

Parable of the Good Samaritan as an Image of the Moral Life for CST¹

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I. Introduction and Framing the Workshop

In the 1970s, Fr. Peter Henriot, SJ, famously called Catholic social teaching the church's best-kept secret (eventually writing a book with the title).² While it is not secret to those here, one challenge that I am sure we all share is the challenge in communicating the depth and pastoral importance of Catholic social teaching to a wider audience. Unfortunately, it is often still “our best kept secret.”

Catholic social teaching is a deep matter of our lived faith. At the same time, it is not closed off – it is an integral part of discipleship in the world – engaging all people of good will, focusing on flourishing persons and communities (on building the Reign of God), with a particular focus on the most vulnerable (inclusive without exception). Undergirding that connection between lived faith and the principle of Catholic social teaching is its grounding in Scripture, and it is there that I begin my contribution for our workshop.

II. CST & Scripture: Centering the Parable of the Good Samaritan³

The Second Vatican Council called Catholics to lift-up and incorporate Scripture more broadly and explicitly in our theology and practice. For Catholic social teaching, there are many Scripture passages that feature prominently in our approach to human dignity, the common good, and solidarity – just to name a few principles. In my presentation I spotlight just four that are historically the most commonly used: Genesis 1:26-27, Deuteronomy 10:17-19 (stand in for the plethora of injunctions to care for the orphan, widow, and stranger among us), The Beatitudes (Matthew 5 or Luke 6), and Mathew 25: 35-46’s Parable of the Last Judgment.

¹ This text is a shortened version of the presentation given in Warsaw 2025. It builds on published and ongoing research that I am currently doing on the role of the Parable of the Good Samaritan within Catholic social ethics.

² Peter J. Henriot, Edward P

³ My basic argument about the Parable of the Good Samaritan here is a summary of a longer argument which applies this specifically to the agency of women published earlier in 2025: Clark, M. J. (2025). Equal Dignity and Agency: Catholic Social Teaching & The Lives of Women. *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 90(2), 109-128. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00211400251325848> (Original work published 2025)

Traditionally, those of us who work in Catholic social teaching have relied on the Beatitudes and the Parable of the Last Judgment as our “go to” biblical passages. In Matthew 25: 35-45, Jesus offers a clear criterion by which we all shall be judged in which Jesus himself radically identifies himself with those in need (for I was hungry, and you fed me; or I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me). In these important passages, we are asked to take a hard look at our own actions. It emphasizes participation and agency to work for justice and love of neighbor. At the same time, however, the movement is largely one directional: helper/helped or rejector / rejected. The passages offer us a clear criterion for evaluating our decisions.

This is an essential way of evaluating the moral life based upon how one has treated the least among us. Structurally, it mostly envisions standing at the end of one’s life and re-examining one’s choices. Still, it doesn’t capture as easily the wider complexity of one’s life, in the middle of it, especially when we think about justice and the common good over the course of one’s life.

Theologically, with its presentation of the parable of the Good Samaritan, *Fratelli tutti* invites us onto a journey of moral reflection that is more dialogical. Matthew 25 remains essential, but our lens is widened as Francis uses the parable of the good Samaritan as the umbrella for moral reflection and within that includes other parables like Matthew 25 and the Samaritan woman at the well.

“The parable is clear and straightforward,” notes Francis “yet it also evokes the interior struggle that each of us experiences as we gradually come to know ourselves through our relationships with our brothers and sisters.” (*Fratelli Tutti* 69). It is my contention that as a tool of dialogical reflection, the parable of the Good Samaritan is one of shifting positionality on a journey that invites broader reflection on the complexities of the moral life.

As we reflect on the parable itself, the scene and the cast of characters was familiar, if unexpected, to Jesus’s original audience. Most likely, notes Gerhard Lohfink, “the priest and Levite are coming directly from carrying out their sacrificial duties in the temple,” and yet when they see the wounded man, they continue walking. We are not told any additional identifiers of the robber’s victim, simply that the man who is “moved with compassion” is a Samaritan.⁴ Enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans was also well known. According A.J. Levine, they

⁴ Gehrad Lohfink, *The Forty Parables of Jesus*, trans. from the German by L. Maloney (Liturgical Press, 202), 119.

were enemies and this turn in the parable would have been absolutely shocking to Jesus's audience.⁵ For the Levine, the challenge is to see oneself as the man in the ditch and ask are we prepared to accept help from even our enemy?⁶

III. The Parable of the Good Samaritan as Invitation to Discernment

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is arguably Jesus's most famous parable. Every semester, even my students with no prior encounter with the Bible know the phrase "good Samaritan" and associate it with acts of mercy. In *Fratelli Tutti*, the parable remains a story of mercy but is also much more. Instead of a fixed story, it is presented as an invitation to ongoing discernment. A glance at the chapter's endnotes reveals a complex web of citations that weave together biblical references alongside insights from his predecessors, early Church fathers, and a wide range of Francis's own pastoral messages.

By taking one of our most familiar stories, Francis is teaching that there may always be more to learn. In our familiarity, we often fail to truly hear the depth of the parable's call to look both inward and outward. Are we becoming neighbor to each other? Becoming a community of mercy?

Francis clearly identifies what he believes is often missed:

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 fulfilment that can only be found in love. We cannot be indifferent to suffering; we cannot allow anyone to go through life as an outcast. Instead, we should feel indignant, challenged to emerge from our comfortable isolation and to be changed by our contact with human suffering. That is the meaning of dignity. (Fratelli Tutti 68).

Where Jesus asks, "and which of these men was neighbor to the robber's victim?" Pope Francis pointedly reframes asking, "which of these persons do you identify with? This question, blunt as it is, is direct and incisive. Which of these characters do you resemble?" (Fratelli Tutti 64). As already noted, *Fratelli Tutti* does not mince words as it challenges us to look internally and

⁵ Amy Jill Levine, "The Good Samaritan," The Guibord Center, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/563463539>; Amy Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (Harper One, 2015).

⁶ Ibid.

acknowledge the ways in which we are tempted to keep walking, to show indifference to our suffering neighbors.

In a poignant caution against self-righteousness, Francis explains, the parable demonstrates that, “belief in God and worship of God are not enough to ensure we are actually living in a way pleasing to God,” and that, in particular “those who claim to be unbelievers can sometimes put God’s will into practice better than the believers.” (Fratelli Tutti 64).

By analyzing the different characters, we begin to see the foundation for a greater sense of moral obligation within the local, national, regional and global communities. As Francis noted, “All of us have in ourselves something of the wounded man, something of the robber, something of the passers-by, and something of the Good Samaritan.” The story itself tears down expectations and barriers challenging our sense of identity and assumptions. As I prepared for this presentation, I found myself stuck on paragraph 75 – on the robbers – which concludes with the following “sad hypocrisy” :

The complaint that “everything is broken” is answered by the claim that “it can’t be fixed”, or “what can I do?” This feeds into disillusionment and despair, and hardly encourages a spirit of solidarity and generosity. Plunging people into despair closes a perfectly perverse circle: such is the agenda of the invisible dictatorship of hidden interests that have gained mastery over both resources and the possibility of thinking and expressing opinions.

If we begin, as Fratelli Tutti does, with the parable of the Good Samaritan and later turn to the other parables like Matthew 25 or the Beatitudes it is not only our perspective that shifts but our positionality. Positionality and perspective become fluid. If we truly accept that at some point or more likely many points in our lives – we ourselves shift and inhabit all the different roles – the development and complexity of the moral life is revealed.

Thus, in our shared, vulnerable and fragile humanity, we are called to recognize that we are all sinners, all wounded, all capable of mercy and grace. “Moral theology must not be afraid to take up the cry of the least of the earth and make it its own,” contends Pope Francis, “The dignity of the fragile is a moral duty that cannot be evaded or postponed.”⁷

⁷ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20210323_messaggio-santalfonso.html

IV. Doing Theology from the Peripheries

“We recyclers...we help to clean up the planet a little bit, in all the continents where there is a recycler, we help to clean the planet, because if we did not exist who would collect the garbage from the streets? ~Josefa

*“God never discriminated against anyone...never pushed aside anyone who wanted to follow him. And so I say why would one who is an ordinary human being, why would one do that if God does not? That is my way of thinking.” – Josefa*⁸

In 2022, the Migrant and Refugee Section of the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development embarked on a global theology project called “Doing Theology from the Existential Peripheries.”⁹ Inspired by Pope Francis’s call for theologians to go out to the margins, this project was unique in many ways – the first project of its kind coordinated and commissioned by the dicastery. Organized with regional/continental working groups and focused mostly within urban contexts, this project sought to examine the priority themes of Pope Francis’s papacy via the faith of persons living on the margins of society or the church.

Titling our report “what we have seen and heard,” the North American working group used *Fratelli Tutti* 215 as a framing inspiration: “Each of us can learn something from others. No one is useless and no one is expendable. This also means finding ways to include those on the peripheries of life. For they have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centers of power where weighty decisions are made.”

Josefa, a recycler in Brooklyn, witnesses to building up that community every day. In New York and around the world, waste pickers and recyclers experience exclusion, derision, and pity. Yet, Josefa lives and works with dignity at a job that contributes to the common good.

All too often, given her poverty and vulnerability, Josefa is only perceived as the wounded in need of assistance – in doing so she is objectified and her own agency limited. Josefa demonstrated that she too is the Good Samaritan – capable of aiding her neighbor and our planet.

⁸ Chu Ilo and Clark, “What We Have Seen and Heard,” 84–85.

⁹ Stan Chu Ilo and Meghan J. Clark, “What We Have Seen and Heard,” North American Report, “Doing Theology from the Existential Peripheries,” migrants-refugees.va/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/North-America-Final-Report-FORMATTED-1.pdf.

Those living in poverty or on the margins of societal power too are all the persons in the story, called to discipleship and on the same journey of moral development.

Reconsidering the road from Jerusalem to Jericho as the moral life itself, we can perhaps begin to include more deeply discernment and complexity in our approach to Catholic social teaching – and recognize that all of us – you, me, and Josefa are all everyone in the story – seeking to be neighbor and live with dignity.