Introduction

Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, “the preferential option for the poor, if it aims at the promotion of justice, equally implies friendship with the poor and among the poor.”¹ Friendship has long been recognized for the vital role it plays in moral formation and social change.² But are inclusive friendships across real differences – including but not limited to rising social fragmentation, economic inequality, and racial tensions – possible today, in the current American context? The classic critique of Catholic Social Teaching is that it too often operates from a top-down approach from principles to practices, lacking sufficient guidance for implementation at the local level. However, Gutiérrez’s emphasis on friendship as the building block for solidarity and the option for the poor give these principles a ground-up orientation. Moreover, Gutiérrez’s appeal to the Samaritan’s example (in Luke 10:25-37) parallels Pope Francis’ references to the same passage as inspiration for overcoming the “globalization of indifference” to build a “culture of encounter” that brings people together across differences.³ Taken together, this provides the basis for action to heal what divides us on the personal, social, and institutional levels.

² See, for example, Paul J. Wadell, Friendship and the Moral Life (University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) and Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship (Brazos, 2002).
³ In his homily at Lampedusa on July 8, 2013, Pope Francis preached, “we see our brother half dead on the side of the road, and perhaps we say to ourselves: ‘poor soul…!’ and then go on our way. It’s not our responsibility, and
The Divided States of America

Gustavo Gutiérrez frames his “theology of liberation” as a call to accompany the poor, the nonpersons, those rendered socially insignificant and fated to a premature death. Accompaniment ought to lead to friendship and solidarity; as Gutiérrez explains, “If there is no friendship with [the poor and exploited] and no sharing of the life of the poor, then there is no authentic commitment to liberation, because love exists only among equals. Any talk of liberation necessarily refers to a comprehensive process, one that embraces everyone.”

Gutiérrez clarifies that a theology of liberation is a “theology of salvation,” involving emancipation from sin for the fullness of life for all. The fullness of life is more than personal; it requires building community through fellowship, which he describes as “both a grace and a task to be carried out.” This was a challenge to the whole world in 1971, when Gutiérrez first urged work for communion with God and fellowship with one another, which “presupposes the abolition of all injustice and exploitation.”

It became an even more daunting challenge as economic inequality grew steadily by 1988, when Gutiérrez added a new introduction to this classic text, emphasizing sharing life in friendship with the poor. But now, more than 30 years later, it seems nearly impossible, given the collapse of the American community, rising social segregation by class and race, as well as rampant hyper-partisanship and polarization. Before with that we feel reassured, assuaged. The culture of comfort, which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, makes us live in soap bubbles which, however lovely, are insubstantial; they offer a fleeting and empty illusion which results in indifference to others; indeed, it even leads to the globalization of indifference. In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference. We have become used to the suffering of others: it doesn’t affect me; it doesn’t concern me; it’s none of my business!”


5 Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, xxix.
6 Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 149.
addressing why Gutiérrez proposes Christians should cultivate friendship with the poor, let’s consider the challenges posed by our present American context.

Social divisions and unjust inequalities have plagued every culture, but American society is currently mired in acute social separation, polarization and hyper-partisanship, deteriorating race relations, increasing class divides, tensions around gender and sexual orientation, nationalism and xenophobia, and myriad additional causes of anxiety, fear, and displacement. The result is an unraveling social fabric, fractured civic body, and mounting frustration at the ubiquitous “us versus them” tribalism. Following the 2016 Election, 85% of Americans reported feeling that the country is sharply divided.7 Two years later, nearly nine in ten Americans lamented that the nation remains more divided than at any point in their lifetime.8 Much of this tension is exacerbated by hyper-partisanship that shifts political differences into disdain for those on the other side of the party line. In a recent poll, roughly half of Democrats described Republicans as ignorant (54%) and spiteful (44%) while a similar proportion of Republicans described Democrats as ignorant (49%) and spiteful (54%). Moreover, 61% of Democrats labeled Republicans racist, sexist, or bigoted, while 31% of Republicans applied these terms to Democrats. Perhaps most concerning of all, more than twenty percent of Republicans (23%) and Democrats (21%) called members of the other party “evil.” Only four percent of both parties think the other side is fair and even fewer describe them as thoughtful or kind.9 News media foment anger and vitriol directed at the “other side.” Political activity has become more a matter of winning—that is, beating one’s detestable opponents—than a shared commitment to the

---

common good.\textsuperscript{10} Polarization might be considered the “defining characteristic of modern American politics” but most Americans “do not like polarization.”\textsuperscript{11} Nonetheless, the average citizen has internalized the antagonism that has become normative in our nation’s capital and on cable news. This makes it all too common to demonize fellow citizens, simply for having different political priorities.

Social separation makes it easier to demonize others across differences, as one rarely encounters someone who looks, thinks, or acts differently. This has been the trend in America, as the “collapse of the American community” has resulted in the decline of social trust.\textsuperscript{12} Social capital, or the connective tissue of community, has decreased dramatically since the 1950s, when social bonds were forged through playing bridge or bowling with neighbors, participating in sewing circles, and attending meetings for the Rotary Club, Knights of Columbus, or PTA. Even if people were living in ethnically or religiously homogenous neighborhoods, their interactions in these social clubs and meetings created a social bond.\textsuperscript{13} Since Putnam’s work to diagnose the decline of social capital nearly twenty years ago, “social sorting” has been on the rise, creating homogenous lifestyle enclaves, “geographies of similar manners, sentiments, and interests.”\textsuperscript{14} Fewer Americans encounter others across differences—except at work\textsuperscript{15}—because of the loss of “middle ring” relationships that exist between the intimate ties of family and friends and the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Lilliana Mason, \textit{Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 11-12.}
\footnote{Robert Putnam, \textit{Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 20-21. Putnam cites figures from 1992, when three-quarters of the U.S. workforce agreed that the “breakdown of community” and “selfishness” were “serious” or “extremely serious” problems in America (25).}
\footnote{Robert Putnam, \textit{Bowling Alone}, 23, 103-104.}
\footnote{Bill Bishop, \textit{The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart} (Boston, MA: Mariner, 2009), 71.}
more distant ties of acquaintances. The rise of “homophily” means that Americans are living increasingly segregated lives, not only by race or ethnicity, but also by political and economic ideology. This is also true by class, as economic inequality increases. Putnam describes this as “incipient class apartheid,” resulting in the kind of segregation that makes it hard for most Americans to know “how the other half lives.”

In a time of unprecedented wealth accumulating into the hands of a select few, a “new gilded age” means that the top one percent of families take in 26.3 times as much as a family in the bottom 99 percent. In addition to this staggering wealth inequality, the economic elite are becoming increasingly socially isolated from the rest of the country. For example, many of the wealthiest Americans have sorted themselves into “superzip clusters” that are largely homogenous in economic, educational, cultural, and in many cases, political terms. American exceptionalism erodes American community, in part because of the “secession of the successful” and because fewer encounters with others across difference makes it much harder to understand and trust others who are different. A “get ahead” mentality endorses fighting your way to the

18 Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 39, 41. Putnam finds that the “sorting of households into distinct neighborhoods by income was significantly higher in 2010 than it was in 1970” (38). This residential segregation translates “into de facto class-based school segregation” since “Schoolchildren from the top half of the income distribution increasingly attend private schools or live in better school districts” and are more likely to “attend a highly selective college” (39). Moreover, Putnam finds evidence of “increasing endogamy” (marrying within one’s own social class), which means that “rich Americans and poor Americans are living, learning, and raising children in increasingly separate and unequal worlds, removing stepping-stones to upward mobility” and as result, “members of the upper middle class are less likely to have firsthand knowledge of the lives of poor kids and thus are unable even to recognize the growing opportunity gap” (40-41).
21 Murray, *Coming Apart*, 241-244, 252-255. Murray points out that social trust is “eroded by ethnic diversity,” inauspicious for the future in light of demographic shifts toward majority-minority status shortly after 2040.
top and makes everyone else a rival if not an outright obstacle to success. In fact, some studies show that as wealth increases, empathy, compassion, and ethical behavior decrease.\textsuperscript{22} Self-interest and greed become obstacles to social bonds and shared duties. These trends give credence to the claim that the most powerful Americans “increasingly trade on the perks of their privileged positions without regard to the seemliness of that behavior,” abdicating their responsibilities to the common good.\textsuperscript{23}

On the other end of the spectrum, a growing number of Americans are simply trying to survive. 143 million Americans live below or near the federal poverty line, and as this number grows, the ratio of impoverished citizens slides from two-in-five toward one-in-two.\textsuperscript{24} Christians are twice as likely as non-Christians to blame the poor for their state in life.\textsuperscript{25} This judgment points to a failure to understand the complex circumstances and structural inequalities that often contribute to economic deprivation. Wages have not increased in proportion to inflation or costs of living since the 1960s.\textsuperscript{26} Many employees have seen pensions cut, retirement funds slashed, and health care costs skyrocket.\textsuperscript{27} Forty percent of Americans do not have the necessary funds to cover an unexpected expense of $400.\textsuperscript{28} A 2017 CareerBuilder survey found that almost eighty

\begin{proof}
\textsuperscript{22} See, for example, Paul K. Piff, Daniel M. Stancato, Stéphane Côté, Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton, and Dacher Keltner, “Higher Social Class Predicts Increased Unethical Behavior” Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America 109:11 (13 March 2012): 4086-4091.
\textsuperscript{23} Murray, Coming Apart, 298.
\textsuperscript{28} Anna Bahney, “40% of Americans can’t cover a $400 emergency expense” CNN (22 May 2018), https://money.cnn.com/2018/05/22/pf/emergency-expenses-household-finances/index.html.
\end{proof}
percent of U.S. workers live paycheck to paycheck to make ends meet. More than one in four workers do not set aside any savings each month. Three in four say they are in debt and more than half think that will always be true. A majority of minimum wage workers say they have to work more than one job to make ends meet. Americans are living with more debt than ever before, as student loan debt, car loan debt, credit card debt, and mortgage debt have surpassed 13 trillion collectively. That does not include medical debt, a burden one in five Americans carry and the leading cause of personal bankruptcy in the United States. These financial burdens push people to work harder, caught in a vicious cycle of production and consumption. Time for leisure and play seems expendable, even while time for rest is essential for mental health and emotional wellbeing. All of this contributes to anxiety at home, insecurity at work, and an overall sense of scarcity that makes generosity or hospitality to strangers too much to expect. Politicians play on these insecurities to justify xenophobia and “America First” policies that betray the repeated commands in Scripture emphasizing obligation to those without status or protection.

Allison Pugh describes this widespread insecurity as creating a “tumbleweed society” that leaves people feeling destabilized and displaced. Overall, economic insecurity thwarts social mobility and makes it more difficult for people to decide whether to leave or endure unhealthy relationships at home. In spite of mounting stress at home and work, companies and the state mostly escape blame. Employees come to expect less from their employers and largely feel “not

30 Ben Lane, “Americans now have more debt than ever before” HousingWire (14 August 2018), https://www.housingwire.com/articles/46455-americans-now-have-more-debt-than-ever-before.
32 For example, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has pointed out that the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” is repeated twice in the Hebrew Scriptures, while the commands to love the widow, stranger, and orphan are repeated no less than thirty-six times. See Sacks, To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility (New York: Schocken, 2005), 103.
anger but shame, not indignation but grief, not outrage but sorrow."\(^{33}\) More and more people seek to be distracted or defused from these negative emotions. To cope, they build a “moral wall” between work and home, trying to focus on what they can control at home, seeing how little power they have to determine their future at work.\(^{34}\)

These examples of social and economic separation contribute to racial segregation and inequality, as well. Racial tension and injustice continue to persist in our country.\(^{35}\) A few years ago, researchers found that three-quarters of white Americans don’t have a single black friend while two-thirds of black Americans say they don’t have any white friends.\(^{36}\) This should not be all that shocking, in light of the geographical segregation by race that persists in America. The physical marginalization of people of color—especially African Americans—demonstrates “the fatal couplings of place and race in our society” that leaves black individuals and families with only a fraction of the access to resources, freedom of choice, and accumulated wealth as compared to most white Americans.\(^{37}\) When whiteness is normative (as is the case in the United States, historically, culturally, and institutionally\(^{38}\)), space is constructed to enforce white privilege, ensuring freedom and social mobility for whites while imposing unfair obstacles for people of color.\(^{39}\)


\(^{34}\) Pugh, *The Tumbleweed Society*, 51.

\(^{35}\) According to a *Washington Post-ABC News* 2016 survey, 63% of whites and 72% of blacks reported race relations are “generally bad,” the highest rate since 1992.


\(^{38}\) Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, “In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is *heritage*. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor … [it was also] casual wrath and random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. It must be rape so regular as to be industrial …” He continues, “The plunder of black life was drilled into this country in its infancy and reinforced across its history, so that plunder has become an heirloom, an intelligence, a sentience, a default setting to which, likely to the end of our days, we must invariably return.” See *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 103-104, 111.

Whiteness is more than skin color; the racialization of space makes evident that racism is designed into systems and structures that funnel unfair advantages to whites while people of color are left behind. Spatial segregation leaves many white Americans oblivious and perhaps indifferent to the deep divides that exist between neighborhoods and schools, the problem of gerrymandering and voter suppression, or the school-to-prison pipeline fueling the mass incarceration of people of color. Many white Americans may not question why most people assume whites deserve to live in the suburbs while people of color deserve to live in ghettos, or why housing policies financially reward whiteness and discriminate against people of color, or how these practices subsidize the concentration of wealth, produce sprawl, waste resources, and divert social costs to nonwhite neighborhoods. This is not to suggest that every white person is racist; instead, it speaks to the way in which social distance lulls white Americans into complacency and complicity with policies and structures that defy racial justice. For example, the racial wealth gap, if left unaddressed at the present trend, will mean that in 2053, the median white household wealth will be $137,000 and the median black household wealth will be zero. People of color are more likely to be forced to deal with urban food deserts, underperforming schools, unfair housing practices, and much harsher drug enforcement than what is typical for the suburbs. All these issues reinforce segregation and poverty, exacerbate social fragmentation, and generate the conditions for criminal activity. These racial disparities distort the criminal justice

---

40 Spatial segregation also applies to African Americans, Latinx, Asian Americans and Native Americans. One example of people of color being left behind is wealth inheritance, which determines life chances even more than college degrees, marital status, number of children, or employment. In The Hidden Cost of Being African American, Thomas Shapiro finds the wealth gap between whites and people of color quadrupled between 1984-2007. Lipsitz reports that more than one-fourth of African American families “have no assets at all” (How Racism Takes Place, 4).
system, fueled by moral panic and a preference for punishment over mercy, resulting in people of color suffering disproportionately from an immoral system.\(^{45}\) For these reasons, it is imperative to state explicitly that racism “is not incidental, aberrant, or individual, but rather collective, cumulative, and continuing.”\(^{46}\) How can we expect Americans to understand the needs of and obligations to their neighbors when they have less and less interaction with them?

**The Problem of Tolerance**

Typically, when Americans face social change and economic uncertainty, they find refuge in a “circle the wagons” mentality that turns inward on the family unit. They find comfort in “a belief in the righteousness of the family,”\(^{47}\) focusing on “traditional family morality,”\(^{48}\) that reduces the scope of moral concern to the domestic household. This affects how parents interact with their children and what they expect from their children: whereas well-educated and job-secure parents have the freedom and resources to cultivate creativity, self-direction, and self-esteem in their children, these “promotive” strategies for success are not shared by job-insecure parents who focus more on discipline, conformity, and other “preventative strategies” to keep them out of trouble.\(^{49}\) This, too, exacerbates social separation, since affluent parents are inclined to over-indulge their children (at the expense of duties to other children) while parents who are struggling financially have neither the time nor the means to look after anyone’s children aside from their own. To reduce their mental and emotional load, they de-personalize others, which leads to estrangement. This makes it easier to ignore the needs of others, as well as social duties

---


\(^{46}\) Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 41.


\(^{49}\) Putnam, *Our Kids*, 121.
that extend beyond the family unit. We defer these responsibilities to others, sometimes even outsourcing the “emotional labor” to care about others.\textsuperscript{50}

On the one hand, this makes perfect sense: when life is unpredictable, it is necessary to focus on what you can control. But on the other hand, if we have more and more families that are putting the good of their own unit ahead of everyone else, we are stuck in what Edward Banfield’s described sixty years ago: “amoral familism” that maximizes the self-interest of one’s own family and assumes that other families are doing the same.\textsuperscript{51} Americans are becoming less aware of the needs of others and their obligation to others or are actively “redefining and reducing” expectations for and from them.\textsuperscript{52} In the end, this reflects an overall trend of “shrinking understandings of what we owe each other.”\textsuperscript{53}

In face of so much social division, many people call for civility and tolerance. But these concepts are insufficient for solving the root causes of social separation and unjust inequalities. Tolerance is too often distorted and abused while some push the limits of what others can and will endure. “Live and let live” allows for a retreat from minimum standards of the good like kindness, generosity, and forgiveness. It produces bystanders who remain silent in the face of lies, threats, and injustice. When cowardice finds protection in tolerance, we are guilty of a “traitorous moral flabbiness” that has converted virtue into vice.\textsuperscript{54} When tolerance is invoked without mutual respect and responsibility, it can make people endure harmful beliefs or actions, creating a “moral culture of oppression” that undermines human dignity and the common good.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{52} Pugh, \textit{The Tumbleweed Society}, 80. Pugh finds evidence of new language to create different categories of relationships and responsibilities, like “bar friends” versus “real friends” (82-83).
\textsuperscript{53} Pugh, \textit{The Tumbleweed Society}, 86.
\textsuperscript{55} John R. Bowlin, \textit{Tolerance Among the Virtues}, 65.
A significant problem with the popular understanding of tolerance is that it makes space for the other but takes no responsibility for his or her well-being. At best, it presumes the other has the same access to resources, range of choice, and exercise of agency. At worst, it is used as a shield to hide indifference to the subjugation and suffering of others. When the other is marginalized, oppressed, or otherwise prevented from full and equal participation in social life, tolerance—as it is commonly understood today—endorses passive acceptance of these unjust inequalities. Tolerance can become passive acceptance when it is divorced from empathy, especially since empathy is the cure for righteousness that wants to divide people into camps of right and wrong, us and them. Tolerance does not automatically inspire mutual acceptance and appreciation, which points to why it is such a challenging moral norm: it is impossible to predict or control the actions of another, including whether others will adopt intolerable practices. This makes it distinct from other virtues like courage or hope that are more focused on one’s own dispositions and actions.

In the Christian moral tradition, tolerance cannot be considered apart from the command to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Tolerance is a virtue (sometimes referred to as forbearance), that empowers love across difficulty and the endurance of suffering, like Jesus (Romans 2:4, 15:1-4). Tolerance is patient with difference and division; it does not withdraw, coerce, or expel. It makes room for the other, even in the face of disagreement, without becoming so uncritical that it must bear any or all burdens. As a virtue, it is a mean between extremes of deficiency and excess, just as hope is the midpoint between despair and presumption, and courage is the ideal balance between cowardice and brazen foolishness. Tolerance seeks harmony between the respective extremes of what would be harmless and harmful to endure. It counters the vice of

---

intolerance that is coldly indifferent or inappropriately objects to others. Tolerance cannot be considered only as a matter of self-restraint or how to resist fear, hatred, and violence. It must also be recognized as crucial for promoting virtuous behavior and communities. For these reasons, tolerance requires sound judgment about what should be tolerated: the beliefs, actions, and relationships that foster unity, peace, and the common good. This means that tolerance cannot be conflated with nonjudgmentalism, as it is popularly conceived.

Tolerance is not the same as “I do me, you do you” because such a credo denies mutual responsibility and accountability. This “live and let live” mentality is a symptom of social cowardice that undermines the shared commitments necessary for the common good. Today, tolerance mostly implies acceptance that creates social distance. Instead, what we need is to draw near the other in the spirit of tenderness. Gustavo Gutiérrez provides a framework for bridging these social divides through his description of the “preferential option for the poor,” illustrated by the story of the Good Samaritan. But before we can turn to this well-known story, we have to consider Gutiérrez’s call to conversion from the beliefs and practices that perpetuate social separation and exclusion.

**Conversion to a Theology of Neighbor**

Gustavo Gutiérrez frames Christian discipleship as a response to the call to conversion into a deeper, fuller, and freer love of God and neighbor. This is a conversion to love God who is identified in the neighbor as Jesus teaches his disciples in Matthew’s Last Judgment scene: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,

---

57 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xlii. See also: Puebla, no. 1147.
you did it to me” (25:40).  This reinforces the single command to love God and neighbor as oneself in Luke 10:25-27 and the “new commandment” to “love one another as I have loved you” in John 13:34. In sum, disciples love God by loving their neighbor. Karl Rahner cites these passages to conclude that “every act of charity towards our neighbor is indeed formally, even though perhaps only implicitly, love of God” and also that “every act of explicit love of God is truly and formally … love of neighbor.”

Conversion implies a new “theology of the neighbor” as Gutiérrez describes in A Theology of Liberation. Gutiérrez cites Yves Congar who claims that disciples’ “deepest commitment” is the “a paradoxical sign of God” who is our neighbor, or better, the “sacrament of our Neighbor!” A “theology of neighbor” recognizes that God is revealed in our neighbors, that proximity with others is a doorway to the sacred. This not only implies a posture of reverence and respect to the other, but it produces moral obligations for love, justice, and solidarity in order to honor right-relationship with God and one another. As Gutiérrez notes, this

58 In this passage, the goats in the Last Judgment are denounced for refusing to help Jesus, who identifies himself with those in need (25:41-46).
59 Augustine explains that since God is love (1 John 4:8), all love is love for God and for union with God (in Deo and propter Deum; see Confessions XI.xxix.39). Love of God, according to Augustine, means loving God in the neighbor, who is anyone and everyone; all are worthy of our love (De Doctrina Christiana I.xxx.31-32).
61 This phrase comes from a brief passage by Spanish theologian José María González Ruiz, in his book, Pobreza Evangélica y Promoción Humana. González Ruiz exhorts Christian theologians to emphasize the Samaritan’s depiction of fraternity as he writes, “it is inexcusable to omit an authentic ‘theology of the neighbor.’” As González Ruiz sees it, this involves taking up the example of the Samaritan who “makes himself a neighbor from the others,” serving as a model for being a person “completely universal, the sworn enemy of every kind of discrimination.” A “theology of the neighbor,” according to González Ruiz, implies a commitment to liberation to more fully realize the bonds of human solidarity for the flourishing of all peoples. See José María González Ruiz, Pobreza evangélica y promoción humana (Málaga: Manantial-Aguaviva, [1966] 1999), 98. Translations are my own.
62 Yves Congar, The Wide World My Parish: Salvation and its Problems tr. Donald Attwater (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961), 124. Congar continues, “our neighbor is privileged above all because God is actually present in him. It is right and it is necessary to speak of the ‘mystery of our neighbor’ … [as] something which has a meaning beyond itself and in relation to the final reality towards which the whole history of salvation moves. Humanly, we never know exactly who it is we are meeting in the person of our neighbor.” Congar connects this to Matthew 25:31-46 to conclude, “We shall be judged on what we have done, not on what we have known” (125-126).
is also a commitment to openness and transformation in encountering groups of people, and not just individuals in a series of one-on-one encounters.63 This is how disciples honor their commitment to Christ-in-the-other, and, in light of Matthew 25:31-46, Christ-in-the-poor.64 This requires a proactive approach toward others in need; Gutiérrez explains, the neighbor “is not the one whom I find on my path, but rather the one in whose path I place myself, the one whom I approach and actively seek.”65 This partiality for the other and particularly the other in need, leads beyond generic Christian-neighbor-love to the principle of Catholic social teaching known as the preferential option for the poor.66

The preferential option for the poor has sometimes been misunderstood to be an exclusive preference for poor, vulnerable, and marginalized peoples. It is instead a commitment to inclusively extend the reach of love, justice, and solidarity, beginning with those in greatest need.67 It is a commitment to emulate God’s preferential care and concern for the most vulnerable members of the human family.68 In speaking of this “option for the poor,” we must be on guard against using words like “the poor,” “the vulnerable,” or “the marginalized” in a way that reifies conditions of deprivation and treats persons as a homogenous category, a group of faceless “others.” This can also perpetuate dichotomous thinking between “us” and “them,” making “the poor” people who need something from us, rather than first being our equal brothers

---

63 Gutiérrez argues this is not only true for individual others, but entire groups, including the poor and suffering “masses [who] are also our neighbor.” (A Theology of Liberation, 116).
64 Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 112-113.
65 Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 113.
66 This phrase is adopted in the episcopal conferences in 1968 in Medellín (“Poverty,” no. 9), in 1979 in Puebla (Part IV, Chapter 1), and in Pope John Paul II’s 1987 encyclical, Sollicitudo rei socialis (no. 42).
67 Gutiérrez unpacks the meaning of poverty in three ways: real poverty as evil (something God does not want); spiritual poverty (“readiness to do God’s will”); solidarity with the poor themselves, along with protest against the conditions that cause them to suffer (Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, xxv).
68 This is a theme that runs through both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. See, for example, Exodus 3:7-8, Deuteronomy 14:29, 15:7, Psalm 82:3-4, and James 2:5: “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?”
and sisters in Christ. Emphasizing solidarity in tandem with the preferential option for the poor reminds the nonpoor that we have much to learn and receive from those who are poor. This also helps to avoid paternalistic or instrumental views that only see the poor through their condition of socio-economic insecurity or treat them as objects of Christian duty. Solidarity, or “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all,”⁶⁹ is thus inclusive, mutual empowerment to share in receiving and building up the Reign of God (already initiated but not yet in its fullness).⁷⁰ Gutiérrez clarifies that “the poor” should refer to our brothers and sisters who suffer from conditions of material deprivation as well as other forms of exclusion, thus becoming “socially insignificant.” To speak of the poor is to describe those who have been rendered “nonpersons” and who, because they face material poverty, are often sentenced to “premature death.”⁷¹ Solidarity with the poor does not mean that the “haves” must provide for “the have nots,” as this provides necessary aid but does not necessarily cultivate mutual respect and understanding, or the sharing of power and resources to transform the status quo that benefits

---

⁶⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, no. 38. Note that this definition relies heavily on a Thomistic conception of justice as a habit of the will to render to each person what is due to them (*ST* II-II.58.1).

⁷⁰ The connection between evangelization and liberation was made explicit by Pope Paul VI in his 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, wherein the pope asserts that the Church “has the duty to proclaim the liberation of millions of human beings … the duty of assisting the birth of this liberation, of giving witness to it, of ensuring that it is complete. This is not foreign to evangelization” (no. 30). Gustavo Gutiérrez was an important theological advisor to the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) bishops during the conferences that gathered in Medellín in 1968, Puebla in 1979, Santo Domingo in 1992, and in Aparecida in 2007. Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI endorsed the preferential option for the poor as a matter of Christological faith and Christian charity. For example, in *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, Pope John Paul II asserts, “This is an option, or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness” (no. 42). In his opening address to the bishops gathered at Aparecida, Benedict XVI proclaimed that “the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty (cf. 2 Cor 8:9).” Pope Francis has integrated the preferential option for the poor into several speeches and letters, including *Laudato Si’* (no. 158).

some at the expense of others. Instead, solidarity depends on shared interests and commitment for inclusive empowerment, always sensitive to the poverties around us and in us.\textsuperscript{72}

For Gutiérrez, this task begins with a spirituality of solidarity with God and our neighbors, sustained by a life-long pilgrimage in prayer, commitment, and action.\textsuperscript{73} It is a spirituality rooted in gratitude for God’s generous bestowal of life and love. Conversion is an unending process of being transformed in greater gratitude and generosity, which transforms personal biases, prejudices, and mental categories as well as social, economic, and political structures.\textsuperscript{74} Conversion requires more than a new way of seeing or believing; it denotes an intentional change of place. Gutiérrez proposes that this new place should be the locus for virtuous friendships, where disciples can share in the life of those who experience the in-breaking of the Reign of God as “nonpersons.”

A “theology of neighbor” is a call to accompany neighbors in need. It is a proactive, place-changing love for God in the poor, as part of each disciple’s vocation to solidarity.\textsuperscript{75} Like the Samaritan who goes out of his way and into the ditch, it is a love that is not content to stay “on its own front porch.” Instead, as Gutiérrez claims, it means defining the neighbor “as the one I must go out to look for, on the highways and byways, in the factories and slums, on the farms

\textsuperscript{72} Jean Vanier reflects on an abiding lesson at L’Arche communities: very often, people come to help the poor only to learn that they themselves are impoverished in many ways. See Jean Vanier, \textit{The Heart of L’Arche: A Spirituality for Everyday} (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

\textsuperscript{73} Gutiérrez, \textit{A Theology of Liberation}, 117. Elsewhere, Gutiérrez succinctly defines spirituality as discipleship, that is, following the Holy Spirit through life lived in love. See \textit{We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People} tr. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003) 45.

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{A Theology of Liberation}, 118. Gutiérrez adds “Christians have not done enough in this area of conversion to the neighbor, to social justice, to history. They have not perceived clearly enough yet that to know God \textit{is} to do justice. They still do not live \textit{in one sole action} with both God and all humans. They still do not situate themselves in Christ without attempting to avoid concrete human history. They have yet to tread the path which will lead them to seek effectively the peace of the Lord in the heart of social struggle” (Ibid.).

\textsuperscript{75} See Gutiérrez, \textit{We Drink from Our Own Wells}, 21.
and in the mines” which means that “my world changes.” It also means that my place in the world changes: to “Go and do likewise” is to be a neighbor who draws near to neighbors in need. Gutiérrez explains that the Samaritan’s actions on the road to Jericho illustrate solidarity and the preferential option for the poor. He writes: the preferential option for the poor “involves a commitment that implies leaving the road one is on, as the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches, and entering the world of the other, of the ‘insignificant’ person, of the one excluded from dominant social sectors, communities, viewpoints, and ideas … The priority of the other is a distinguishing mark of a gospel ethic, and nobody embodies this priority more clearly than the poor and the excluded.” This parallels Pope Francis’ appeal to the Samaritan as more than a parable, but a way of life that incarnates mercy and is accountable to the “other.”

From Tolerance to Tenderness

Although the Samaritan does not befriend the man robbed, beaten, and left for dead in Luke’s gospel, Gutiérrez asserts that friendship is essential to the work of solidarity and the preferential option, since intimate connections—especially with those who may be easily ignored or isolated—could help cultivate a greater respect for “nonpersons,” sensitivity to their suffering, and commitment to work for empowered action to alleviate dehumanizing conditions. In light of the hyper-partisanship and polarization, social separation and unjust inequalities, friendships

---

76 Gutiérrez continues, “This is what is happening with the ‘option for the poor,’ for in the gospel it is the poor person who is the neighbor par excellence. This option constitutes the nub and core of a new way of being human and Christian.” See Gutiérrez, The Power of the Poor in History (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983), 44.
79 Gutiérrez often notes that poverty is a complex reality and that solidarity with the poor requires a closeness and accompaniment in order to understand their concrete situation and to overcome fear and misperception. These intimate encounters will help us overcome fear, the “enemy of faith” and its “offspring, despair and indifference.” See Gutiérrez, The God of Life (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 173-179, 187.
across differences seem unlikely to happen organically. To practice solidarity and the option for the poor, disciples must get in the habit of moving into proximity with those we consider “other.”\(^{80}\) Avoiding the narrow loyalties of some understandings of friendship, Gutiérrez envisions inclusive relationships incarnating an ever-widening “comradely communion” that effects the unity it signifies: the Body of Christ.\(^{81}\) This is a friendship firmly committed to restoring the bonds broken by sin, requiring a posture of pardon and mercy.\(^{82}\) It involves gratuitous love for real persons, especially the alienated and exploited. In contrast to tolerance that makes room for the other, Gutiérrez asserts that solidarity and the preferential option for the poor implies closeness with those who are different from us. He explains that friendship is not a matter of fulfilling a duty, but the “work of concrete, authentic love for the poor that is not possible apart from a certain integration into their world and apart from bonds of real friendship with those who suffer despoliation and injustice. The solidarity is not with ‘the poor’ in the abstract but with human beings of flesh and bone. Without love and affection, without—why not say it?—tenderness, there can be no true gesture of solidarity.”\(^{83}\) Gutiérrez’s reference to tenderness anticipates Pope Francis’ call to participate in a “revolution of tenderness” as part of the culture of encounter that brings people together across differences in mercy, solidarity, and hope.\(^{84}\) To rebuild social ties and eventually restore a semblance of social trust will require

\(^{80}\) Gutiérrez lobbied to have this emphasis on proximity with the poor made explicit at the CELAM Conference in Aparecida. In the concluding document the bishops state, “Only the closeness that makes us friends enables us to appreciate deeply the values of the poor today, their legitimate desires, and their own manner of living the faith. The option for the poor should lead us to friendship with the poor. Day by day the poor become agents of evangelization and of comprehensive human promotion” (no. 398).

\(^{81}\) Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 70. Gutiérrez links solidarity to the “Body of Christ” imagery found in the Pauline Epistles, like 1 Corinthians 12.

\(^{82}\) Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 96-102.

\(^{83}\) Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 104.

interpersonal practices of mutual respect and responsibility. This implies a shared commitment to freedom, agency, and empowerment as co-equals. Friendship serves as the building block for “social charity” that promotes interdependence and the common good, reaching eventually the macro-level work for structural justice and reciprocal solidarity.\(^8\) This is part of what it means to work toward the biblical vision of right-relationships with God and neighbor. This is how disciples concretely engage the principles of solidarity and the option for the poor, necessary work for bridging the social and economic divides that wound our communities and churches.\(^8\)

Some dismiss the Samaritan’s example as a hyperbolic ideal or reduce it to random acts of kindness. But this misreading distorts Jesus’ teaching of what is normative for the Christian moral life.\(^8\) The Samaritan recognizes another person in need and provides the care he is capable of offering. He enlists others to join in healing the man left for dead, and continues along his way. He does not sell all his possessions, disown his family, or leave behind his manner of earning a living. He does not set up camp in the ditch or dedicate his life to the “Jericho Road Development Agency.”\(^8\) This passage does not ignore the reality of finitude or question the legitimate pursuit of one’s own interests and preexisting relationships. It does not mean that we have to change our political party affiliation or white-wash our differences with others to settle for a least common denominator as a basis for common ground. Given widespread animosity

---


\(^8\) Recall that the story is preceded by the lawyer’s question, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” and then the limit-seeking question, “Who is my neighbor?” (which implies there is a non-neighbor, someone beyond my moral concern). See Luke 10:25-29.

\(^8\) Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. suggested, “On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life’s roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.” See Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Time to Break the Silence,” in *I Have a Dream: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 148.
toward the other and segregation from the other, the path toward healing depends on people willing to go out of their way and into the ditch, like the Samaritan. This means taking the vantage point of the one who is marginalized and excluded and making it our own. This begins the work of conversion to a new way of seeing, as Gutiérrez describes.

**Conclusion**

To practice solidarity, individuals, families, and parishes will need to change their social location and accompany those considered “other” (whether by party, class, race, or another category). To share life together and befriend others across differences means that their problems will become our problems, not only as a requirement of justice, but because we will be compelled to work with and for those we care about. This is why—as both Gustavo Gutiérrez and Pope Francis point out—tenderness, not tolerance, is what our church and world need. Tenderness can initiate and sustain the “culture of encounter” that becomes a “culture of belonging.” When tenderness takes hold, people will not be able to demonize the other or defer their social responsibilities to another. Tenderness begins the work of building inclusive coalitions rooted in mutual respect, co-responsibility and shared empowerment, as well as advocating for the legal changes that will promote human dignity, solidarity, and the option for the poor on the institutional and structural levels. When Jesus tells his followers to “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37), he does not mean that they should offer aid in an emergency or be generous to strangers. He instructs his disciples to see in a way that recognizes that we belong to each other, to move toward—rather than away from, like the priest and Levite—others in need, and habitually act with tenderness and inclusive solidarity. This is how we bridge what divides us and repair the broken body of Christ.