes both the evangelical proclamation of the Gospel and the evangelical performance of compassionate solidarity with those who suffer.⁷⁸

It is imprecise, of course, to reduce the encounter with Christ to the thin horizon of social location. Nevertheless, according to Pope John Paul, those who are disproportionately burdened by the wounds of original sin (*malum poenae*) and those who unjustly suffer under the moral evil wrought by others (*malum culpae*) become a privileged locus for encountering Christ—because, if they are Christians, through their poverty and suffering they perfect and participate in Christ's suffering.⁷⁹ Pope John Paul's apostolic exhortation *Salvifici Doloris* is devoted to the implications of this Christian claim.⁸⁰ By way of compassionate solidarity, those who are circumstantially free of mortal misery (for now) are able to encounter in the person of their suffering neighbor a living icon of Christ crucified. In this encounter with Christ, the spiritual affliction of the one called to mercy is in at least one important way healed.⁸¹ On that point, Pope John Paul provides a particularly important assessment:

An act of merciful love is only really such when we are deeply convinced at the moment that we perform it that we are at the same time receiving mercy from the people who are accepting it from us. If

⁷⁷ *Caritas in Veritate* §78; cf. *Spe Salvi* §4.

⁷⁸ In *Evangelii Nuntiandi* §35–38, Pope Paul VI shows the formal and integral relationship between our salvation in Christ and the political liberation of politically and economically oppressed persons. For Pope Paul, the proper understanding of the Christian vocation to work for the political liberation and temporal wellbeing of our neighbors can never be separated from that most determinative liberation which the Church proclaims: the complete liberation announced in the gospel and which was wrought for humanity through Christ's death on the Cross.

⁷⁹ *Salvifici Doloris* §27.

⁸⁰ See *Salvifici Doloris* §§19–27.

⁸¹ *ST I–II*, q. 114, a. 6, ad 3. Aquinas writes “The poor who receive alms are said to receive others into everlasting dwellings, either by impetrating their forgiveness in prayer, or by meriting congruously by other good works, or materially speaking, inasmuch as by these good works of mercy, exercised towards the poor, we merit to be received into everlasting dwellings.” Cf. *Caritas in Veritate* §§1–2.

this bilateral and reciprocal quality is absent, our actions are not yet true acts of mercy, nor has there yet been fully completed in us that conversion to which Christ has shown us the way by His words and example, even to the cross, nor are we yet sharing fully in the magnificent source of merciful love that has been revealed to us by Him.⁸²

The person of our suffering neighbor mediates to us, in our solidarity with him or her, the recognition of our need for liberation from sin and the consequences of sin. Like the stranger on the road to Jerusalem, we who were left for dead, abandoned to our misery, are raised by the mercy of the Good Samaritan, Christ; and we are commissioned to go and do likewise.⁸³ Those who are tempted to think that we are not in need of mercy, because we do not suffer physically or spiritually, are precisely the wounded and the lost who need to receive the merciful regard of those who suffer. We receive this particular mercy when we follow Christ in his concrete, personal, and morally intimate preferential love for particular persons in their individual suffering. We must always remember that Christ is the Good Samaritan who has mercy upon us, and we must never forget that our individual reception of Christ's eternal compassion toward us in our misery is constituted in our participation in his preferential love for the poor.

Final Remarks

Interpreters of the anthropological and moral horizon of *Veritatis Splendor* tend to underappreciate the concrete implications of Pope John Paul's remarks on Jesus's invitation to the rich young man.⁸⁴ Contrary to the moral vision and methodological argument of the encyclical, no small number of moralists have "emptied the Cross of Christ of its power" by effectively revising the call for "maturity in self-giving" into a morally ambiguous "*fundamental option*" for the poor.⁸⁵ More often than not, moralists attentive to the moral horizon indicated by *Veritatis Splendor* present the virtue of solidarity with the poor in terms that hardly exceed a "feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far."⁸⁶ With that in mind, what difference would it make if Catholic moralists were to affirm, on the terms provided by Pope John Paul and Aquinas, that Jesus was not speaking metaphorically when

⁸² *Dives in Misericordia* §14c.

⁸³ Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 194–201.

⁸⁴ For example, the implications outlined in *Veritatis Splendor* §§97–101.

⁸⁵ *Veritatis Splendor* §§17b, 68, 85.

⁸⁶ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* §38f.

he called the rich young man to “go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor”? More directly, what if the contemporary prudential judgments relevant to merciful love of neighbor and the preferential option for the poor were not invoked as a way to avoid the radical dispossession of personal property, security, and time?⁸⁷

A grave moral imperative attaches itself to each personal encounter with the suffering of another human being. This imperative is an invitation into a rich and flourishing form of life. We dishonor the high privilege of meditating upon the moral implications of the Gospel when we dilute Christ’s call to mercy; that is to say, when we refuse the call to mercy because the moral good is sometimes difficult and the truth of the Divine good has inconvenient implications.

Pope John Paul II understood that our graced response to the call of Jesus prefigures a radical moral transformation that is at once personal and social.⁸⁸ Holiness is the authentic and integral freedom, the moral perfection, toward which the liberative grace of Christian baptism is ordered. Liberated from sin, Christ’s disciples are invited to be conformed to his likeness as participants in the free reception and gifting of the Father’s love for the Son, in the Holy Spirit.⁸⁹ As objects of God’s love, the women and men made free by Christ are called to become instruments of God’s grace through the evangelical proclamation and performance of the truth of Christ’s love in society.⁹⁰

On the terms provided by *Veritatis Splendor* and in the light of Aquinas’s teaching, the preferential option for the poor called mercy is constitutive of the path to moral perfection and authentic human flourishing. Thus, it is incorrect to call the preferential option for the poor a “higher good” toward which one might aspire; rather, it is a moral principle that stipulates the nature of the good life. The human being is constituted in such a way that to act against the intuition of mercy is to act against one’s own humanity and natural good. Likewise, the Christian who resists the promptings of the Holy Spirit to recognize Christ in the person of his suffering neighbor is living an objectively miserable life. The happy life and the flourishing human life *just is* the preferential option for the poor: to share life and friendship in christoformic solidarity with those who suffer.

It belongs to human nature that our flourishing is contingent upon each individual entering into messy personal relationships of mercy and solidarity. To avoid these kinds of relationships is to actively avoid exactly that perfec-

⁸⁷ *Veritatis Splendor* §67b.

⁸⁸ *Veritatis Splendor* §98a.

⁸⁹ *Caritas in Veritate* §5a.

⁹⁰ *Caritas in Veritate* §5b.

tion and great happiness to which we are called as Christians. The life animated by the call to mercy is more difficult, complicated, and clumsy—but it is a better life. It is a good life and more human life. It is the happiness that foreshadows the eternal happiness for which we are created. **N.V.**