

'... Love in Action Is a Harsh and Dreadful Thing Compared to Love in Dreams'

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'... Love in Action Is a Harsh and Dreadful Thing Compared to Love in Dreams'

Response to the Panel Discussion of The Spirit and the Common Good: Shared Flourishing in the Image of God

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Abstract

In this response Daniela C. Augustine engages the three articles, published in the present issue of the journal, which dialogue with her monograph *The Spirit and the Common Good: Shared Flourishing in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019). Her dialogue partners are Frank D. Macchia, Chris E.W. Green, and Joseph M. Lear.

Keywords

love – Holy Spirit – hagiography – forgiveness – the common good

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... love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.

DOSTOEVSKY, *The Brothers Karamazov*¹

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1 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (trans. Constance Garnett; Louisville, KY: CreateSpace, 2018), p. 21. As I have pointed out, Fr. Zossima's theological discourse on love throughout the book is a summary of Dostoevsky's own theology, which elevates love toward

I begin this response with a deep sense of gratitude to Frank D. Macchia, Chris E.W. Green, and Joseph Lear for the attentive and gracious reading of my book, *The Spirit and the Common Good* (hereafter, *SCG*). Their constructive engagement with the volume conveys generous intellectual hospitality while raising pertinent points for further discourse. I find their comments both enriching and inspiring and feel that they deserve more extensive engagement than the format of this dialogue allows.

Recognizing the demand for brevity, the present response is organized under three headings that highlight key related aspects of the three articles' engagement of *SCG*: contextualization in the present North American setting; the Christian demand for loving one's enemy and its implications for forgiveness and reconciliation; and the interface between the genres of hagiography and testimony. These subtopics intersect within the book in complex ways, one of which is reflected in the sobering words of Dostoyevsky's Fr Zossima, '... love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams'. Having spent over twenty years researching social transformation (through pneumatologically-framed theologico-ethical lenses), I am aware of the challenge to live suspended between daydreaming in/with the Spirit (re-envisioning hopeful socio-political and economic alternatives to broken systems, compromised by pervasive injustice), and daily awakenings to the 'harsh and dreadful' realities of embodied love that drives human beings relentlessly, unapologetically, perilously to seek God's face in the face of the other, even the enemy. The following reflection points to the need not only to share in this awareness, but to enact it in the communal interface with the political, racial, ethnic, and religious other, as a mark of genuine commitment to the common good.

In light of this assertion, I will begin with a quote from *SCG* (pp. 9–10), which seems to be key to the points raised by my interlocutors and to the core of the present reflection:

The Spirit of Pentecost condemns the spirits of racism, sexism, tribalism/ethnocentrism and nationalism as manifestations of sin's fracturing and antagonizing the human community. Pentecost announces God's judgement upon these social pathologies and upon all attempts for their religious justification – they have no future for in the divinely-ordained relational sacramentality of the cosmos there is no future/no eschaton without the other. At Pentecost (as well as in the transfigured economic life of the post-Pentecost community), the Spirit

the fellow human as the only cure for doubt and despair and presents it as the only act that has the capacity to save the world.

reveals the sacrament of the other, even the enemy ... and the essentiality of loving them as the means of loving communion with God. Thus, the consequent Spirit-saturated daily commensality of the Pentecost community ... is uplifted as the continuation of the Eucharistic table. It makes the Gospel visible and tangible by paradigmatically bridging the gap between faith and practice and unveiling the Church as the eschatological future of the cosmos – the living icon of the Triune life en fleshed by the Spirit in the redeemed human community ...

Indeed, as I have argued, Pentecost, as the Spirit's socio-transformative manifesto to a world fractured by many dehumanizing spirits, is inclusion, hospitality, and justice toward the other.

1 Implications for the Current North American Context 'in a Time of Social Upheaval and Political Reckoning'

2020 has been a year like no other not just in the United States but around the globe. It has been a time of brokenness and resilience; of chronic disinformation and piercing clarity; of irresponsible recklessness toward and dutiful care for others; of mourning and hope; of protest and compliance. Due to the pandemic, I found myself unexpectedly 'stranded' in the United States, allowing me to witness firsthand the socio-political upheaval while trying to love the church in her struggle to love the other – a struggle exacerbated by her difficulty in discerning the difference between Christianity and civil religion and her tendency to worship personal civil rights rather than practice Christoformed love for one's enemy. In this sense, Chris Green's questions present an important prompting toward self-searching in discerning the 'orderliness' of one's Christian affections and related ability to 'untangle' what is 'due to Caesar' from what is required by God (Lk. 20.25). If, from the standpoint of Christian ethics, the litmus test for the authenticity of one's love for God is loving one's neighbor, then it is legitimate to ask, have Pentecostals and Evangelicals passed the test when that neighbor is the racial and political other? Has the Pentecostal 'passion for the kingdom' manifested itself in the ethical praxis of the kingdom during this time of socio-political upheaval? These questions obviously touch also upon Green's comments regarding 'the relationship of the church to the kingdom' and the efficacy of the Eucharist within SCG's vision. Perhaps the place to start in addressing the relevance of the book to the American context, in addition to pointing back to the quote above, is by highlighting that SCG presents a *theological ethic* of the common good,

seeking (as most theological ethics do) to address the seemingly unbridgeable chasm between orthodoxy and orthopraxy – between knowing the right thing and actually doing it.

According to Jesus' teaching, the ethics of the kingdom (the heart of which, as most Christian ethicists would agree, is summed in the two great commandments and explicated in the six precepts – Mt. 5.21–48 – which represent Jesus' radicalization of the Law and the Prophets) are to be enacted by the believers within the present age. Thus, the kingdom of God is 'within' (Lk. 17.20–21) those whose rightly-ordered affections are enfleshed in the kingdom's ethical praxis, which always seeks the flourishing of the other, even the enemy (Mt. 5.44). *SCG*'s vision articulates (among other things) the agency of the Spirit within this process of enfleshment (recalling the event of the incarnation) while pointing out the socio-transformative, redemptive, world-mending capacity of incarnate love. This is a Christian ethic of responsibility which (while reflecting its roots in the Jewish prophetic tradition) is articulated in terms of the believer's in-Spirit-ed Christoforation/Christification.

While inspired by the ethical practice of a concrete Pentecostal community, *SCG* is not a textbook on that community's dogmatics, nor does it seek to cement their ethical practice as the only authentic manifestation of Spirit-filled, Christofomed socio-transformative human agency. The inter-/trans-contextual, ecumenical scope of the book's vision flows from its foundational claim that commitment to mutual safekeeping in pursuit of shared communal life with the (racial, political, cultural, ethnic, religious, gender) other begins with the recognition of shared humanity, and that the Spirit's Christofoming agency facilitates this recognition while summoning each to responsibility for the flourishing of all.

Indeed, neither the Eucharist nor any other liturgical event works magically toward the believers' Christoforation. Throughout the Balkans and Eastern Europe, Pentecostals and Eastern Orthodox emphasize the Eucharist's demand for self-searching/self-examination and taking responsibility for one's acts of injustice (known and unknown, in words, thoughts and deeds) toward all others. Making the effort to correct the injustice and transform/mend the relationship with the other is upheld as a prerequisite to communion. Thus, the underlying understanding is that partaking of the Eucharist in an unworthy manner is eating and drinking judgement. In this Eucharistic logic, seeking reconciliation is not a sentimental gesture, it is a 'hard and dreadful' work – it is 'love in action'.

Does this mean that all Balkan and Eastern-European Pentecostals and Orthodox believers partake in the Eucharist at all times in a worthy manner?

Probably not, since, as both Chris Green and Joseph Lear point out, mutual negation, strife and mistrust have antagonized and fragmented many communities within the region and there is still much reconciliation to be done. This is another reminder that orthodoxy cannot substitute for the lack of orthopathy, that there is no magic food/meal which can undo one's acts of injustice, that charisma is not a replacement for the fruit of the Spirit (Mt. 7.21–23). As in the story of Zacchaeus (Lk. 9.1–10), after welcoming the Lord at the table and feasting with Him, the communicant still remains the one responsible to enact distributive justice, repairing/compensating for the wrong he/she has done to others. Notably, in the story of Zacchaeus, taking responsibility for injustice and making generous amends is announced by Jesus to be the advent of salvation into the tax-collector's life.

One of the lessons learned from the Third Balkan War is that the deficit of ecumenical love and cooperation (evident not only in the Balkans and Eastern Europe but also in North America), as well as the passionate surrender to negation/demonization and persecution of the other, are often induced and inflamed precisely by historical fusions of Christianity and civil religion. Nationalism replaces the vision of the kingdom of God's ethnography, patriotism (not love for neighbor) is elevated as the supreme Christian virtue, and fighting against the 'enemies of the state' (a messy political concept) is embraced as sacred duty (even if this means marching against one's Christian neighbors 'in the name of God and country'). The urgent catechetical task of disentangling Christianity from civil religion by facilitating an orthopathic discipleship in ethical discernment, summons to responsibility all Christian communities (regardless of their location around the world).

In this vein of thought, the *scg* reminds readers that the fruit of the Spirit (Christ's character within the believer) is depicted by scripture as the bridge between this age and the age to come. Love does not pass away (1 Cor. 13.8), for it is the content of the life of the Spirit as the life of the kingdom within humanity on this side of the eschaton. Therefore, among the *scg*'s applications to the current North American setting will be asking if our love has been weighted/measured and found lacking (Dan. 5.27). Many Christians have refused to prioritize the wellbeing and life of others over their own desires and comfort, elevating personal civil rights over-against loving care for the other. The same question can be asked in relation to our justice for the other. As the *scg* points out, where love is lacking, legislated justice often fails. While the world witnessed in disbelief the shocking death of George Floyd, it was once again apparent that legislation, though essential for social order, is not enough to secure the other's life and flourishing.

2 The Christian Demand for Loving One's Enemy and its Implications for Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Frank Macchia's exploration of the *SCG*'s theological vision presents a rich construct that explicates the book's theological highlights and difficult proposals with insightful clarity. Engaging his reflection, I will focus on three related aspects, namely the uniqueness of the Eucharistic meal, the sacrament of the other, and unconditional forgiveness toward one's enemy.

Indeed, as Macchia points out, there is a 'difference between the *sacrament* and that which is *sacramental*', and the encounter of 'the Lord's presence in the Eucharist' is (within the *SCG*) 'paradigmatic' toward a 'sacramental enactment of the common good that hallows all dimensions of human existence' (p. 149). From the standpoint of theological ethics, the role of the Eucharistic meal is multidimensional. The Eucharist is a pedagogy on becoming like 'God in flesh' – it is a gift with a Christoforming purpose intended to bring the communicants closer to God and to one another. As such, the Eucharist is the liturgical root of the common good, the shared Christian life and, therefore, of all other sacraments. Further (to echo James K.A. Smith's engagement of St Augustine's anthropology),² the Eucharist trains human affections, reorders them in realignment with God's will, disciplining desires and functioning as an antidote to the malformations of secular liturgies, including those induced by consumer capitalism and civil religion. Revealing the interconnectivity of all life, the Eucharist teaches reverent consumption, re-habituating the believers' affections and re-sensitizing them to others' suffering of lack and depravation. In this sense, Paul's instructions on partaking of the Eucharist in a worthy manner, rightly discerning the communal body of Christ, could be understood also as summoning the believers to distributive justice within the household of God – a justice that starts from the Lord's table.

In light of this, the commensality table could be viewed as a continuation (an intended outcome) of the Eucharistic communion table (of its pedagogy) without blurring the uniqueness of the Eucharist. This continuity is visible not only in the architectural settings of Orthodox monasteries, but even more emphatically in the post-Eucharistic agape feasts of some Balkan Pentecostal communities, where the multipurpose use of space and furniture, including the same table, does not demean the wonder of the Eucharist, but magnifies its significance. This symbolic continuity of 'the liturgy beyond the liturgy' points to the need to realign all life with the Eucharist, re-sensitizing the celebrants

2 James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 101.

to the sacramental purpose of all creation. As such, the Eucharist remains the distinct sacred meal in/of the Lord's presence from which and towards which everything flows. Ultimately, in the Eucharist's pedagogy, as the epicletic prayer of St Basil's Divine Liturgy reveals, the communal body of Christ is the true Eucharistic element that is to be transformed by the Spirit into Christ's flesh and blood for the life of the world.

Regarding understanding the significance of 'the sacrament of the other, even the enemy', in addition to Macchia's interpretation (with which I fully agree), it could be helpful to add that the phrase should be read in light of Mt. 5.44 (discussed also in the previous section). Here, love for the enemy appears as the apotheosis of the six precepts – the very ethical distinction of Christianity in comparison with other religions (including Judaism). Indeed, all six precepts are related to one another in a striking crescendo of ethical demands that radicalizes the Mosaic law by pointing to its true spiritual telos. Therefore, love for the enemy in the sixth precept cannot be understood without the first precept, which (as I suggest in the book) recollects the story of Cain and Abel and asserts that the goal of worship is reconciliation with God and one's fellow human. The precept demands taking responsibility for one's Cain, leaving one's offering at the altar and going to reconcile with the brother/sister who harbor animosity/negation against us. This responsibility is stretched even further within the last precept, demanding an enlarged vision of the other, recognizing even the enemy as (estranged) sibling and loving them accordingly, seeking/praying for their flourishing. As Desmond Tutu states, among humanity 'God has no enemies, only family'.³

Here comes the related question: should the one whom we forgive – the enemy – be repentant at the moment of forgiveness? I believe Jacques Derrida's assertion that when we forgive the penitent, we are forgiving a different (transformed) human being, not the original perpetrator (p. 187), is instructive, especially in light of Jesus' paradigmatic act of unconditional forgiveness from the cross that the early Christian martyrs embraced as part of their rehumanizing, Christofforming journey (p. 88). In relation to Macchia's compelling recasting of Pannenberg's thought in light of Pentecost, I would like to point to Behr's assertion that, looking at the cross, the beholder is apprehended in the vision of the completion of humanity (p. 89), not its abolition. Christ's forgiveness from the cross (as the cradle of reconciliation) is part of this teleological process. This Christic grace extended from the cross to humanity is the source from which humanity is to extend it to others (p. 194). Therefore, forgiveness is

3 Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), pp. 46–47.

freedom/liberation and participation in the divine life, and as such is experienced as a transformative encounter of divine grace.

The socio-transformative power of forgiveness resides, undoubtedly, with the victims. Can the victims refuse to forgive? Yes, they can, but for those who follow Christ, unforgiveness seems not to be an option – the end of their Christofforming journey is reconciliation with one's enemy (pp. 164–82). Yet, forgiveness is not giving a license to the perpetrator to continue dehumanizing others. As a profoundly pneumatic, Christofforming event, forgiveness is empowerment to hold the perpetrator responsible for his/her own Christic transfiguration, for this is what love does. Loving one's enemy demands summoning them resolutely and uncompromisingly back to their humanity, refusing to be enablers of their self-dehumanization through dehumanizing others. Forgiveness is not sheepish tolerance; it is a socio-transformative extremism of love that aims at the transfiguration of the world into a sanctuary of comprehensive distributive justice – of shalom and flourishing for all.

3 Between Testimony and Hagiography

In this final section, I would like to address briefly Joseph Lear's engaging reflection on testimony and hagiography. As explicated within the Epilogue's introduction (pp. 199–200), hagiographies come in various subgenres; yet they all have some common features, one of which is that they seek to address the aporia between moral theory and practice. As such, hagiographies are texts in public moral theology. Therefore, while hagiographies are also testimonial in their doxological character, their catechetical and liturgical function extends beyond that of testimony by offering paradigmatic Christian ethics of responsibility.

Choosing the 'acts' model in articulating the stories of the Pentecostal peacebuilders in Eastern Slavonia was not accidental. This hagiographical subgenre is modeled after the Acts of the Apostles, viewed as narrating what Christ did post-ascension through his Spirit-saturated communal body on earth. In this sense, hagiographies written as 'acts' maintain a strong doxological orientation. In light of this, the 'acts' approach seemed to facilitate best also the flow of the eyewitnesses' accounts about the peacebuilding acts of the Spirit through consecrated human agents in the midst of war.

It is important to point out that in their theological agenda, hagiographies do not obscure the shortcomings of the saints, but strive to present their messy and turbulent Christofforming journey. Often the beginning of hagiographies depicts the saints as unlikely candidates for sainthood – they are occasionally

introduced to the reader as being antithetical to Christ-likeness – as persecutors and deniers of Christ, as reprobates (prostitutes, tax-collectors, violent unjust rulers), mockers of Christian moral commitments. Yet, their encounter with Christ places them on an upward journey of Christification, representing the very teleological intention of this hope-charged genre. If the saints are ordinary human beings – broken, doubting, struggling with their own identity, failing to resist temptation, including that of routinized ethnocentrism, nationalism and xenophobia – then there is hope for the readers who fight the same temptations and spirits within and without. Precisely the ordinariness of saintly lives asserts their credibility as examples of the synergy between divine grace and human responsibility in the believers' Christofforming journey.

Returning to the contemporary North American context, the vision of the *SCG* reminds readers that there is no peace without justice and no justice without love. Forgiving requires remembering that holds perpetrators accountable, as love seeks the flourishing of one's enemy. The saintly lives described in the book walk this 'harsh and dreadful' journey of 'love in action'. They are restless in the pursuit of the other's flourishing, refusing to turn away their face, so that the other (the enemy) can behold the countenance of God and recollect his/her own humanity in the Spirit-illuminated iconography of the other's face.