opusdei.org

Reflections on the Good Samaritan

An article by Ana Marta Gonzalez published in the December 2018 issue of 'Scripta Theologica'.

01/21/2021

In his recent encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis says that the parable of the Good Samaritan is "one that any of us can relate to and find challenging."[1] The second chapter of his encyclical is an extended commentary on this parable, which

is the key for reading the entire encyclical.

Below is an excerpt from an article by Ana Marta Gonzalez published in the December 2018 issue of *Scripta Theologica*.[2] She offers reflections on this parable in light of two texts: *Salvfici Doloris* by Saint John Paul II and a letter by Blessed Alvaro del Portillo addressed to the faithful of Opus Dei, written in January 1993.

A decisive question

The parable of the Good Samaritan is found in chapter 10 of Saint Luke's gospel. The sacred writer presents us with a teacher of the Law who stands up and asks Jesus a decisive question: *Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*"[3] Instead of giving a quick answer, Jesus responds with another question: *What is written in the law? How do you read?* The lawyer in turn answers with words taken from the

Book of Deuteronomy: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. And he said to him, "You have answered right; do this, and you will live." But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*[4]

In its apparent simplicity, the parable of the Good Samaritan conveys an unusually deep message, which has over the centuries awakened consciences and sparked authentic spiritual mobilizations. Its religious message has crystallized into ethical, personal and institutional expressions, without which we couldn't understand our contemporary culture.

It is significant that the parable is preceded by a question on the part of the doctor of the Law: *And who is my neighbor?* As Saint John Paul II points

out, this question gives rise to the entire narrative (cf. *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 28), and should not be separated from the passage referring to the final judgment, in which Jesus identifies Himself with anyone who is suffering hunger, thirst, is in want of clothing, imprisoned, or sick. One could also quote here Saint John's forceful words: *If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen* (*1 Jn* 4:20).

A change of perspective

After describing the different reactions of the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan to the situation of the injured man, Jesus addresses the doctor of the Law again: *which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers*?[5] The one who first

asked the question is required to answer in a personal way, after having listened to and understood, also in a personal way, the story's implicit message. *He said, "The one who showed mercy on him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*[6]

Jesus doesn't allow the questioner to become a mere spectator, perhaps even a judge. The reply to the question of who is our neighbor calls for a commitment that begins with the recognition that the story requires a change of perspective, giving up one's position as simply a spectator.

Compassion and action

In *Salvifici Doloris*, John Paul II stresses the need for acquiring this new perspective that flows from a merciful heart: "Everyone who stops beside the suffering of another person, whatever form it may take, is

a Good Samaritan. This stopping does not mean curiosity but availability. It is like the opening of a certain interior disposition of the heart, which also has an emotional expression of its own. The name 'good Samaritan' fits every individual who is sensitive to the sufferings of others, who is moved by the misfortune of another. If Christ, who knows the interior of man, emphasizes this compassion, this means that it is important for our whole attitude to others' suffering. Therefore one must cultivate this sensitivity of heart, which bears witness to compassion toward a suffering person. Sometimes this compassion remains the only or principal expression of our love for and solidarity with the sufferer" (*Salvifici Doloris*, no. 28).

While it is important to cultivate this new sensitivity of heart, the Pope stresses that it should lead to action,

to lending effective help to those in need. “The good Samaritan of Christ’s parable does not stop at sympathy and compassion alone. They become for him an incentive to actions aimed at bringing help to the injured man. In a word, then, a good Samaritan is one who brings help in suffering, whatever its nature may be. Help which is, as far as possible, effective. He puts his whole heart into it, nor does he spare material means. We can say that he gives himself, his very ‘I,’ opening this ‘I’ to the other person. Here we touch upon one of the key points of all Christian anthropology. Man cannot ‘fully find himself except though a sincere gift of himself’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24). A good Samaritan is the person capable of exactly such a *gift of self*” (*Salvifici Doloris*, no. 28).

From the moment it is formulated, the question of “who is my neighbor” entails a joyous task: the effort to

open our heart to the needs of others in order to alleviate them in so far as we are able, in a truly effective way. Hence Jesus ends with the words *Go and do likewise* (*Lk* 10:37). The parable invites us to reconsider our own priorities. Could there be anything more important than being moved by and stopping to cure the wounds of the ill-treated person? The parable challenges our view of the world and shakes our moral inertia.

"A new commandment I give you"

In the face of the other person we can see the image of God, and therefore our neighbor becomes worthy not of only our compassion and empathy, but also of our love, which can only be given freely.

Jesus gives us a new commandment: *that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another* (*Jn* 13:34). And Saint Paul says: *he who loves his neighbor has*

fulfilled the law (*Rom* 13:8). But Benedict XVI stresses that "the 'commandment' of love is only possible because it is more than a requirement. Love can be 'commanded' because it has first been given."[7] Saint John is very clear in this regard: *In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another* (*1 Jn* 4:10-11). The love we have received from God needs to reach out to our neighbor.

Priestly soul and lay mentality

In a letter written to the faithful of Opus Dei in January 1993, Blessed Alvaro del Portillo commented on the parable of the Good Samaritan. His aim was to show in a specific way how each one's "priestly soul" and "lay mentality" (two expressions Saint Josemaría used to describe the

condition of the faithful called to live their vocation to sanctity in the middle of the world) converge in the daily life of Christians.

Blessed Alvaro invites us to recognize in the injured man the image of Christ, who continues to be present in all those who suffer and with whom He identifies Himself. But precisely for this reason, not only the one who suffers, but also those who have compassion on him and try to relieve his suffering, are an image of Christ. The Samaritan "stopped and changed his plans; he gave the poor man his time and shared his own resources with him. The Good Samaritan is also the image of Christ, model of the priestly soul, because suffering is a means of sanctification not only in the person who endures it, but also in the one who has compassion on the sufferer and takes pains to look after their needs" (*Letter* 9 January 1993, no. 19). Christ

identifies Himself first of all with the person who is suffering and who is the central figure in the parable. Those who pass by prove they are truly the injured man's neighbor when they put into practice their priestly soul.

Amid one's daily duties

We would not recognize Christ in our neighbor if we did not draw close to him in his suffering, if we did not allow ourselves to be moved by his needs, even when it requires changing our own plans. Blessed Alvaro, like John Paul II, does not limit himself to highlighting the need for a compassionate attitude towards those who are suffering, but stresses the need to show this concern in deeds. In this context, he introduces a significant remark: "Then, once he has brought the sick man to the inn, what does the Samaritan do? *He took out two denarii and gave them to the*

innkeeper, saying, 'take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back' (*Lk* 10:35). He sets off again because he still has other duties he cannot neglect. It is not an excuse. It is not an evasion. He would not have done the right thing if he had stayed longer. He would have been indulging in sentimentality, leaving other obligations unattended. The same charity which formerly made him stop now makes him resume his journey. It is Christ who offers us this example" (*Letter* 9 January 1993, no. 19).

Blessed Alvaro insists that "a Christian can never turn a blind eye to a neighbor's needs. Certainly we cannot be indifferent to the moral misfortune of all those people who are more afflicted in soul than that poor unfortunate man was in body. But neither can we ignore people's material necessities … God's love

opens our eyes to recognizer Christ in those who suffer, and enkindles in our heart the desire to pour ourselves out in works of mercy, silently, without any pomp or ceremony" (*Letter* 9 January 1993, no. 19). It is a concern that we should also strive to instill in others, "so that they don't act selfishly and turn their backs on sorrow, loneliness and misfortune."

We put this charity into practice amid our ordinary daily tasks, amid our family and social duties. "The desire to attend to the material needs of one's neighbor and, where possible, to find a remedy for them, without neglecting one's other obligations, like the Good Samaritan, is a distinguishing feature of the fusion between priestly soul and lay mentality. What God asks of us in the first place is to sanctify our daily work and the duties of our state. As you attend to those duties God allows

you to encounter the needs and sorrow of others. When that happens, a clear sign that you are carrying out your tasks with a priestly soul is that you do not pass by uncaringly; and it is a no less clear sign that you do so without abandoning the other duties you must sanctify" (*Letter* 9 January 1993, no. 20).

Charity from each one's place in the world

Blessed Alvaro faithfully echoes the message of Saint Josemaría, who coined the expression "lay mentality" to refer to the naturalness with which ordinary Christians, citizens and workers among their equals (with whom they share a way of seeing the world and the same concerns) infuse the light of faith and charity into these daily human realities.

In no. 20 of his *Letter* he continues: "God wants you to remain where you are. From there you can carry out – you are carrying out – a wonderful service to the poor and needy, to all those who suffer ignorance, loneliness and sorrow (often as a result of injustice). When you seek holiness with all your strength, trying to sanctify your daily work and your family and social relations, you contribute to imbuing human society with a Christian spirit (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 61)."

It is not only those who hold "important" positions in society who are called to play a role here. "I am not referring now only to those of you who occupy leading positions in financial, political or social circles. I am thinking of all the daughters and all the sons of our Father, who, by turning their work, their entire day into prayer, in occupations that are not perhaps very spectacular, just

like the work and the life of our Lady and Saint Joseph, are nevertheless placing our Lord at the summit of all human activities. And then you can be sure that He will draw all things to Himself and fully satisfy your *hunger and thirst for righteousness*" (*Letter* 9 January 1993, no. 20).

Here we find reflected the whole theology of the sanctifying value of work and ordinary life, which Saint Josemaría highlighted by referring to the years of Jesus' hidden life in Nazareth. This outlook has been confirmed by the Church's Social Teaching when it places human work at the heart of the whole social question. Hence Blessed Alvaro sees this parable as highlighting the intrinsic solidarity of all human work, even the most humanly humble, in its ability to help bring about a more just social order.

Example of the innkeeper

The founder of Opus Dei was struck by the figure of the innkeeper in this parable, who amid his professional work is the one who actively provides for the injured man's needs: "Let us meditate also on how the parable ends. To look after the wounded man the Samaritan enlisted the help of the innkeeper. How would he have managed without him? Our Father admired this man, the owner of the inn. He passed unnoticed, yet he did most of the work, acting in his professional capacity. In considering what he did you should come to realize that by carrying out your work you can all do as he did, because every occupation offers many opportunities to help the needy, either directly or indirectly. This is certainly the case for doctors, lawyers and business people, who often find themselves in a position to help remedy people's material needs. Even though they may not be legally

required to do so, they realize they have an obligation in justice and charity. But office workers, tradesmen or farmers also have many opportunities to serve others, at times perhaps in spite of great personal hardship. Don't forget, as I said before, that in carrying out our ordinary work faithfully, we practice the virtue of charity towards specific people and towards society at large" (*Letter* 9 January 1993, no. 21).

Any job, carried out faithfully and with an eye attentive to the needs of others, can and should be considered a true exercise of solidarity and charity. Moreover truly effective help, which characterizes authentic compassion, often calls for a professional solution. As Blessed Alvaro said: "Concern for the poor and the sick should lead you, inspired by the priestly soul and lay mentality which characterize our spirit, to cooperate in or initiate

social programs that aim to remedy, in a truly professional manner, many of mankind's needs. Training schools for people of limited resources, centers of formation for workers on the land, activities for the advancement of women in rural areas, dispensaries, schools in poorer districts of large cities.... It is a sea without shores, like all our apostolic work" (*Letter* 9 January 1993, no. 21).

Charity not only opens our eyes to the needs of others but, as Saint John Paul II said, spurs us to remedy them in an effective way that does not lose sight of each person's true good. Blessed Alvaro expresses the same idea using the two terms coined by Saint Josemaría. The *priestly soul* possessed by all the Christian faithful who live and work in the middle of the world, should lead them to open their eyes to the needs of others and strive to solve them with the *lay*

mentality and professional outlook proper to them.

In *Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way*, an account of his own vocation written near the end of his life, John Paul II makes reference to the way the laity carry out their vocation in the world: "The laity can accomplish their proper vocation in the world and attain holiness not only through their active involvement in helping the poor and needy, but also by imbuing society with a Christian spirit as they carry out their professional duties and offer an example of Christian family life. Here I am thinking not only of leaders in public life but of the many people who can transform their daily life into prayer, placing Christ at the center of their activity. He will draw them all to Himself and satisfy their *hunger and thirst for righteousness* (cf. *Mt* 5:6)."

And he continued: “Isn’t this the lesson we can learn from the final part of the parable of the Good Samaritan (*Lk* 10:34-35)? After bandaging the wounds of the victim, the Samaritan brought him to the innkeeper and asked him to look after him. Without the innkeeper, what could he have done? It was really the innkeeper, behind the scenes, who did most of the work. We can all do as he did—carrying out our duties in a spirit of service. Directly or indirectly, every occupation provides opportunities to help the needy … By faithfully carrying out one’s professional duties, we are already expressing our love for individuals and for society.”[8]

Ana Marta González

[1] Pope Francis, Enc. *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 56.

[2] Ana Marta González, *En torno al Buen Samaritano. Lecturas del siglo XX*, 50, 3, pp. 533-559, *Scripta Theologica*, 2018.

[3] *Lk* 10:25.

[4] *Lk* 10:29.

[5] *Lk* 10:36

[6] *Lk* 10:37.

[7] Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 14.

[8] Saint John Paul II, *Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way*, Warner Books, 2004, pp. 115-116.

pdf | document generated automatically from https://

dev.opusdei.org/en-ph/article/
reflections-on-the-good-samaritan/
(08/05/2025)