

Revisiting the *Ordo Amoris*: A Contemporary Interpretation of a Classic Christian Theme

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Abstract: This article offers an extended reflection on how Christians should think about the ordering of love in their lives today. It begins by tracing the essential lines of the classic Augustinian and Thomistic accounts of the *ordo amoris*, briefly discusses its treatment in a modern moral manual, and then examines how its contemporary interpretation might be reshaped in light of the norm of the universal destination of the world's goods and the principle of solidarity. The constructive point of the article can be boiled down to three points. First, the Christian moral life is essentially a call to exercise rightly-ordered love, including the love of God and neighbor but also proper love of self and other creatures. Second, every Christian today is called to form a conscience based on a responsible ordering of their own love given his or her particular life history, capacity for agency, and wider social context. Third, any truly Christian ordering of love today requires us to give a high priority to the needs of the abject poor of our world. The key point is that a Christian *ordo amoris* must strive to be responsive to the dignity, aspirations, needs, suffering, and agency of our least advantaged neighbors, both at home and abroad.

IN EARLY 2025 WE WITNESSED THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE classic and mostly forgotten Christian notion of the *ordo amoris*, the order of love. In a January 29, 2025 interview on *Fox News*, Vice President J.D. Vance, a relatively recent convert to the Catholic faith, explicitly appealed to what he takes to be a Christian version of the *ordo amoris* to justify the current federal government's goal of severely curtailing immigration, even for people seeking to apply for refugee status. His version of the *ordo amoris* can also be used to justify the administration's goals of mass deportation and severe reduction of international aid. Vance described his understanding of the *ordo amoris* to Sean Hannity this way: "[First] you love your family, and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own

country, and then, *after that*, you can focus and prioritize the rest of the world.”¹

Vance explicitly depicts this ethic of concentric circles as “very Christian” and, at the same time, as consistent with his responsibility to advocate for policies that “best serve the American people,” apparently regardless of how they impact forcibly displaced people fleeing persecution or other kinds of violence in their own countries. “A lot of the far left,” he explains, “has completely inverted [the order of love] . . . They seem to hate the citizens of their own country and care more about people outside their own borders.” He especially objects to those who assert that moral duties to our own children do not outweigh those to “a stranger who lives thousands of miles away.”² This is an odd criticism coming from Vance, who knows from his own personal experience that the neglect and abuse of children is driven more by domestic violence, addiction, poverty, and dysfunctional family relationships than by any misplaced altruistic concern for distant strangers.³

Vance’s comments sparked intense scrutiny from journalists, pundits, bloggers, political activists, and church leaders. Religious supporters, often proposing a provocative interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), insisted on the authentically Christian character of Vance’s account of the *ordo amoris*.⁴ James Orr

¹ Ian Schwartz, “Vance: The Far-Left Feel More of a Sense Of Compassion for Illegal Aliens than American Citizens,” January 30, 2025, realeclearpolitics.com/video/2025/01/30/vance_the_far-left_feel_more_of_a_sense_of_compassion_for_illegal_alien_than_american_citizens.html; emphasis added. The moral primacy Vance accords to family, proximate connections, and political community is much closer to Cicero than to Catholicism. On Cicero, see Albino Barrera, *Compassion-Justice and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 17–20.

² J.D. Vance (@JDVance), 2025, “Just google ‘ordo amoris.’ Aside from that, the idea that there isn’t a hierarchy of obligations violates basic common sense. Does Rory really think his moral duties to his own children are the same as his duties to a stranger who lives thousands of miles away? Does anyone?,” *X*, January 30, 2025, x.com/JDVance/status/1885073046400012538?lang=en. This comment is part of Vance’s response to critical comments made by Rory Stewart about Vance’s reading of the *ordo amoris*. Within a week this exchange on *X* garnered over 21 million views.

³ J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family in Crisis* (Harper, 2018). Unfortunately, Vance’s self-congratulatory agenda focuses on how his grit, tenacity, and work ethic enabled him to triumph over adversity rather than on the structural conditions that continue to harm the people of Appalachia. While proposing that family stability is essential to upward mobility, he ignores the social conditions that undermine family stability.

⁴ For example, Eric Sammons, “The Sacred Order of Love: Defending J.D. Vance’s *Ordo Amoris*,” *Crisis*, February 3, 2025, crisismagazine.com/editors-desk/the-sacred-order-of-love-defending-j-d-vances-ordo-amoris, and R.R. Reno, “J.D. Vance is Right about the ‘*Ordo Amoris*,’” *Compact*, January 31, 2025, at compactmag.com/article/jd-vance-is-right-about-the-ordo-amoris/. Reno is the editor of *First Things*.

reads the Good Samaritan as showing not that one, “should help all victims wherever they may be, but that whatever differences may divide us from the suffering, we must care for those who fall within the compass of our practical concern.”⁵ Eric Sammons, Editor-in-Chief of *Crisis Magazine*, agrees with Vance’s rejection of what he calls the leftist “moral inversion” that gives a higher priority to distant strangers than to needy members of our own communities. The parable of the Good Samaritan, he writes, “Does not imply that we neglect our family or country for distant strangers. Instead, it teaches us to extend love beyond our immediate circle *when the opportunity arises, without neglecting our primary duties.*”⁶

Religious critics, on the other hand, argued that Vance’s “charity begins at home” moral principle virtually ignores the command to love every person (and not just every person who is close to us) as neighbor and our duty to direct special concern toward the “least of our brothers and sisters” (Matthew 25:40), both at home and abroad.⁷ Terence Sweeney reminded the readers of *America* magazine that the classically Christian account of the order of love is meant to broaden our loves, expand our hearts, and intensify our attempts to reach people who are in need.”⁸ This is precisely because Christians are called to recognize every human being as neighbor.

Vance’s comments helpfully drew attention to a morally significant topic that has been largely neglected in the post-conciliar period. To be fair, we should not expect informal comments made in the course of a television interview to offer much intellectual substance, let alone an extended theological and ethical explication of the *ordo amoris*. At the same time, Vance’s status as Vice President, his significance in American public life, his strong support from white working-class Americans, and his claim to be speaking about

⁵ James Orr, “J.D. Vance States the Obvious About the Ordo Amoris,” *First Things*, January 31, 2025, firstthings.com/jd-vance-states-the-obvious-about-ordo-amoris/. He does not explain how we are to determine what counts as a morally legitimate account of one’s practical concern.

⁶ Sammons, “The Sacred Order of Love.” This suspicion of moral inversion is rightly directed at Peter Singer but, at least from what I can tell, not to Catholic moral theologians.

⁷ For example, Sam Sawyer, “Pope Francis’ Letter, J.D. Vance’s *Ordo Amoris*, and What the Gospel Asks of All of Us on Immigration,” *America*, February 12, 2025, americamagazine.org/politics-society/2025/02/12/bishops-pope-francis-trump-deportation-249919.

⁸ Terence Sweeney, “J.D. Vance Got a Lot Wrong about St. Augustine’s Ordering of Loves,” *America*, February 5, 2025, americamagazine.org/faith/2025/02/05/jd-vance-ordo-amoris-augustine-249848/. See also Stephen J. Pope, “The Problem with J. D. Vance’s Theology of ‘Ordo Amoris’ and Its Impact on Policy,” *America*, February 13, 2025, americamagazine.org/faith/2025/02/13/ordo-amoris-stephen-pope-vance-249926/.

Christian moral priorities render his comments worthy of scholarly scrutiny.

Vance's comments provide the immediate stimulus for considering what constitutes an authentically Christian interpretation of the *ordo amoris*. This article begins by tracing the essential lines of the classic Augustinian and Thomistic accounts of the *ordo amoris*. It then examines how the topic was handled in one sample of a typical analysis provided by the moral manuals. Generations of modern Catholic moralists continue to offer interpretations of the *ordo amoris*, so their work merits some examination, if only by way of one sample. Finally, it discusses how we might best conceive of the *ordo amoris* for our own day and age, particularly in light of Catholic social teaching.

The contribution of this article to moral theology can be concisely summarized in three points. First, the Christian moral life is (and in fact always has been) essentially a call to exercise rightly-ordered love, particularly the love of God and neighbor, but also self and non-human creatures. Second, the complexity of life today challenges Christians both personally and communally to take responsibility for crafting a concrete ordering of love that is appropriate to their particular conscience, identity, and social context. Third, any truly Christian ordering of love requires us to give a special priority to the needs of the abject poor of our world. In Christian language, we must view distant strangers as neighbors whose suffering and lack of well-being seriously concern us. The key issue is whether we best conceive of the *ordo amoris* as either essentially closed in on itself or open to the needs, suffering, and agency of the poor, both at home and abroad.

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO ON THE *ORDO AMORIS*

Augustine conceives of the Christian life as one of growing in the love of God and love of all those whom God loves. To love those whom God loves centrally includes willing the good to them, especially the good of salvation.⁹ The whole of the Christian life can be described as an ongoing process of learning how rightly to love God and to love the self and the neighbor "in God."¹⁰ Loving God

⁹ Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New City Press, 2008), 119.

¹⁰ *Caritas* loves the neighbor "in God" as opposed to *cupiditas* that seeks to possess, dominate, and use the neighbor for our egocentric purposes. As Eric Gregory explains: "To love the neighbor 'in God,' Augustine's mature formulation, aims to morally protect the neighbor from the self's prideful distortion that the neighbor exists only in terms of one's own ends, or that the neighbor is a threat to the self's relation to this infinite God." Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 42.

provides the context within which we love our neighbor in the right way, that is, as someone neither to be ignored nor exploited but rather as one cherished by God and invited to fellowship with us in the communion of saints.

Augustine considers love of God the key to “rightly ordered love.”¹¹ His *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* defines virtue as “nothing less than the perfect love of God.” After identifying God as the primary object of the four cardinal virtues, Augustine describes the cardinal virtues as various forms of rightly ordered love for God.¹²

The primacy of love for God in turn shapes Augustine’s account of love of neighbor as first and foremost wanting the neighbor to love God with rightly ordered affections. Love for God grounds all of our social responsibilities, beginning with a benevolence that both refuses to unjustly harm any person and that comes to the aid of anyone in need when it is in our power to do so.¹³ Rightly ordered love, healed and empowered by grace, enables us to walk together as pilgrims on the path toward beatitude. Rather than love the neighbor *so that* God will love us, we love the neighbor *because* God loves us and our neighbor; Christian love, then, is fundamentally gratuitous rather than transactional.¹⁴

Virtue also observes a proper ordering of love of neighbor which conforms to two duties. Augustine begins with our responsibilities to members of our own households because, “both in the order of nature and in the framework of human society” we have “easier and more immediate contact with them.”¹⁵ Secondly, however, we ought “to

¹¹ Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Penguin 1976), 637 (15.23), citing Song of Songs 2:4.

¹² Augustine, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* (Magisterium Press, 2015), chapters 15 and 25. Augustine holds that “temperance is love keeping itself entire and incorrupt for God; fortitude is love bearing everything readily for the sake of God; justice is love serving God only, and therefore ruling well all else, as subject to man; prudence is love making a distinction between what helps it toward God and what might hinder it.” Augustine elaborates on how love of God is served by the virtue of temperance in chapter 19, fortitude in chapter 22, and justice and prudence in chapter 24. See also Augustine, *City of God*, 850 (19.3).

¹³ Augustine, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, chapter 26.

¹⁴ Bonnie Kent, “Augustine’s Ethics,” *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzman (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 205–233.

¹⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, 873 (19.14). As befits his historical context, Augustine has in mind male heads of households and assumes paternalistic standards of domestic peace, “the ordered harmony about giving and obeying orders among those who live in the same house. Thus the husband gives orders to the wife, parents to children, masters to servants.” Those who give orders should understand themselves “to be the servants of those whom they appear to command.” Augustine, *City of God*, 874 (19.14). The notion of ordered harmony of diverse parts within a whole is developed into the principle of subsidiarity in Catholic social teaching. Pope Pius XI, referring to Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, c. 71, defines “order” as a “unity

help everyone whenever possible.” He has in mind not only people from our own household, geographical vicinity, or ethnic group, but any person in need who suffers from either bodily or spiritual deprivations.¹⁶

Christians have a special responsibility to help fellow believers: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 John 3:17).¹⁷ Augustine then elaborates: “Your brother is hungry, he is needy . . . He has nothing, you have something. He is your brother. You have been purchased together; your price is the same: both of you have been redeemed by the blood of Christ . . . [so] show that you are a Christian by your deeds.”¹⁸

While charity begins within the household of the faith, it must grow into love of outsiders—after all, even Gentiles help those who love them (Matthew 5:46).¹⁹ “Like fire,” Augustine writes, “[love] first seizes upon the things that are nearby and in that way stretches out to what is more distant.”²⁰ We grow into the proper order of love in stages: we first learn to love those who love us and then we extend our concern to those who do not love us.²¹ Christians differ from pagans in the unilateral character of their love: “You should love all people, even your enemies, not because they are your brothers [i.e., fellow believers] but so that they may become your brothers.”²²

Augustine’s expansive moral orientation is consistent with how sociologist Rodney Stark describes the earliest Christian communities.

arising from the harmonious arrangement of many objects.” *Quadragesimo Anno*, May 15, 1930, no. 84, vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html.

¹⁶ Augustine, *On the Morals*, chapter 27, “On Doing Good to the Body” and chapter 28, “On Doing Good to the Soul of Our Neighbor.”

¹⁷ The New Testament authors tend to use the word “brothers” (*adelphoi*) as a fellow member of the Christian community (e.g., Mark 3:34–35; Matthew 5:22; 1 John 3:14–16). Recent papal statements, on the other hand, treat “brother” and “sister” as a term of affection for any person regarded as a “neighbor.” See Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 9; Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 11.

¹⁸ Augustine, “Sixth Homily,” in *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, 86. The Emperor Julian was impressed by Christian “benevolence for strangers” and complained that, “The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well.” Cited in Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 84.

¹⁹ “All our brotherly love, then, is directed toward Christians, toward all his members. . . . Spread your charity throughout the world, if you want to love Christ, because Christ’s members lie throughout the world.” Augustine, “Tenth Homily,” in *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, 154–155.

²⁰ Augustine, “Tenth Homily,” in *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, 154. Aquinas, as we will see below, develops this analogy further.

²¹ Augustine, “Eighth Homily,” in *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, 118.

²² Augustine, “Tenth Homily,” in *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, 154.

He argues that, unlike pagans, Christians drew a new connection between pleasing God and loving the neighbor. “Perhaps even more revolutionary,” Stark suggests, “was the principle that Christian love and charity must extend beyond the boundaries of family and tribe, that it must extend to ‘all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Corinthians 1:2). Indeed, love and charity must even extend beyond the Christian community.”²³

Augustine took the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) to demonstrate that we must count *every human being*, and not just those who live in proximity to us, as our neighbor. All the peoples of the earth, both Jews and Gentiles, are invited into the new covenant that will lead them into the heavenly City. The universality of the love command, reflected in the centrifugal character of the *ordo amoris*, leads Augustine to be skeptical of any kin-centered ethic. “Partiality for kin,” Bonnie Kent explains, “represents [for Augustine] one more case of judging the value of someone in relation to us, in relation to our private advantage, instead of considering the person’s intrinsic worth.”²⁴

Indeed, as historian Henry Chadwick points out, Christian monotheism—the principle that “there is but one God, he is the Lord of all peoples”—is fundamentally at odds with “tribalism,” in other words “the notion that the function of religion is to ensure the coherence, survival, and prosperity of the tribe.”²⁵ The Christian way of life retains and properly orders loyalties to family, kin, and tribe but subordinates them to the supreme love we owe to God.

Because as finite creatures we cannot *do* all the concrete good to which love of neighbor inclines us, we have to make difficult choices about whom to help and how to do so. The Christian life involves a certain unavoidable tension between the universal scope of benevolence and the limits on our capacity to act beneficently. Charitable organizations emerged throughout the history of the church to help people whose needs outstripped the capacity of personal acts of charity. In the modern period, as Catholic social teaching notes, the state has a much greater capacity to address suffering and injustice than do individuals. For this reason we should be wary of Vance’s attempt to argue that governments do not have a responsibility to

²³ Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 212.

²⁴ Kent, “Augustine’s Ethics,” 214.

²⁵ Henry Chadwick, “The Early Christian Community,” in *The Oxford History of Christianity*, ed. John McManners (Oxford University Press, 1993), 23. Rowan Williams makes an even stronger claim: “The early Christian claim that God creates out of nothing presupposed the possibility and the reality of a love *not* based on kinship or similarity, since it presupposed a God willing to make real something wholly other than the divine life and to endow it with beauty, rationality and liberty.” Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (Bloomsbury, 2016), 72.

people of distant lands because of the limited capacity of individuals. The latter in fact constitutes a good reason for strengthening rather than weakening the responsibility of wealthier states to those on the margins. Widening the scope of our collective responsibilities, as we will see below, is precisely what we find in modern Catholic social teachings.

Though Christians are often squeamish about admitting it, deciding to help some people implies that we will not help others. On what basis, then, do we decide whom to help and in what way? Augustine's discussion revolves around two general criteria of beneficence: connection and need. You ought to love all persons equally (that is, will the good to everyone without exception, particularly the good of eternal salvation), "but since you cannot be of assistance to everybody, those especially are to be cared for who are most closely bound to you by place, time, or opportunity, as if by chance."²⁶ God works providentially through the historical contingencies within which we form particular bonds with some people more than others and in so doing incur special moral responsibilities for them.

Augustine acknowledges the human significance of "special relations," Eric Gregory notes, "but this endorsement does not lead to a kind of partial preference that would deny the claims of strangers."²⁷ The command to love every neighbor—the fact that "every human being is a neighbor to every other human being—means that, inasmuch as reasonably possible, we must be responsive to the suffering of others, including those to whom we have no special connection."²⁸

The love for the poor that was promoted by the Christian faith to which Augustine converted profoundly challenged what historian Peter Brown calls the "iron laws of reciprocity" that dominated ancient Roman social life.²⁹ *Caritas* breaks the walls that limit compassion to the circles of those who can return favors. In his letter to his friend Marcellinus, Augustine explains that "love deals with her sons as a nurse does with her children . . . according to the urgency of each case; she gives a preference for the weaker, because she desires to impart to them such strength as is possessed by the stronger."³⁰

²⁶ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (Macmillan, 1986), 23–24 (1.28).

²⁷ Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 295.

²⁸ Augustine, "Sermon 299D," in *Sermons*, vol. 8: *Sermons 273–305A*, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III (New City Press, 1994), 257.

²⁹ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 76.

³⁰ Augustine, "Letter 139," no. 3, newadvent.org/fathers/1102139.htm. Augustine laments to Marcellinus the fact that his role as bishop forced him to spend time

Yet the needs of particular neighbors range even more broadly than do our abilities to meet those needs. We thus need to distinguish particularly urgent needs (say, for food, water, and medicine to prevent death) from deeper human needs that touch the core of our humanity (such as social connection, meaning, love). Augustine implicitly distinguishes the moral urgency of meeting pressing elemental needs from striving to meet higher spiritual needs. We must then provide food to starving people while keeping in mind that “man does not live on bread alone” (Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3). The general order of good is thus hierarchical—some goods are more important than others—and the most excellent goods are those which satisfy us most deeply as creatures whose final end is union with God.

Augustine proposes an imaginary case: “Suppose you had an abundance of something which but would be well to give to someone else who lacked it, but you could not give it to two.”³¹ He then poses a dilemma in which two people came to you “of whom neither took precedence either in need or in any special connection with you.” In such a situation, Augustine reasons, “you could do nothing more just than to decide by lot which one should be given that which you could not give to both.” The two criteria of need and connection are the normative basis for ordering beneficence: “Thus so among [people], not all of whom you can care for, you must consider as if selected by lot each time one as he is able to be more closely associated with you in time.” But when presented with competing claims of either proximity of connection or urgency of need, we will have to choose to act in keeping with the wisest course of action, all things considered. Sometimes a weightier consideration is presented by someone to whom we have a particular connection but at other times we will recognize that a stranger’s urgent need is more compelling. Awareness of our proclivity to favor loved ones more than others, and our proximate over remote neighbors, should motivate us to become more attentive to the latter.

Augustine’s account of our moral responsibilities reflects his view of private property. He is well aware of Psalm 24:1: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” He

fulfilling institutional and pastoral responsibilities rather than write on subjects “much more congenial to the ardent desires of my heart.”

³¹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 24 (1.28). Augustine was wary of the egocentric distortions of almsgiving. He writes in his eighth homily on 1 John: “For, if you have made an offering to an unfortunate, perhaps you desire to extol yourself over against him, and you want him—who is the author of your good deed—to be subject to you. He was needy, you bestowed something. You seem greater, because you made the offering, than him to whom the offering was made. Choose to be equal, so that both of you. May be under the one to whom nothing can be offered.” Augustine, “Eighth Homily,” in *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, 120.

conceives of the Creator as the eternal and primordial owner of all of creation who, in our present fallen state, gives the wealthy resources as a deposit they are to use to help the needy. He laments the fact, Eugene Teselle explains, that we sinful humans, “have deserted the ‘common good,’ the God who can be shared by all without rivalry, and have sought individual good, ‘private property’ . . . deprived of the greater good which should have been shared by all.”³²

Augustine regards legal ownership of private property as a concession to our fallen condition and recognizes the duty of the Roman authorities to execute the law that protects it. He saw that well-off Christians have a moral obligation to assist the needy with their superfluous wealth while living within a starkly unequal social order.³³ Individual Christians and their communities must strive to fulfill the divinely-ordained purpose of property through almsgiving and to use their possessions to benefit others rather than hoard them for their private gain.

THOMAS AQUINAS ON THE *ORDO CARITATIS*

Eight centuries after Augustine, Thomas Aquinas builds on but modifies and expands Augustine’s account of the *ordo amoris*. He discusses aspects of the right ordering of natural love in his treatise on the passions (especially ST I-II, qq. 26–28), and then explicitly examines the *ordo amoris* (the natural order of love) within his discussion of the *ordo caritatis* (graced or supernatural love) in the *Secunda Secundae* (especially ST II-II, qq. 25–26). He proceeds this way because the natural order is perfected in, rather than replaced by, the life of charity.³⁴

In his account, natural human love involves three attitudes: appreciating the good of the beloved (*complacentia boni*), seeking union with the beloved, and effectively willing and doing the good to the beloved inasmuch as it is in one’s power to do so.³⁵ In *caritas*, the

³² Eugene Teselle, *Living in Two Cities: Augustinian Trajectories in Political Thought* (University of Scranton Press, 1998), 161.

³³ Augustine’s more conservative view of property contrasts with both Ambrose and Chrysostom. Ambrose understood almsgiving from one’s superfluities as owed to the poor. See Ambrose, *On the Duties of the Clergy*, 1.132, newadvent.org/fathers/34011.htm, and Ambrose, *Homily 11 on Acts of the Apostles*, newadvent.org/fathers/210111.htm.

³⁴ Aquinas differentiates the acquired virtues, which help us pursue the human good in this life, from the infused virtues, which direct us to our supernatural end. The latter transform rather than replace the former. Infused moral virtues orient us to our final ends while also retaining their proper orientation to various proximate ends.

³⁵ Citations from the *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter ST) are taken from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, ed. Kevin Knight, 1920, newadvent.org/summa/. Aquinas refers to “complacency in good” in ST I-II, q. 26, a. 1 and a. 2; benevolence in ST I-II, q. 26, a. 4; and union as the effect of love in ST I-II, q. 28, a. 1. He describes *caritas* as

believer thus beholds the absolute goodness of God, accepts friendship with God as the supreme end, and strives to do God's will in all things.

Aquinas accepts Augustine's twin criteria for the ordering of interpersonal beneficence. Just as our affections are *naturally proportioned to various kinds of connection* we have to different neighbors, he argues, so grace-infused love is calibrated to the many ways in which our various neighbors are connected to us (ST II-II, q. 26, a. 1). He regards familial love as the most elementary and stable of all our natural ties and the household as the original site of childhood habit formation, moral education, and piety. He does not think that recognizing the significance of close biologically-based connections should lead us to diminish the significance of other kinds of associations and friendships. Indeed, both Augustine and Aquinas follow the New Testament in placing the greatest importance in the love of God, faith in Christ, and membership in the Christian community.³⁶ Blood, it turns out, is not thicker than (baptismal) water.³⁷

Aquinas distinguishes the *good* we want for various neighbors from the *intensity* with which we will the good to them. He argues that we naturally will the good *more intensely* to those who are *connected to us* in more personal ways than to those who are connected to us only by common humanity, shared faith, or virtue. It is natural that the more varied, overlapping, and rich our connections to others, the more *intensely* we will the good to them. While ties based on parental biological origins are more *stable and lasting* than other kinds, the most *noble* and *profound* kind of connection is displayed in those who share the love of God, our supreme good. Since the *more virtuous person* is due the greater good, he reasons, the order of charity wills the *greater good* to the better person (ST II-II, q. 26, a. 6).³⁸ Aquinas

benevolent in ST II-II, q. 23, a. 1, and as primarily oriented toward union with God in ST II-II, q. 23, a. 5, and elsewhere. Aquinas also makes it clear that *caritas* is marked by mutual benevolence and a certain "union of affections" that is not present in unilateral benevolence. *Caritas* embraces every neighbor within the mutual love that is friendship with God.

³⁶ The qualifier "ultimately" is meant in both metaphysical and eschatological senses. See ST II-II, q. 26, a. 8, ad 2. In heaven, Aquinas holds, each will only love the other person according to his or her holiness and proximity to God and not according to their other connections to us. See ST II-II, q. 26, a. 13.

³⁷ See Jana Bennett, *Water Is Thicker than Blood: An Augustinian Theology of Marriage and Singlehood* (Oxford University Press, 2008). Bennett's focus on the church as the primary household helps to properly contextualize, and relativize, the moral status of the nuclear family. She appreciates the significance of Jesus' call to "renounce familial ties" (119) in a way that the concentric circles model of the *ordo amoris* does not. Her attention to worship as a kind of Christ-centered, polity-forming practice provides a strong counterpoint to Christian nationalism.

³⁸ We thus want the just rather than unjust person to serve as judge and a wise rather than rash professor appointed as Dean.

the Dominican knew that friends devoted to a life of deep faith, hope, and charity share even more excellent goods than those based merely on blood ties, social roles, or instrumental convenience.

Our affective and social lives are constituted by many different kinds of relationships based on particular kinds of goods. Each domain has its own regional “order of love” based on particular kinds of goods on which it is based. Aquinas explains that, “in matters pertaining to nature, we should love our kindred most, in matters concerning relations between citizens, we should prefer our fellow-citizens, and on the battlefield our fellow-soldiers” (ST II-II, q. 26, a. 8).³⁹

So while we should give a general priority to family members in “matters pertaining to nature,” we are also called to fulfill a significant array of responsibilities based in other kinds of connection. Loyalty to family must be responsibly coordinated with, and sometimes subordinated to, other morally substantive loyalties. Aquinas recognized both our obligations to all human beings as a matter of justice, that we may not act unjustly even when doing so would significantly benefit our family members, and, as pointed out below, he recognized that *caritas* inclines us to love all human beings, and not just our own people “in God.”⁴⁰

Like Augustine, Aquinas also employs a second principle according to which, other things being equal, we ought first to help people with *greater and more urgent needs* before those with less important needs. We typically give greater weight to the pressing needs of loved ones than to the needs of people we do not know. Yet at times we are morally obligated to meet the urgent needs of a stranger before satisfying the trivial wishes of a loved one. In some circumstances, we ought to provide assistance, “to one who is much holier and in greater want, and to one who is more useful to the

³⁹ Aquinas places more normative weight on the biological underpinnings of familial love than does Augustine but not reductively so. Edmund Hill oversimplifies when he describes Aquinas as holding that: “love of parents takes precedence over love of one’s children and love of one’s father over love of one’s mother—other things, of course, such as their goodness and holiness, being equal.” Hill recommends Augustine for “not being so meticulous in the matter.” Hill’s comment is found in Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, trans. Edmund Hill (New City Press, 1996), 127n28. Aquinas does not think, for example, that adult love of one’s elderly parents always carries more weight than responsibilities for one’s children.

⁴⁰ Aquinas does not think that family always trumps every other loyalty. See Barrera, *Compassion-Justice Conflicts and Christian Ethics*, 162–176. A recent example of disordered family loyalty is seen in the “Operation Varsity Blues” scandal in which parents bribed prestigious universities to grant admission to their children. See Sarah Brown, “8 Universities. Millions in Bribes. 10 Corrupt Coaches. What You Need to Know about the Admissions-Bribery Scandal,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 12, 2019, chronicle.com/article/8-universities-millions-in-bribes-10-corrupt-coaches-what-you-need-to-know-about-the-admissions-bribery-scandal/.

common weal, *rather than* to one who is more closely united to us, especially if the latter be not very closely united, and has no special claim on our care then and there, and who is not in very urgent need” (ST II-II, q. 32, a. 9).

Aquinas clearly recognizes that we should not always treat family responsibilities as outweighing all others. We do not find here an account of moral obligations arranged in flat, one-dimensional set of concentric circles. Various connections based on different kinds of good are *not commensurable* and should not be treated as such. The good of biological connection between blood relatives is not the same kind of connection as that which unites women religious to their communities, and so they cannot be compared to one another as strong to weak, proximate to remote, or thick to thin.

Mercy plays a central role in the ordering of love. Aquinas took it for granted that what we should provide for ourselves and our loved ones depends on our particular “station in life” and the responsibilities that come with it (ST II-II, q. 32, a. 6).⁴¹ He inherited the patristic conviction that once we have met our own needs and those of our dependents, we have a duty to give our surplus wealth to the poor: “Each one must first of all look after himself and then after those over whom he has charge, and afterwards with what remains relieve the needs of others (ST II-II, q. 32, a. 5).”⁴² Those who are comfortable are easily tempted to ignore the poor and thereby act like the right man who walks by Lazarus at his gate without even noticing him (Luke 16:19–31). As Albino Barrera, OP, points out, “Natural love and affinity by blood, association, or proximity leads people to conduct their economic lives with an eye toward promoting the well-being of

⁴¹ What counts as need and surplus are of course socially relative and historically variable. In Aquinas’ society, a noble family needs more resources to sustain their way of life than does a peasant family. Aquinas’ view of one’s “station in life” obviously presumes a feudal social order within which each person has her or his own proper place. See also the nuanced discussion of Aquinas’ ethics of social station in Mary Hirschfeld, *Aquinas and the Market: Toward a Humane Economy* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 170–180.

⁴² For the patristics, see, *inter alia*, John Chrysostom’s “Sermons on Lazarus and the Rich Man,” where he tells his wealthy congregation that “failure to share one’s own goods with others is theft and swindle and defraudation.” “The rich,” he continues, “hold the goods of the poor even if they have inherited them from their fathers or no matter how they have gathered their wealth. . . . For our money is the Lord’s, however we may have gathered it.” John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 49. Zacchaeus’ welcoming of Jesus (Luke 19:1–10) contrasts with the rich young ruler’s refusal of his invitation (Luke 18:18–23). Zacchaeus’ stewardship represents a kind of ancient version of the *ordo amoris*. Whereas the young ruler declines Jesus to hold onto his riches, Zacchaeus comes close to Jesus and shares his wealth. See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Liturgical Press, 1991), 285–287.

people within their tight circle of family, friends and associates. Agape pushes them to go to the ‘deep waters’ beyond the circles that are familiar, comfortable, or dear to them. It serves as a counterweight to the natural inclination of self-interest or of safety amid the familiar.”⁴³

The following passage from the *Summa Theologiae* displays Aquinas’ complementary view of the relation of our love for those closest to us and our concern for needy strangers. Developing an analogy between love and fire, he suggests that “our love for God is proved to be all the stronger through carrying a person’s affections to people that are farthest away, just as the power of a furnace is proved to be stronger, according as it throws its heat to more distant objects. Yet just as the same fire acts with greater force on what is near than on what is distant, so, too, charity loves with greater fervor those who are united to us than those who are far removed” (ST II-II, q. 27, a. 7). This account of the *ordo caritatis*, then, avoids two extremes: a moral parochialism that only cares about family, friends, and proximate neighbors and effectively views strangers as morally insignificant, on the one hand, and a universal ethical benevolence that ignores the concrete needs of people for whom we have special responsibilities, on the other.⁴⁴ The “fire” that grace sets in the heart of the believer intensifies the affective bonds to loved ones and at the same time generates compassionate concern that extends well beyond the conventional ethic of reciprocity, then or now.

THE *ORDO AMORIS* IN TWENTIETH CENTURY MORAL MANUALS

From the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century, neo-scholastic and neo-Thomist manuals of moral theology have exerted enormous

⁴³ Barrera, *Compassion-Justice Conflicts and Christian Ethics*, 81.

⁴⁴ A nonfictional example of this problem can be seen in the life of young Ted Williams (future baseball legend), who essentially had to raise himself. His father was an absent alcoholic and his mother a dedicated Salvation Army worker who was “far more committed to her street mission than she was to raising her two sons.” Williams commented to a reporter: “My mother was strictly Salvation Army. As a result, strictly non-family.” His biographer explains that for May, his mother, “charity did not begin at home. She was so absorbed in doing the Lord’s work, tending to others, that she neglected her own children and husband, causing resentment against her to fester in all three of them.” Williams’s friend Steve Brown remarks, “His biggest thing was the hunger he went to bed with, literally, because his mother was busy feeding orphans in Tijuana . . . His mother never showed him love, yet she showed those street urchins love like you wouldn’t believe. That’s what turned him against religion . . . he didn’t want any part of that kind of God.” Ben Bradlee, Jr., *The Kid: The Immortal Life of Ted Williams* (Little, Brown and Company, 2013), 25, 43–44. Thanks to Dave Manzo for this reference.

influence on how Catholics conceived of the Christian life.⁴⁵ The twentieth century manuals expounded on Aquinas' order of charity, sometimes with greater detail than we find in the *Summa Theologiae*. Because of their widespread influence over the course of centuries of moral instruction, their treatment of the order of love deserves mention. It will also be apparent that this tradition of moral theology is also more complex than we find in the concentric circles model of the *ordo amoris*.

The manualists conceived of the moral life primarily in terms of conforming to the moral law and fulfilling moral obligations. Avoiding the risk of eternal damnation made the stakes high. They focused on what kinds of acts must be performed by someone seeking to fulfill the duties of charity. One mid-twentieth century manual written by John A. McHugh, OP, and Charles J. Callan, OP, *Moral Theology: A Complete Course on St. Thomas Aquinas and the Best Modern Authorities*, offers an illustration.⁴⁶ McHugh and Callan provide a lengthy and detailed analysis of "Commandments of Charity."⁴⁷ They lay out a ranking of normative love as first directed to God, then the self (in the sense that we are primarily responsible for our own spiritual welfare), and then our various neighbors, whose needs are in turn identified as either "goods of the soul" or "goods of the body." The former are more excellent than the latter, but in some circumstances we ought to give greater attention to the latter—it is no use for someone with a blinding migraine to attend a lecture on Trinitarian theology.

McHugh and Callan thus provide a scheme of general set moral priorities organized according to a scale of goodness that begins with the most important and moves down: "The spiritual goods of self, the spiritual goods of the neighbor, the bodily goods of self, the bodily goods of the neighbor, the external goods of self, the external goods

⁴⁵ Nineteenth and twentieth century manuals of moral theology were an outgrowth of both the seventeenth century *Summa de Casibus* and then the *Institutiones Morales* in the eighteenth century. On this history, see John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology* (Clarendon, 1987); John Gallagher, *Time Past, Time Future: An Historical Study of Catholic Moral Theology* (Paulist Press, 1990); James F. Keenan, SJ, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (Continuum, 2010).

⁴⁶ John McHugh and Charles Callan, *Moral Theology: A Complete Course on St. Thomas Aquinas and the Best Modern Authorities*, revised and enlarged by Edward P. Farrell, OP (Herder, 1958), gutenberg.org/ebooks/35354. This electronic version of the book does not provide page numbers, so citations will be provided in the form of paragraph numbers.

⁴⁷ McHugh and Callan, *Moral Theology*, Article Ten, "The Commandments of Charity," examines our duty to love God (par. 1553–1560), then our duty to love ourselves (par. 1561–1578), and then our duty to love our various neighbors (par. 1579–1608).

of the neighbor.”⁴⁸ Unusual circumstances, however, can require us to depart from this order; for example, if we encounter a neighbor about to give birth, we ought to drive her to the hospital rather than wave at her from the car as we head to confession. They also incorporate the Thomistic principle that since human love is a response to some kind of goodness, we ought to love those who are more virtuous more than those who are less so. We can distinguish the admiring love we have for individuals who are particularly virtuous or holy from the honoring love generally due our parents, the caring love we feel for our children, and intimate love we share with a spouse. The complexities and contingencies of life can also lead to significant departures from the general order of love; for example, we do not blame adults who were victims of child neglect or abuse for not honoring their parents.

This hierarchy of goods can inform how we think about the ordering of love for various neighbors. In general, moral obligations rooted in closer connections are stronger than those associated with weaker connections. McHugh and Callan then offer a spectrum of connections to various neighbors with their attending degrees of moral responsibility running from strongest to weakest: “wife, children, parents, brothers and sisters, other relatives, friends, domestics, citizens of the same town, state, and country, and finally all others.”⁴⁹ When one’s spouse and one’s child have identical needs, and one is forced to choose between helping one first, the proper order of love requires us to choose our spouse.

What does this actually mean, ethically? Imagine a situation in which you arrive home from work to find your house engulfed in flames and your spouse and your baby are trapped inside. Faced with a kind of “Sophie’s choice” where you only have time to save one of them, McHugh and Callan would counsel you to save your wife. They would also likely note that, in some cases, particular circumstances might require you to depart from the general obligation to save your spouse and instead save the baby, for instance, if your spouse is about to die from end stage cancer.⁵⁰

At this point, McHugh and Callan’s order of love seem to share some moral overlap with the concentric circles model. Yet like Augustine and Aquinas, McHugh and Callan recognize that, *in general, greater need generates greater moral priority*. They maintain, for example, that “if a parent and a stranger are in equal necessity, more help and more love are due the parent; but *if a stranger is in need, more help and more corresponding love, as to that particular*

⁴⁸ McHugh and Callan, *Moral Theology*, par. 1606.

⁴⁹ McHugh and Callan, *Moral Theology*, par. 1606.d; cf. 1176.

⁵⁰ This scenario is the author’s, not that of McHugh and Callan.

case, are due the stranger.”⁵¹ They do not argue that foreign strangers in urgent need have less priority than the ordinary needs of our fellow citizens.⁵² Vance’s one-dimensional metaphor of concentric circles in fact implies that we have a greater responsibility to meet the minor needs of loved ones than the extreme needs of destitute strangers. The Catholic moral tradition, however, leaves no doubt that under some circumstances the urgent needs of strangers take priority over the less urgent needs of our family members.

THE *ORDO AMORIS* IN LIGHT OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

The kind of manualist natural law-based framework for thinking about moral obligations and virtues obviously lent itself to a legalistic and mechanical view of moral decision-making that was a far cry from Augustine’s and Aquinas’ respective theocentric ethics of *caritas*, inspired by grace and guided by the Holy Spirit. The innovations of the Second Vatican Council led moral theologians to abandon the manualists’ method of moral theology and put in its place an ethic that is more Christ-centered, respects personal freedom and responsibility, seeks to form mature consciences that can engage in moral discernment, and gives greater importance to virtue-based discipleship rather than law. Their work renovated moral theology by incorporating a more personalist, relational, and historically conscious approach to love.⁵³ The classical language of “*the*” order of love sounds far too static, abstract, and general to accommodate the concreteness, particularity, and contextual complexities of actual human lives.

Yet for all the advances achieved by the post-conciliar revision of moral theology, it was unnecessary to have deemphasized the *ordo*

⁵¹ McHugh and Callan, *Moral Theology*, par. 1607.

⁵² J.D. Vance’s moral logic implies that we have a greater responsibility to meet the minor needs of a loved one than the extreme needs of a stranger. As we saw in Aquinas, and now in McHugh and Callan, however, the Catholic moral tradition holds that the urgent needs of a stranger can take priority over less urgent needs of a family member.

⁵³ It is also important to note that the Second Vatican Council also called for a recovery of aspects of the Catholic and Christian moral tradition that had not been properly appreciated in the modern period. The recovery of key sources, particularly biblical, patristic and high scholastic approaches, is emphasized by Servais Pinckaers, OP, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 3rd ed., trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Catholic University of America, 1995). Pinckaers pays attention to the ordering of charity between love for God, love for self, and love for neighbor but to my knowledge he does not address the ordering of love for various neighbors.

caritatis.⁵⁴ The twin ethical criteria found in Augustine and Aquinas—need and connection—are essential factors that must be taken into account in any adequate contemporary Christian reflection on the ordering of love. We can read the encyclical tradition from Popes Paul VI through Francis as extending the ordering of love to our collective responsibility to address the needs of people whose suffering is due to large scale socio-economic and politico-legal injustices. The moral vantage point in this body of literature is primarily concerned with addressing such large scale injustices and not so much on personal priorities and interpersonal responsibilities. This shift in emphasis, however, should not be taken to suggest that the latter are unimportant; far from it.

Both the older and more recent stages of the Catholic social tradition are essentially outward moving: they push us, as Barrera puts it, to take care of our own while reaching beyond “kin-particularistic love” to a more “universal love (*agape*).”⁵⁵ They have consistently tried to draw our attention to the significance of charity that issues in both interpersonal concern and social advocacy for more distant neighbors (*Mater et Magistra*, nos. 119–121). Catholic social teaching encourages institutional responses to human suffering, particularly as it has been caused by sinful social structures.⁵⁶ The church’s “preferential option for the poor” constitutes both a *collective* call to address structural injustices, human rights abuses, and global injustices and a *personal* invitation to order our loves in ways that are truly responsive to the suffering of human beings, both near and far.⁵⁷

This twofold commitment is displayed in all of the principles of Catholic social teaching, but we will focus here on the universal destination of the world’s goods and the principle of solidarity, and then sketch how both of these serve the overarching goal of morality: integral human flourishing. For reasons of space, our discussion of these themes must be brief and highly selective.

First, popes from Leo XIII to Francis have repeatedly called attention to the universal purpose of the goods of creation, which holds that God creates the world so that all of its creatures, including human

⁵⁴ There are some exceptions, as in Jean Porter, “*De Ordine Caritatis*: Charity, Friendship, and Justice in Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*,” *The Thomist* 53, no. 2 (1989): 197–213, and Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*.

⁵⁵ Barrera, *Compassion-Justice Conflicts and Christian Ethics*, 8; see also 158–213.

⁵⁶ See the texts cited below, particularly John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 36, and Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 34. See also Daniel K. Finn, “What is a Sinful Social Structure?,” *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (2016): 136–164.

⁵⁷ See Daniel K. Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics: History and Implications* (Fortress Press, 2013), especially chapters 14–17.

beings, can flourish.⁵⁸ They draw from the strong patristic conviction, noted above, that the Creator is the real owner of the goods of creation, including our personal property. The doctrine of creation recognizes God as producing the goods of creation to meet the needs of creatures. A situation that divides the “haves” from “have-nots” directly contradicts God’s will. This sinful deprivation creates a duty of mercy—the rich must share with the poor and join the poor in working to create a less unjust society and world.

Modern Catholic social teaching continues to acknowledge the twofold criteria of need and connection: *Gaudium et Spes* recognizes both: (1) the moral right of every person to a “share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one’s family” and (2) our serious moral obligation, “to come to the relief of the poor” (no. 69). Moreover, in some circumstances, when times are desperate enough, we are morally bound to do so not only from our superfluity but even from our own socially relative necessities.

The basis for both norms is the universal destination of the goods of the earth. As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council put it: “God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples . . . [Every person] should regard the external things that he legitimately possesses not only as his [or her] own but also as common in the sense that they should be able to benefit not only him but also others” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 69). This principle poses two key moral questions to us, both personally and collectively: How many resources do we really *need* as distinct from what we just *want*? How willing are we to *give up* some of our luxuries to mitigate some of the immense suffering of the poor and to change the policies that keep them poor?

The principle of the universal destination of goods carries two fundamental moral implications for the state. First, states have a duty to make sure every person in their societies has access to the material necessities of human flourishing, including clean water, sanitation, nutritious food, shelter, and healthcare. Second, states also have a long-term moral obligation to do what they can, given their resources, to reduce poverty by investing in sustainable development projects in the global South.

A contemporary crafting of the *ordo amoris* should also be shaped by the principle of solidarity. As *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) makes clear, Pope John Paul II lodges his account of solidarity in the inherent dignity of every person as created in the image of God. Like Augustine, he reads the parable of the Good Samaritan as showing us that every human being, including the stranger, counts as our

⁵⁸ Some version of this theme runs throughout Catholic social teachings from Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, no. 22, to Francis’s *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 119–123.

neighbor, that we must pay special attention to neighbors who are particularly “weak or threatened,” and that compassion for such neighbors is an essential expression of our solidarity with them (*Evangelium Vitae*, nos. 41, 77; *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 28).⁵⁹

Here he built on his prior work in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), where he made clear that our increasing global interdependence should be accompanied by the expansion of our moral concern to include not only our own communities but also, “the *remotest human communities* in view of higher values such as the common good [and] the full development ‘of the whole individual and of *all people*’” (no. 38).⁶⁰ The pope praises people of good will throughout the world who “feel personally affected by the injustices and violations of human rights committed in *distant countries*, countries they will perhaps never visit” (no. 38). This commitment takes the form of solidarity when it leads people to undertake, “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all” (no. 38).

Inclusive solidarity is not a just matter of transferring resources but rather aims at supporting the agency of the poor. John Paul II praises the “solidarity of the poor among themselves, their efforts to support one another, and their public demonstrations on the social scene which, without recourse to violence, present their own needs and rights in the face of the inefficiency or corruption of the public authorities” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 39). The pope was continuing Paul VI’s understanding of solidarity as promoting conditions that “allow all peoples to become the artisans of their destiny” (*Populorum Progressio*, no. 65).⁶¹

John Paul II also applies the principle to the sphere of international relations: “The stronger and richer nations,” he wrote, “must have a *sense of moral responsibility for the other nations*, so that a real

⁵⁹ Augustine reads the parable morally as well as allegorically.

⁶⁰ On solidarity as a both personal virtue and social standard, see Meghan J. Clark, “Anatomy of a Social Virtue: Solidarity and Corresponding Vices,” *Political Theology* 15, no. 1 (2014): 26–39. This focus on John Paul II and Benedict XVI rules out dismissing ethically expansive neighbor-love as a particularly “liberal,” let alone “far left,” notion.

⁶¹ Pope Francis’s spirituality and ethics of accompaniment develops John Paul II’s line of interpreting solidarity in a particularly rich way. See Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 169–173, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, and *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 116, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html: “Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. . . . It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labor rights. . . . Solidarity, understood in its most profound meaning, is a way of making history.”

international system may be established which will rest on the foundation of the equality of all peoples” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 39, emphasis added). The proper solution does not create dependency but rather enables economically weaker countries, “to make a contribution of their own to the common good with their treasures of humanity and culture, which otherwise would be lost forever” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 39).

Benedict XVI’s 2005 encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* goes even further in calling all men and women of good will, and particularly Catholics, to undertake a new “readiness to assist our neighbors in need.”⁶² His 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, describes charity as a moral standard governing both interpersonal social ethics—“the heart of the Church’s social doctrine” (no. 1).⁶³ Just as advances in communications technology have radically reduced the distances between peoples, so concern for our neighbor must move beyond the “confines of national communities and has increasingly *broadened its horizon to the whole world*” (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 30). The wide scope of our responsibilities will only be met when civil society, NGOs, states, and transnational organizations fulfill their obligations, including their responsibility to use their financial and other resources to alleviate the suffering of communities in the greatest need and to work to overcome the systemic barriers to their flourishing (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 30).⁶⁴

These two principles of Catholic social teaching (and the others as well) come together in their promotion of integral human development, first articulated by Pope Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio*, which aims at the creation of social conditions that promote the holistic and complete growth of every person in every community.⁶⁵ Integral human development calls Christians and non-Christians to work to develop conditions that allow everyone fair access to what Aquinas calls “goods of the body” and “external goods”

⁶² For a helpful discussion of the meaning of love in this encyclical, see William Mattison III, “The Movements of Love: A Thomistic Perspective on *Agape* and *Eros*,” *The Journal of Moral Theology* 1, no. 2 (2012): 31–60.

⁶³ Charity is, he writes, “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)” (no. 1).

⁶⁴ In the same section he goes on to write, “State agencies and humanitarian associations work to promote this [broadening], the former mainly through subsidies or tax relief, the latter by making available considerable resources.”

⁶⁵ On authentic human development as integral human development, see especially Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, and Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*. The latter expresses serious concern over the efforts of states to reduce their social safety nets; see *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 24. Benedict also decries the “high tariffs imposed by economically developed countries [that] make it difficult for the products of poor countries to gain a foothold in the markets of rich countries” (no. 33).

but also “goods of the soul,” especially conditions that promote the development of our moral capacities for love, justice, and solidarity.

Pope Francis was particularly emphatic in calling attention to our collective responsibility to show compassion to both proximate and remote neighbors. His extended discussion of the parable of the Good Samaritan in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* extends and deepens the tradition’s reflections on the neighbor in global perspective. “Love does not care,” he writes, “if a brother or sister in need comes from one place or another” (no. 62). We must, like the Good Samaritan, attend to the needs of victims whom we directly encounter but also care about the suffering inflicted on innocent people around the world whom our institutions have neglected or exploited (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 76). This parable, Pope Francis writes, “asks us not to decide who is close enough to be our neighbor, but rather that we ourselves becomes neighbors to all” (no. 80). We rightly begin “from below, and case by case, act at the most concrete and local levels, and then expand to the farthest reaches of our countries and our world” (no. 81). Caring for our own, in the spirit of Christian compassion, should lead us to expand rather than contract the scope of our moral concern. We can only do so if we, following the example of both the Samaritan and Jesus himself, are willing, “to put aside all differences and, in the face of suffering, to draw near to others with no questions asked” (no. 81).⁶⁶

CONCLUSION: THE *ORDO AMORIS* TODAY

This expansive Christian account of our moral concern is sharply at odds with the increased cultural dominance of Western individualism and the rise of right-wing populism and nationalism in many regions of the world.⁶⁷

I have tried to show that Vance ignores authoritative voices from his own Catholic tradition that call on us to recognize the moral responsibility of wealthier countries to the abject poor without restriction to nationality. It is entirely possible to love our families,

⁶⁶ A good example of “no questions asked” hospitality is seen Greg Boyle and Homeboy Industries. Very much in the spirit of Pope Francis, his latest book is *Cherished Belonging: The Healing Power of Love in Divided Times* (Simon & Schuster, 2024).

⁶⁷ The variety of nationalisms and their various relations to one another and cultural individualism are vastly complex. The cultural force of individualism (a focus on individual rights, the privatization of morality, skepticism about the notion of the common good, etc.) is in many ways contrary to nationalism, which in at least some versions places devotion to the nation above private concerns. The Trump-Vance administration combines cuts to social services and mistrust in government while promoting cultural nationalism. Vance’s *ordo amoris* seems to be fundamentally individualistic (the self and family are always the first priority) and instrumentally nationalistic (loyalty to community and nation are secondary).

communities, and fellow citizens, while also believing that wealthy countries like ours should not simply turn our back on remote neighbors in the global South who are chronically malnourished, threatened with an Ebola outbreak, or driven from their homes by armed militias.⁶⁸ Our collective responsibility as Americans is in fact intensified to the extent to which the policies and interventions of our government have contributed to the impoverishment of millions.

In an *ad hoc* letter to the American bishops, Pope Francis repudiated Vance's attempt to use the Catholic notion of the *ordo amoris* to justify mass deportations and the Trump administration's highly restrictive immigration policy. The pope reminds the bishops of "the dignified treatment that all people deserve, especially the poorest and most marginalized." A crucial test of the "true common good," he writes, "is whether the state "welcomes, protects, promotes and integrates the most fragile, unprotected and vulnerable."⁶⁹ Doing so neither contradicts a reasonable immigration policy nor inhibits the capacity of the state to exercise its responsibility to take care of its own citizens.

As in one's personal ordering of love, collective decisions are constrained by finitude, involve trade-offs, and entail opportunity costs. Federal dollars used in USAID funding for HIV programs in Uganda are not spent on domestic affordable housing, addiction treatment, job training, or rural clinics. Conversely, subsidizing our farmers, imposing tariffs, and enacting import controls on key commodities imposes hardships that push many farmers, businesses, and workers of foreign countries further into poverty.⁷⁰

Modern individualism begins with the self and then extends concern to others inasmuch as they are connected to the self and able to serve the self's interests. The circle is extended by transactions that engage others who do something for the self and the self's inner circle. This moral framework allows us to provide assistance to remote neighbors but only *after* we have done everything possible to help ourselves and our people. Yet since there is always *something more* we can do for our families, friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens, we are effectively free to ignore even the most desperate and chronic

⁶⁸ Brooke Nichols, a global health economist at Boston University, estimates that recent cutbacks have led to the deaths of at least 340,000 people as of June 15, 2025. See Allison Prang, "The Impact of Trump's Cuts to Humanitarian Aid, By the Numbers," *National Catholic Reporter*, June 16, 2025, nronline.org/news/impact-trumps-cuts-humanitarian-aid-numbers. The calculations can be found at Impact Counter, www.impactcounter.com/portfolio.

⁶⁹ Pope Francis, "Letter of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops of the United States of America," February 10, 2025, no. 5, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2025/documents/20250210-lettera-vescovi-usa.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2025/documents/20250210-lettera-vescovi-usa.html).

⁷⁰ See Barrera, *Compassion-Justice Conflicts and Christian Ethics*, 79–99, 111–135.

suffering of outsiders. This is the site of the sharpest contrast between Vance's ethic and the Catholic social tradition.

Pope Francis explicitly rejects this characterization of the *ordo amoris*: "Christian love is not a concentric expansion of interests that little by little extend to other persons and groups."⁷¹ The Good Samaritan, on the contrary, displays a "love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception."⁷² Indeed, as we have seen, Catholic social teachings take the command to love our neighbor to imply that under some circumstances we can be morally obligated to give a *greater priority to the urgent needs of strangers* than to our own inner circle. This is not an "inversion" of the moral order but rather its proper Christianization.

Vance is of course right to call attention to our pressing domestic needs. At the present time, an estimated forty-five million Americans are suffering from food insecurity, one in six children under five lives below the poverty line, and firearms are the leading cause of death for children and teenagers.⁷³ Rural American men have on average poorer health, lower access to health care, and lower life expectancy than their urban and suburban male counterparts.⁷⁴ No reasonable person doubts the urgency of addressing these and other serious widespread harms suffered by Americans. A truly Catholic *ordo amoris*, however, particularly as informed by the last five decades of Catholic social teachings, suggests that the wealthiest country in human history has a moral responsibility to summon the political will to use our resources

⁷¹ Pope Francis, "Letter," no. 6.

⁷² Pope Francis, "Letter," no. 6. The pope here refers the reader to his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. Catholic ethics does recognize our special obligations to loved ones. This aspect of the *ordo amoris* finds support in both Old (for example the fourth commandment, Exodus 20:12) and New Testaments. The *locus classicus* is 1 Timothy 5, which was written to a community in which family members were not taking care of their widows: "If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some repayment to their parents; for this is pleasing in God's sight. . . . And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5: 4, 8).

⁷³ See Feeding America, "Hunger in America," feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america; Children's Defense Fund, "Child Poverty," 2023 State of America's Children Report, childrensdefense.org/tools-and-resources/the-state-of-americas-children/soac-child-poverty/; and S. Villarreal, R. Kim, E. Wagner, N. Somayaji, A. Davis, and C.K. Crifasi, Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, "Gun Violence in the United States 2022: Examining the Burden Among Children and Teens," September 2024, publichealth.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/2024-09/2022-cgvs-gun-violence-in-the-united-states.pdf.

⁷⁴ See University of Southern California Leonard D. Schaeffer Institute for Public Policy & Government Service, "Growing Divide: Rural Men Are Living Shorter, Less Healthy Lives Than Their Urban Counterparts," September 25, 2024, schaeffer.usc.edu/research/rural-health-men-life-expectancy-quality/.

to address the needs of our most imperiled neighbors *both* here and abroad.⁷⁵ The current administration's severe cutbacks on both domestic programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Medicaid and international assistance administered by the US Agency for International Development call into question the claim that resources should be taken from overseas programs so that they can be used to help poor and working class Americans. Because of these cuts, children both here and abroad are less protected from disease and more likely to die of preventable causes.

Unfortunately, Vance's attitude resonates with a large segment of the American public, and particularly those who feel discarded by cultural elites, a government they believe has been indifferent to their plight, and the global economic system. Any Christian ordering of love requires that we take their pain, frustration, and humiliation seriously and address their legitimate demands for economic and other forms of justice. Whether or not we agree with their political views, they too are neighbors deserving a fair opportunity to flourish. Just as moral integrity requires each of us to cultivate a personal conscience responsive to both our particular connections to others and the urgent needs of the poor, so an exceptionally wealthy state that aspires to be just must craft policies that are both responsive to the real and unmet needs of its own people and do what it can to reduce the immense suffering imposed on the desperately poor of other countries. With sufficient political will, the wealthiest country in the world has the wherewithal to do both. This, anyway, is the clear message of the Catholic moral tradition.

The *ordo amoris* does not provide a neat method for decision-making when it comes to how we ought concretely to respond to

⁷⁵ President George W. Bush, an evangelical Christian, demonstrated this both/and sense of moral obligation in his State of the Union address in January 2003 when he said that, "Our calling as a *blessed country* is to make the world better." One expression of this calling was to establish the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR): "We have confronted, and will continue to confront, HIV/AIDS in our own country. And to meet a severe and urgent crisis abroad, tonight I propose the Emergency Plans for AIDS Relief—a *work of mercy* beyond all current international efforts to help the people of Africa." Note that this agenda seeks to address this terrible scourge both at home and abroad, both domestic and overseas. See President George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," January 28, 2003), [georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030128-19.html](https://www.georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030128-19.html), emphasis added. Since its founding, PEPFAR has been credited with saving over 26 million lives in more than fifty countries. The new Trump-Vance Administration drastically reduced PEPFAR funding. See Melody Schreiber, "Trump Pauses Funding for Anti-HIV Program That Prevented 26 Million AIDS Deaths," *National Public Radio*, January 27, 2025, [npr.org/sections/goats-and-soda/2025/01/25/g-s1-44762/pepfar-trump-hiv-foreign-aid](https://www.npr.org/sections/goats-and-soda/2025/01/25/g-s1-44762/pepfar-trump-hiv-foreign-aid). Coincidentally, Vice President Vance made his *ordo amoris* remarks on January 30, 2025.

various neighbors, both proximate and remote. It calls us to distinguish the goods that truly contribute to our integral human flourishing, on the one hand, from our wants, cravings, and consumer preferences, on the other. As finite creatures, we will never be able to do all the good we would like to do, and so the *ordo amoris* involves a permanent tension over to whom to provide assistance and in what way we should do so.

We can be informed by the classic guides for ordering love: the Bible, Augustine, and Aquinas. Catholic social teaching, building on moral insights from the patristic and high medieval tradition, provides the key norms and values that should guide our thinking about the ordering of love today. On a personal level, we all have a responsibility to develop some kind of working *ordo amoris* that is practically and wisely responsive to the needs of both proximate and distant neighbors.

Rather than tidy, clear, and settled, a working *ordo amoris* that is appropriate to our times must be dynamic, provisional, and self-aware. Rather than encourage complacency, an authentically Christian ethic should leave us feeling permanently dissatisfied about the yawning gap between the urgent needs of the global poor and the immense wealth of the world's elite, and the economic institutions that usually work to their advantage. We should be collectively troubled that every year American citizens spend roughly \$150 billion on their pets while donating less than \$50 billion to NGOs that provide emergency relief and poverty-reduction development aid.⁷⁶ Rather than pit underserved communities at home against poor masses abroad, we must use our abundant resources to address the suffering of both, even if the gains we make will be incremental and incomplete. Any *ordo amoris* that is authentically Catholic and Christian will present a profound challenge to our dominant culture of individualism as well as to the priorities of the current political regime governing the country. Our responsibility as people of faith is to act as both witnesses to compassion and

⁷⁶ See National Public Trust, "Charitable Giving Statistics," nptrust.org/philanthropic-resources/charitable-giving-statistics/. Bonnie Kent expresses Augustine's observation that many of us care more about things and pets that we own more than we do other people. "Pause to compare the vast sum that people willingly pay for a new car, even though their present car remains functional, with the small donation they willingly make to feed the starving or shelter the homeless, and one may begin to develop the feeling of moral discomfort that Augustine believes all reflective people should have." Kent, "Augustine's Ethics," 213. My argument is that modern Catholic social teaching modifies the traditional *ordo amoris* by encouraging us to form consciences that are more sensitive to the remote as well as proximate neighbor. Contemporary circumstances both enable and require this extension of Augustine's account of the demands of neighbor-love.

advocates for policies that actually recognize every human being as our neighbor.⁷⁷ **M**

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⁷⁷ A version of this article was presented to the Markarios II conference at the Australian Catholic University, Rome campus, on June 2, 2025. I would like to thank my colleagues Jeremy Wilkins and Boyd Coolman for suggestions about the overall project as well as M. Therese Lysaught and two anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of Moral Theology* for helpful feedback on my submission.