

The Human Way Out: The Friendship of Charity as a Countercultural Practice

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God has a dream for the world, and God's dream is real and beautiful. God's dream is for absolutely everyone of us to grow to fullness of life and well-being through justice, compassion, and love. God's dream is for all of us to live together in harmony and peace and benevolence, not injustice, violence, and hostility. God's love wish for the world is to bind us together in friendship, care, and mutual affection.

But God's dream is under assault. Something is happening in our society today that is frightening. There seems to be a breakdown in all the things that make life together possible. When we look around we see so many people angry with one another. We see people who have completely forgotten what it means to care for others or how to live with even minimal thoughtfulness. We see so much random cruelty and meanness, so much hatred and viciousness. It really does seem, as Leopold Bloom says in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, that we live in a world "in which everybody is eating everybody else."

We are faced today with a crisis of dehumanization. There are the dehumanizing forces of violence, whether that violence be physical, verbal, psychological, or economic. There are the dehumanizing forces of selfishness and individualism which overlook the centrality of justice and the common good. We are dehumanized through consumerism and materialism, through exploitative and manipulative relationships, and through a kind of moral agnosticism which suggests there are no sure values through which our human dignity is sustained and our spirits perfected. We are dehumanized through the fatal patterns of excessive wealth for some and debilitating poverty for others,

in the sad and tragic cycles of family breakdown, and in the growing number of people who seem to be expendable. Is it any wonder people today are losing heart? Are we surprised that the modern maladies of the soul with which we struggle are apathy, a dangerous sense of resignation and defeat, cynicism, and sometimes even hopelessness?

Over thirty years ago in one of *The Cold War Letters*, Thomas Merton spoke of "the human way out."¹ In confronting the fatal patterns of his time, Merton searched for a more truthful and hopeful way of envisioning life. He decried the "sickening inhumanities that are everywhere in the world" and refused to be complacent before them: "They are too awful for human protest to be meaningful,—or so people seem to think. I protest anyway, I am still primitive enough, I have not caught up with this century."² In another of *The Cold War Letters* written at New Year's 1962, Merton wrote poignantly of an hour of crisis before which Christians, and all people of good will, must do everything possible to find a way to peace. In a passage remarkably appropriate for our times, Merton said:

I don't want to waste your time philosophizing. But I do want to say this one thing. We are in an awfully serious hour for Christianity, for our own souls. We are faced with necessity to be very faithful to the Law of Christ, and His truth. This means that we must do everything that we reasonably can to find our way peacefully through the mess we are in. This is becoming harder and harder every day and success seems less and less likely. Yet we remain responsible for doing the things that "are for our peace." . . .

We have to try to some extent to preserve the sanity of this nation, and keep it from going berserk which will be its destruction, and ours, and perhaps also the destruction of Christendom. . . .

I wanted to say these few things, as we enter the New Year. For it is going to be a crucial year, and in it we are going to have to walk sanely, and in faith, and with great sacrifice, and with an almost impossible hope.³

1. William H. Shannon, "The Year of the 'Cold War Letters,'" *Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton's Journey*, ed. M. Basil Pennington (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988) 166-177.

2. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1964) 279.

3. *Ibid.*, 266-267.

If we are not to be destroyed by the pathologies of our time, we must do the same. What I want to suggest is that one way to "find our way peacefully through the mess we are in" is by recovering the practice of friendship; however, I have a particular kind of friendship in mind. It is not the friendship of cordial relations and passing acquaintances, but the substantive and challenging friendship of charity.

Thomas Aquinas defined charity as friendship with God and all those God loves, sinners and saints, angels as well as enemies. For him, charity is more than kindness; indeed, charity is a transformative way of life constituted by distinctive virtues such as forbearance, compassion, justice, mercy, and peace. Based on practicing the ways of God, charity is a way of life in which people bear one another's burdens, help and support one another, care for one another, and offer forgiveness when necessary. The human way out of the "sickening inhumanities that are everywhere in the world" lies in embracing the life of charity, and understanding this friendship with God and neighbor not as a cozy, complacent relationship, but as a distinctive social and ecclesial practice powerful and hopeful enough to overcome our crisis of dehumanization by demonstrating that people can live together in benevolence, joy, and peace.

To substantiate this claim, I want to consider four points: (1) what in our culture works against the kind of friendships we need for authentic human living; (2) Aristotle's understanding of virtue friendships and their role in the moral life; (3) Aquinas's description of charity as friendship with God; and (4) why the life of charity challenges our understanding of who is our neighbor, calls us to a different understanding of power, and commits us to being a reconciling and peaceful presence in the world.

I. Cultural Impediments to Friendship

The moral and spiritual life requires friendships of depth, substance, and endurance, but it is exactly these kinds of relationships that cannot be presumed today. We live in a culture that misunderstands, trivializes, and often subverts friendship. How can we build our moral and spiritual lives on friendship when our culture subtly encourages us to use others, claiming them as friends when they are advantageous, abandoning them when they are not? Furthermore, what passes for friendships in our culture are often not friendships

at all because they are not relationships capable of bettering the self. They may be relatively superficial acquaintances, passing relationships, or worse, manipulative, unhealthy partnerships in which persons are diminished and sometimes destroyed. Even at their best, such friendships may not be constituted around the kinds of substantive goods necessary for the most promising development of the self. Friendship is a moral skill which demands at least minimal generosity and thoughtfulness, a capacity to care, and at least sufficient justice to recognize how we are obliged to respond to the needs and well-being of others, something not easily presumed in a culture as individualistic as our own.

Rodney Clapp addresses this in his article "The Celebration of Friendship" where he argues that "friendship has become a difficult, even counter-cultural practice" because of a variety of social and cultural forces which sabotage the good and abiding relationships we need for the moral and spiritual life.⁴ One of those social forces is consumerism. We live in a culture that is aggressively materialistic, urging us to believe we need things more than we need people. This cultural narrative tells us that we are liberated through what we own, not through friendship, and our identity is measured by our possessions, not by the richness of our loves. People formed by a consumerist society lack the deeper spiritual resources necessary for friendship, particularly justice, genuine benevolence, compassion, and availability. If we believe what we own matters more than whom we love, we will hardly be unselfish enough to seek the good of another for her own sake or to find joy in spending ourselves for her well-being, which is exactly what good friendships require.

In a consumer society, friends are just another commodity to pick up or dispose of as we see fit, novelties that are quickly displaced when something new and more interesting comes along.⁵ If our identity is

4. Rodney Clapp, "The Celebration of Friendship," *The Reformed Journal* (August 1989) 11-13.

5. Merton makes a similar point in his essay "Love and Need: Is Love a Package or a Message?" He argues that in our market economy, love and friendship are viewed as an exchange whose sole purpose is the fulfillment of one's needs. When a friend is no longer capable of satisfying those needs, the relationship ends and a new one is sought. See "Love and Need: Is Love a Package or a Message?" *Love and Living*, eds. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Bantam, 1979) 27.

primarily formed by the consumerist narrative of our culture, we will lack the qualities and dispositions necessary to relate to others on a deeper level or to be friends in a genuinely humanizing way. Even more tragically, we will be blind to our need for others because we will have been fooled by the fantasy that our salvation lies in the clutter of our possessions, rather than in the joy that comes from loving and being loved.

In his essay "Love and Need: Is Love a Package or a Message?" Merton makes a similar point. He argues that the language and categories of a market economy have so permeated our culture, including our understanding of relationships, that we have come to think of "ourselves and others not as *persons* but as *products*."⁶ Love is a form of salesmanship through which we strive to make ourselves desirable to others, and this is only possible if we appear to others as worthwhile products through whom they will be fulfilled. "We unconsciously think of ourselves as objects for sale on the market," Merton writes. "We want to be wanted. We want to attract customers."⁷

But like any product that will soon be surpassed by something better, our appeal, or another's for us, can only be fleeting. No relationship is lasting because no single person can forever satisfy our needs; hence, when our needs are no longer being fulfilled, we look for a more stimulating and exciting product. When friendships and relationships are viewed on the model of a market exchange, Merton notes, "We do not give ourselves in love, we make a deal that will enhance our own product, and therefore no deal is final. Our eyes are already on the next deal—and this next deal need not necessarily be with the same customer. Life is more interesting when you make a lot of deals with a lot of new customers."⁸ In a profoundly insightful passage, Merton describes what happens to love, and hence friendship, when it is seen as nothing more than a market exchange:

This concept of love assumes that the machinery of buying and selling of needs and fulfillment is what makes everything run. It regards life as a market and love as a variation on free enterprise. You buy and you sell, and to get somewhere in love is to make a good deal with whatever you happen to have available.

6. *Ibid.*, 26.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*

In business, buyer and seller get together in the market with their needs and their products. And they swap. The swapping is simplified by the use of a happy-making convenience called money. So too in love. The love relationship is a deal that is arrived at for the satisfaction of mutual needs. If it is successful it pays off, not necessarily in money, but in gratification, peace of mind, fulfillment. Yet since the idea of happiness is with us inseparable from the idea of prosperity, we must face the fact that a love that is not crowned with every material and social benefit seems to us to be rather suspect. Is it really *blessed*? Was it really a *deal*?⁹

Second, true friendship will be impossible if the self is understood to find life not, as Merton wrote, in making a gift of oneself to others,¹⁰ but by dominating and controlling them. In *Theology and Social Theory*, John Milbank argues convincingly that since the Enlightenment and the rise of capitalism there has been a radical shift in our understanding of the self that has critical repercussions for friendship. Instead of believing that selfhood and identity are established through love, our culture suggests they are constituted through owning and controlling, but here the ownership and dominion is extended beyond possessions to persons.¹¹ In such a system friendship has no place at all because people are seen more as adversaries than friends. Self-identity is not determined by our relationship with God and our neighbors, but by what and who we are able to dominate and control; in short, our identity is proportionate to our power, but here power is understood not in terms of service, justice, or love, but in terms of mastery over one's self, one's possessions, and others. We thrive not when we are friends, but when we manipulate and control.

There is something brutal and inescapably violent in this understanding of the self because it fundamentally argues that identity requires oppression. It is a vision of life that sees human beings locked in ceaseless competitive struggle as everyone seeks to dominate others. It is a world in which people come to life through self-love and self-assertion, not gentleness, mercy, and sacrifice. Here we grow not when we endorse others, raise them up, and love them in joyful self-

9. *Ibid.*, 27–28.

10. *Ibid.*, 25.

11. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 12–13.

forgetfulness, but when we are able to manipulate, maneuver, and exploit.

This is not a world in which real friendship is possible or even desired because the otherness of people is seen as something to overcome or control, not as something we are blessed to receive. Too, it is not a world in which people can live together in the kind of harmony and peace necessary for friendship because there is too much violence and division and cruelty to achieve anything more than the false and shaky peace that comes when the strong subdue the weak. This is the world not of blessed and saving friendship love, but of the barbaric nihilism which inevitably marks a culture in which power is the ultimate idol.¹²

No wonder so many people live shoulder-to-shoulder, but their lives hardly touch. No wonder that for many there is physical proximity, but no spiritual connectedness, no mingling of souls or unity of spirit. With these understandings of the self dominating our culture, for many people today life, in Ignace Lepp's haunting phrase, is nothing more than "a mere juxtaposition of solitudes."¹³ This should not astonish us. If we live in a society shaped by ideologies of consumerism and materialism, radical individualism, and dynamics of self-assertion and domination, it is not surprising that we have lost the art of friendship and forgotten what friendship, in the richest and most promising sense, entails.

Our understanding of friendship, as well as its possibilities, is connected to our understanding of self. The narrative of our modern culture devalues and subverts friendship because of how it defines the self through consumerism, individualism, and domination. What we lack today is a philosophy of self adequate for a healthy and flourishing moral and spiritual life, as well as a social and political life defined by a strong commitment to a common good. I want to suggest not only that a particular understanding of friendship, namely, the friendship defined through charity, offers a much more promising understanding of the self for overcoming our crisis of dehumanization, but also that it is absolutely essential.

Thus, in order to sustain an argument for friendship as key to "the human way out" we must adopt a countercultural understand-

12. *Ibid.*, 326-434.

13. Ignace Lepp, *The Ways of Friendship* (New York: Macmillan, 1966) 15.

ing of the self. We must reject the model of the self governed by consumerism, individualism, and domination, and retrieve from Aquinas the model of *caritas* in which to be a self is to live in friendship with God and neighbor. However, before considering why the Thomistic notion of friendship is countercultural to our modern age, I want to examine briefly Aristotle's understanding of virtue friendships and their role in our humanization, first because they will contribute something vital to "the human way out," and second because it is in them that so much of Aquinas's treatment of charity's friendships, however different, is rooted.

II. Virtue Friendships and Their Role in the Moral Life

Aristotle identified three kinds of friendship, each distinguished by whatever goods or purposes bring the friends together and explain the life of the friendship. There are friendships of usefulness or advantage, friendships of pleasure, and friendships of character or virtue.¹⁴ Of the three, however, only friendships of virtue and character pass the test of friendship in every way; Aristotle said they alone are friendships in the most "perfect and complete sense."¹⁵ Character friendship's moral excellence is derived from the purpose which identifies the friendship, namely, a mutual love for virtue and a mutual desire to become good.

Aristotle argues that friendships of character are the deepest and most permanent and worthiest because they are constituted by the best and most excellent of goods: a shared desire to develop together the qualities of character and virtue that are most perfecting of human beings. Since Aristotle believed there was nothing more humanizing than goodness and nothing more perfecting than the virtues, these relationships will be the most crucial and indispensable for life. They are the friendships in which people who want to be good can become good. Too, the explicit purpose of virtue friendships is to work for the moral well-being of one's friend, and for Aristotle this is to love her or him truly.¹⁶

14. John M. Cooper, "Aristotle on Friendship," *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) 303.

15. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962) 1157b33.

16. *NE*, 1156b6-25.

For Aristotle the moral life is unavoidably a cooperative enterprise, "a jointly pursued life,"¹⁷ because we need others to create a way of life in which growth in virtue and the development of character are possible.¹⁸ Friendship is indispensable to the moral life for Aristotle precisely because the virtues are shared activities. They are not disconnected pieces of behavior, isolated acts which occasionally engage us, but comprise an ongoing way of life in which people joined in a partnership of the good come to understand what the virtues are and how they need to be expressed. Contrary to our dominant cultural understandings, Aristotle could never conceive of happiness or a good life as something we could achieve on our own; rather, by their very nature as shared activities, the virtues require "a life in companionship with others."¹⁹ Put simply, good friendships are schools of virtue.

And so Aristotle is saying much more than friendship makes the virtues more interesting and pleasant; he is claiming that friendship makes the life of virtue *possible*. He agrees that we need friends "only to provide what we are unable to provide ourselves,"²⁰ but exactly his point is that the one thing we cannot offer ourselves is virtue. Virtue friendships are more than conveniences; they are indispensable moral enterprises because the only way for us to come in touch with the good is through lasting relationships with people who share our love for the good and are committed to helping us grow in it. As Nancy Sherman observes, virtue friendships provide "the very form and mode of life" within which we grow in goodness and achieve happiness.²¹

Virtue comes to us in friendships with good people. It is this mutual, communal seeking of the good that makes us good; in fact, it is truer to say in this mutual, communal seeking of the good we make one another good because at least to some extent virtue is mediated through the love exchanged among friends. By seeking goodness for

17. Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 131.

18. Aristotle captures this when he writes that friendship "is some sort of excellence or virtue, or involves virtue, and it is, moreover, most indispensable for life" (NE, 1155a3-4). And again, "We may also get some sort of training in virtue or excellence from living together with good men, as Theognis says" (NE, 1170a11-12).

19. Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, 127.

20. NE, 1169b8.

21. Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, 127.

one another and encouraging each other in virtue, the friends are transfigured in goodness themselves. Thus, it is not surprising that by the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* friendship has emerged as the crucial context for acquiring, exercising, and flourishing in the virtues. It is the moral community in which those who love the good come together in a shared life so they may actually become good.²² Too, it is the moral community most essential for making and keeping us human.

If virtue friendships figure so significantly in the moral life, then certainly such persons must be chosen carefully and wisely. As Nancy Sherman writes, "in choosing a character friend, we select 'another self' (NE 1170b-7), who shares a sense of our commitments and ends, and a sense of what we take to be ultimately 'good and pleasant' in living. We choose another to be a partner in the joint pursuit of these ends."²³ Such a person cannot be chosen haphazardly because his or her impact on our character and moral development will be profound. We are looking for someone whose values and concerns are fundamentally in agreement with our own, someone who shares our ideals, aspirations, and principles, and especially someone who agrees with us on what a truly good and worthwhile life involves. Even to discover who might be best suited for this kind of relationship requires time, testing, much reflection, and prudence.²⁴ Once chosen, the friend makes one's moral life a partnership, a joint adventure in which the friends mutually deliberate about what their life together means and how it can best be pursued.²⁵

This analysis of Aristotle's ethics may seem far removed from Aquinas's vision of the Christian moral life as charity, but actually they are closely connected. In many respects Aristotle provides the foundation on which Aquinas constructs his account of the moral life. For instance, like Aristotle, Aquinas has a normative understanding of the good life and a normative understanding of a good person. Too, like his Athenian predecessor, transformation was at the heart of the moral life for Aquinas. Both believed morality involved change and growth through the virtues; indeed, they insisted that without the virtues we could hardly remain human because apart from them we were bound

22. See Paul J. Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) 63.

23. Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, 131-32.

24. *Ibid.*, 132.

25. *Ibid.*, 135.

to be corrupted. And both insisted that this transformation of the self in virtue was not something we could possibly achieve alone, but something attempted in the crucible of virtue friendships.

Nonetheless, for all their similarities, there are considerable and important differences. Aristotle gave a privileged place to friendship in his schema of the moral life, but ironically only the privileged could partake of it. As Aristotle saw it, the best and most necessary of friendships were possible only for politically free *men*; women, children, and slaves were excluded. Too, while Aristotle did not believe human beings could be friends with the gods because the gods were too unlike us, Aquinas argued that without friendship with God we could not truly be human at all.

Thus, for Aquinas, Aristotle is useful but limited. As we shall see, Aquinas radically re-envisioned what the moral life is about. In his account of charity as friendship with God, he explodes the boundaries Aristotle put on what the best friendships might be, what they are seeking, and who could enjoy them. For as Aquinas saw it, the most crucial and blessed of friendships was not with politically free men, but with God, and they were seeking happiness not in Athens, but in the kingdom of God in fellowship with the saints. And most importantly, unlike Aristotle, Aquinas believed it was a happiness open to all. If our crisis of dehumanization is to be overcome and a truly human way out discovered, it will be through the hopeful, challenging, and joyous life of charity.

III. Charity as Friendship with God

Charity is friendship with God and all those God loves. It is what the Christian life of grace is all about. Charity is something more than kindness and acts of thoughtfulness; indeed, it is sharing in the very life and goodness of God so intimately that eventually we enjoy union with God. Friendship with God is the vocation all share: however, far from being a cozy, complacent relationship, it is the daunting challenge to be transformed in order to live God's life now.

Charity is friendship with God, and that friendship is a life of never-ending conversion and deep change of heart, a metamorphosis so complete that those who enter charity go from being sinners to saints. Charity contains both the great hope and the great challenge of the Christian life. Charity's hope is that through grace and love we

can enjoy a life together with God now, a kinship of hearts so intimate that we can become for God who God has always been for us, a friend, a source of happiness and delight. Charity's challenge is that the only way for us to enter the life of God is by undergoing a radical reconstruction of ourself through repentance, contrition, forgiveness, grace, and virtue.²⁶

Aquinas believed God calls us to share in the life of the Trinity in this world now and in the reign of God to come.²⁷ He saw us not primarily as fallen, but summoned, creatures who, despite whatever frailty and weakness, were relentlessly and ingeniously loved by God and called to union with God. Aquinas interpreted the whole of history as an endless chronicle of God reaching out to us in love and friendship, healing and restoring us through grace, leading and redeeming us in Christ, sanctifying and strengthening us in the Spirit. God's foremost desire, Aquinas believed, is to share with us his happiness and perfection, and to do so by drawing us into his life. Yes, God loves all things, but he loves us uniquely and passionately with the special love marked out for friends. Yes, God loves everything that is, Aquinas reasoned, but he loves us as friends, wanting for us all the goodness and happiness that is himself.²⁸ The message of charity is that God is in love with us, making us his friends.

This view of the Christian life was consistently affirmed by Thomas Merton. He knew that God's befriending love is the foundation of our life and that we have life only insofar as we are known and loved by God; in fact, for Merton our life is a never-ending act of friendship with God, of knowing and loving God and being known and loved by God in return.²⁹ In *The New Man* Merton says authentic human existence "is nothing else but a participation in the life, and wisdom, and joy and peace of God Himself," adding that this friendship relationship is our "supreme freedom" and "most perfect fulfillment."³⁰

26. For a fuller treatment of charity as friendship with God see Paul J. Wadell, *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Paulist, 1992) 63-78, and Paul J. Wadell, *Friends of God: Virtues and Gifts in Aquinas* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991) 1-49.

27. Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 207.

28. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 110,1.

29. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 104.

30. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1961) 48.

Like Aquinas, Merton realized our self-realization is a measure of our union with God, and that we live "not when we pause to reflect upon our own self as an isolated individual entity," but when "we center our whole soul upon the God Who is our life."³¹

For both Aquinas and Merton the life of friendship with God that is charity begins in the outpouring of grace into our hearts and, interestingly, both describe this grace as an invitation to friendship, an appeal to share in the very friendship life of God. Aquinas speaks of charity as the gift by which God shares with us his happiness and sees our life as an ever deepening participation in this happiness.³² Merton says simply, "Grace is friendship with God,"³³ but understands this gift not as something static, but as the dynamic and unfolding process by which the baptized are transformed and sanctified through friendship with God, eventually acquiring the likeness to God necessary for mystical union.³⁴

The grace that makes friendship with God possible must initially heal, restore, and rehabilitate a nature living more at enmity with God than in friendship. Aquinas describes this succinctly by saying the grace that comes with charity is "a certain habitual gift, by which spoiled human nature is healed, and once healed, is raised up to perform works which merit eternal life."³⁵ That is quite a turnabout, but describing grace as a *habitual* gift captures well the fact that charity is essentially new life, indeed, a radically transformed life constituted by grace and forgiveness, and deepened and nurtured through the virtues and the sacraments, particularly baptism, the Eucharist, and reconciliation. Through the grace of charity we are reconciled to God and to one another, we become sharers in God's life, companions of the Trinity, and find freedom in making God's ways our own. Thus, charity is a distinctive *habitus*, a radically new way of life constituted by unique habits and practices which require considerable discipline and training, but their transformative effects are stunning. As Thomas puts it, through the *habitus* of charity, erstwhile sinners find themselves "performing works which merit eternal life."

31. *Ibid.*, 122.

32. *ST*, I-II, 23,1, 24,2.

33. Merton, *The New Man*, 42.

34. *Ibid.*, 165-223.

35. *ST*, I-II, 109,9.

His point is that charity ought to make a concrete, discernible difference in our lives; indeed, we misunderstand charity if we receive it and remain unchanged, or if we think it calls for exactly the same patterns of living we knew when we were fallen. The life of charity does not mean *more of the same* because charity empowers us to live, however incompletely, a godlike life now.³⁶ Charity is a summons to a new kind of life, a life that is essentially a resurrection to new and better possibilities. This does not mean that a life of friendship with God takes us out of the world, but it definitely does mean that it calls us to live in the world differently, acting according to who we truly are, fallen ones who, thanks to love, are now the friends of God.

A life lived in company with God opens us to new and better moral possibilities. Aquinas calls these the acts or effects of charity and names them joy, peace, mercy, kindness, almsgiving, and fraternal correction.³⁷ They are characteristics of those whose lives have been transformed by friendship with God. Far from being accidental, joy, peace, mercy, kindness, almsgiving, and fraternal correction collectively describe a new way of being, a different kind of life, born from friendship with God. These are the practices, the habitual ways of being and acting, which characterize those whose lives have been transfigured in charity. They are also the practices that respond to the crisis of dehumanization by making life together possible.

Collectively, these habits of charity represent a distinctive way of life. But it is important to note that in many respects they also represent a countercultural way of life. They are virtues which unmask and challenge the usual ways we go about life. Joy, peace, mercy, kindness, almsgiving, and fraternal correction do not characterize the dominant social patterns of our world. Instead of genuine joy, we often see superficial happiness and artificial satisfactions. Instead of peace, we see so many conflicted hearts and a very conflicted world, a world that seems intent to live by violence, turmoil, and endless bloody hostilities. Instead of kindness, we see too much cruelty and selfishness. And instead of fraternal correction, we too often see a tolerance which masks a deeper indifference in people who do not care enough to challenge one another or to call one another to what is best.

36. Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 271-272.

37. *ST*, II-II, 28-33.

The life of charity is a different kind of witness: indeed, it is a sign of contradiction and perhaps even a threat to many of the reigning ideologies of our time. Charity is a way of life characterized not by violence and division and vindictiveness, but by justice, harmony, mutuality, and peace.³⁸ Charity is a distinctive way of life rooted in the conviction that if all of us are called to live together in friendship with God and with one another, then peace, not violence, is the truth of things, and this peace is rooted in a way of life marked by care, forbearance, cooperation, generosity, forgiveness, and love. Far from being a single virtue, charity is a contrasting way of life founded on the ways of God revealed in Christ and empowered by the Spirit. Charity is not wishful thinking, it is a counter-history begun in a deliberate way of life committed to living God's ways now. In its pledge to witness God's friendship to all people through joy, kindness, mercy, and peace, the community of charity does not escape the world but recreates it. In its commitment to love who God loves as God loves them, the community of charity is the world's true hope. As both Aquinas and Merton knew, there is no more human way out.

IV. Embracing the Life of Charity Today

What would it mean to embrace the life of charity today? I want to suggest that charity commits us to a way of life characterized by three things, each of which is essential to countering the dehumanizing forces of our times: (1) a much more inclusive vision of who is our neighbor; (2) a much more life-giving understanding of power; and (3) a commitment to be a reconciling and peaceful presence in the world.

First, what about charity's understanding of who is our neighbor? Charity is the most radical and demanding love of all because charity, Aquinas says, means we are to love whomever God loves and love them because God loves them.³⁹ But God loves everybody, even our enemies, sinners as well as saints, and so, Aquinas reasoned, should we.⁴⁰ His point was simple but stunning: We are summoned to love

38. These ideas were suggested to me in John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, 380-434. Although Milbank focuses on Augustine's *City of God*, a parallel argument can be made with Aquinas's understanding of the life of charity.

39. *ST*, II-II, 25,1.

40. *ST*, II-II, 25,6,8.

everyone who is connected to God, and of course everybody is. We are obliged to love everyone who is a friend of God, but his point is precisely that charity makes everyone a friend of God. The fellowship of charity is no small community. It is the one place where there is room for everybody.

In a world where there seems to be increasingly less openness to differences, in a world where hate crimes are increasing, and in a world torn apart by ethnic divisions and racism, there will be no human way into any kind of hopeful future unless visions of mistrust and hostility are replaced by the vision of charity. Charity is the kind of truthful vision necessary for justice and peace. Through the vision of charity our eyes are opened to recognize absolutely everyone as brother or sister to us and, most importantly, as fellow friend of God. We have a deep and ineradicable kinship with every man and woman of every time and place because through charity all of us share the same source of life and the same destiny in glory. Before we risk loving anyone, God has loved us all first, has befriended us, and has called us *together* to enter the divine life. Community really is the truth of humanity; all of us really are members one of another.

This vision of charity is key to the "human way out" because only in charity do we find a vision truthful and expansive enough to recognize that absolutely everyone is our neighbor, not just now but for eternity. Charity says our neighbor is whoever shares with us the fact of being loved by God and called to God's happiness. But God gives this gift to everyone, which is why charity explodes our normal understanding of who is our neighbor. Charity bursts open the boundaries of community far beyond what we normally think. The fellowship of charity embraces everyone who has been loved and befriended by God. It tells us our fellowship with one another is based on God's friendship with all of us, a point echoed by Merton in *No Man Is an Island* when he comments that the "universal basis for friendship" with all peoples is the fact that all of us are loved by God.⁴¹

Charity makes all of us sisters and brothers. It says no one can ever really be a stranger to us, no one truly an outsider, because like ourselves they are members of the fellowship of God's friendship.⁴²

41. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1955) 11.

42. Merton makes the same point when he writes, "Every other man is a piece of myself, for I am a part and member of mankind. Every Christian is part

The community of charity is inherently countercultural because it is open to everybody, and it is open to everybody because its basis is not nationality or race or gender or religion, but God's befriending love. Charity is the love running through life, the love which says the starting point for relating rightly to everyone is to see them as one like ourselves, one who has been made by God a sharer in the divine life. If we are to find a human way out of our crisis of dehumanization, particularly the crisis of injustice, we must make charity's vision our own.

Second, charity calls us to a much more life-giving understanding of power. In her recent book *The Power of the Cross*, Sally B. Purvis argues that there are two starkly different models of power. The first she calls "power as control."⁴³ Here power is the ability to control and manipulate through domination. This kind of power is inherently unjust and essentially violent, first because it works directly against the power of justice to reconstruct the world in right relationships, and secondly because it consistently violates the basic demand of justice that we respect the dignity of others and in every instance give them their due.⁴⁴ As long as this understanding of power is endorsed, there is no way to escape the "sickening inhumanities" Merton despised.

But there is a "human way out" if we endorse the second model of power which Purvis calls "power as life."⁴⁵ Power as life is God's power, a power revealed in the seeming weakness of the crucified Christ, a power, St. Paul tells us (1 Cor 1:18-25) that looks absurd and foolish to most, but is the power and wisdom of God by which all things are saved. God's power working through charity is absolutely countercultural because it expresses itself not in domination and oppression, not in violence and division, but in life-giving acts of mercy, kindness, and benevolence. This is the power of compassion, the power

of my own body, because we are members of Christ. What I do is also done for them and with them and by them. What they do is done in me and by me and for me. But each one of us remains responsible for his own share in the life of the whole body. Charity cannot be what it is supposed to be as long as I do not see that my life represents my own allotment in the life of a whole supernatural organism to which I belong." *No Man Is an Island*, xxii.

43. Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross: Foundations for a Christian Feminist Ethic of Community* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 19-36.

44. *ST*, II-II, 58,1.

45. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 37-54.

of mutual enhancement, the power of sharing in suffering and increasing happiness. It is not the power to dominate, but the power to bless and to serve. Too, power as life is essentially just because its steadfast aim is not to diminish, but to safeguard and enhance the well-being of others. It is a model of power which reminds us that other people matter and we cannot be indifferent to their lives whether they be nearby or oceans away. Unlike power as control, power as life recognizes no one is expendable and no one can be ignored.

Merton had a similar understanding of the power of charity. In *The New Man* he describes charity as an *imitatio Christi*, and says when we imitate the love of Christ, particularly in his passion and death, we practice a love powerful enough to overcome evil and all the destructiveness it brings.⁴⁶ In *No Man Is an Island*, Merton says the aim of charity's love is to make us an instrument, not an obstacle, "of God's Providence" in the lives of others.⁴⁷ We are to use the power of our love to do for them whatever God seeks. We are, Merton says, to be "sacraments" of "the mysterious and infinitely selfless love God has for them," and "ministers" of God's Spirit.⁴⁸ For Merton, the distinctive life-giving power of charity is to love others as God loves them, never seeking to dominate or control, but using the power of love to help them be who God wants them to be.⁴⁹ In this respect, true power is benevolence, the capacity and the desire to seek what is best for another in every possible way; in Christian language, Merton hints, it is to "seek the life of the Spirit of God" in the hearts of all people.⁵⁰

Finally, the life of charity calls us to be a reconciling and peaceful presence in our world. In a world which so many are determined to keep broken, in a world where divisions often abide and hurts are never healed, the community of charity works to put all the broken pieces back together again by practicing the healing love of forgiveness and peace.

Think of the passage in Ephesians 4:31-5:2. There Paul tells the Christian community to "get rid of all bitterness, all passion and anger, harsh words, slander, and malice of every kind." Paul says leave all that behind and refuse to be ruled by it. Instead, Paul says, "be kind

46. Merton, *The New Man*, 193.

47. Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 7.

48. *Ibid.*, 8.

49. *Ibid.*, 168.

50. *Ibid.*, 7.

to one another, compassionate, and mutually forgiving, just as God has forgiven you in Christ."

What is Paul telling us? He says be a reconciling presence in the world. Be imitators of the God who forgives and seeks peace. Be part of a community of mercy and life. There is surely something countercultural and provocative about that way of life, but is there anything more hopeful?

The greatest contribution the community of charity can make to the world is to pledge to be the people who live not by the debilitating power of bitterness and anger and resentment, and not by the destructive fantasies of violence, but by the uplifting powers of forgiveness, reconciliation, patience, tolerance, and peace. By refusing to let the hurts and divisions of life prevail, by refusing to lose our freedom to bitterness and cynicism, and by refusing to let broken relationships stay that way, we show that reconciliation, not division, is the truth of things, that peace is possible, and that love really is stronger than death.

People who practice charity's friendship are mindful of the power they have. They know in our everyday actions we can divide or we can make whole, we can bring death or we can bring life. If we pledge ourselves to reconciliation and peace, we become people who refuse to pass on the violence. This is a compelling countercultural witness and it is a choice we have everyday. When we are hurt we can pass on the hurt, adding a little more grief to the world, or we can forgive it. When we are wounded by another's cruelty, we can respond by seeking vengeance, or we can practice a much more creative and powerful love, the love of forgiveness and peace. As friends of God and friends of one another, even our enemies, we are called each day to make the choice not to pass on the violence, but to defuse it through forgiveness and peace.

Nothing could be closer to the thought of Thomas Merton. In "Christian Humanism" Merton says, "The dynamic of Christian love is a dynamic of forgiveness," adding that the power of this special love is "to transform evil into good."⁵¹ In "The Climate of Mercy," an essay written in honor of Albert Schweitzer, Merton reminds us that we who have been "liberated" by God's mercy are to show the same mercy and forgiveness to others; in fact, the essential mission of the

51. Thomas Merton, "Christian Humanism," *Love and Living*, 130.

Church is to continue the mercy of God shown us in Christ. We are "to keep alive on earth the irreplaceable climate of mercy, truth, and faith in which the creative and life-giving joy of reconciliation in Christ always not only remains possible but is a continuous and ever-renewed actuality."⁵²

For Merton, mercy was not weakness or submission, and it certainly was not complacency; rather, mercy is the power that "heals in every way. It heals bodies, spirits, society, and history. It is the only force that can truly heal and save."⁵³ In fact, Merton saw "evangelical mercy" as a social force, a transformative power to renew the world by witnessing the kingdom of God.⁵⁴ The world would not be saved by fear and threats, and it certainly, Merton knew, would not be saved by weapons of war. The ultimate life-saving power is Christian mercy because it alone is capable of overcoming divisions, ending hostilities, and restoring genuine peace. In a particularly moving passage, Merton reflects on the power of Christian mercy in a world surrounded by weapons of destruction:

Christian mercy must discover, in faith, in the Spirit, a power strong enough to initiate the transformation of the world into a realm of understanding, unity, and relative peace, where men, nations, and societies are willing to make the enormous sacrifices required if they are to communicate intelligibly with one another, understand one another, cooperate with one another in feeding the hungry millions and in building a world of peace.

Such is the eschatological climate of the new creation, in which pardon replaces sacrifice (Osee 6:6; Matt 9:13) and the whole world is filled with the mercy of God as the waters cover the sea.⁵⁵

In these reflections I have suggested that the way out of the crisis of dehumanization and into a future of hope and joy lies in adopting the *habitus* of charity. At first glance, this account of charity and the life which flows from it may sound appealing but utopian, too far removed from life as we know it to be within our reach. But we should take another look.

52. Thomas Merton, "The Climate of Mercy," *Love and Living*, 189-190.

53. *Ibid.*, 195.

54. *Ibid.*, 196-197.

55. *Ibid.*, 197.

The life of charity is the only truly human way out because in its commitment to mercy, justice, peace, and forgiveness, charity means, as both Aquinas and Merton testified, that the reign of God need not be completely postponed. Its fullness may be in the future, but its beginnings are now with those who make the life of charity their own. If we are courageous and hopeful enough to embrace the life of charity and all the evangelical practices which flow from it, we will provide an urgent service to our world. We may be a sign of contradiction, but we will also be a beautiful sign of hope because our lives will confirm that God's dream for the world is not some farfetched fantasy, but is the deep down truth of things.