

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

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NEIGHBOR is defined as "to live near" or "a friend" or a fellow man." We shall accept the third definition of the dictionary and understand neighbor in this paper as "a fellow man," making no distinction between color, race, or creed, but accept the term in a general sense.

In his wonderful tract on Charity (*Summa Theologica* 2a 2ae *Questio* XXIII) St. Thomas points out among others the following characteristics of a real neighbor. He defines neighbor as "a created intellectual person, enjoying or capable of enjoying eternal happiness." Thus he says, a man's first duty is to his Creator. Far and above all other qualities will be his conception of God and the divine moral law. For a Catholic this means more than the terms stated. For example, the Catholic will be faithful to his Church, Mass on Sundays and holidays, his children will attend the Catholic school, he will be mindful of his pastor, giving to his support, his speech, that of a gentleman, clean, and his household prayerful. At all times he will realize that good example in fidelity to God may be the means of making some poor neighboring soul think of what he owes to God and perhaps the means of converting that soul to Christ. St. Thomas shows that the love of God is the foundation for the love of our neighbor. He gives the same reason that Christ gave when He said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and thy neighbor as thyself for the love of God." Love of God is therefore the corner-stone for the love of our neighbor, and every man is bound through this law to love his neighbor.

The love of God manifested in the love of neighbor will produce three great effects. The first is mercy. Mercy is that virtue whereby the will is inclined to assist others, materially and spiritually. This virtue should be extended to all at all times. In sorrow, joy or strife, mercy shown to others will never be forgotten. It was through mercy shown to the lame, the dumb and the blind that the fame of Christ was heralded throughout the land of Palestine. Men can be known as real neighbors in the same way although not in the same degree, by the practice

of this virtue. Mercy need not consist in gifts alone as many would have us think; mercy should come from the heart and manifest itself in the service of others; the honor that accrues to the man who is known as merciful cannot be measured. Little acts in themselves are often insignificant, but to those for whom they are done they appear as mountains of kindness. What a neighbor may say or do is often an uncertain test of what he is. Our only way of judging him is frequently through the feelings and they are not always trustworthy.

Another effect of charity in a neighbor is generosity. It is very easy to see the connection between these two virtues. If a neighbor is known to be merciful, he will be found to be generous. It is one of the noblest and greatest of virtues and like most virtues can easily be misunderstood. The goods of this world, given in such abundance should be shared by all. The rich owe their superabundance to the poor and the poor owe their neighbors their good will. There are few things that make a man happier than the knowledge that he has been the means of relieving the want of another; it makes small difference whether it has been through gifts, words or actions, the satisfaction is the same. So true is this that it is the corner-stone of the Mohammedan religion and the only stable bulwark of the Protestant church today; the relief of the poor and needy. A man need not be rich, in fact he may be considered poor, but poverty offers no excuse for omitting the practice of these virtues as faithfully as possible. Christ taught that a cup of cold water given in His name to the least of His brethren would receive its reward. All can afford a cup of water and that cup given with the right intention and spirit will not be forgotten by God. Closely akin to this virtue of generosity is almsgiving. St. Thomas places these two virtues together. One follows upon the other. If you are generous you will give to those in want. Human nature without the teaching of anyone realizes the nobility of giving alms to those in want. The poor will ever be with us and as real neighbors we must help them. Who are worthy and who are not, oftentimes is hard to tell. But would it not be a tragedy if we refused a beggar and that beggar were the Lord? The story of St. Martin sharing his cloak with the beggar should at least make us fear to refuse. In speaking of this virtue, the Angelic Doctor mentions the following order in charity. 1—God; 2—Our own soul; 3—the soul of our neighbor; 4—our

own body; 5—the body of our neighbor; 6—our own honor, fame, temporal goods; 7—those of our neighbor. From this scale we can easily see the place our neighbor finds in every man's life. Immediately following the care of our own soul comes that of our neighbor and the same holds for the body. St. Thomas even goes a step further and declares that should the soul of our neighbor be in danger of being lost we should sacrifice our body for his salvation.

The effect of these virtues in a neighbor is noteworthy. They form the subtle thing in us known as character. Character is what a man is. What he is supposed to be, is reputation. Character is of the soul; reputation is external. Character, if it be a good one, is priceless; reputation fluctuates with the thoughts of those who know us. Character is always real; reputation may be false. To possess character in the Christian sense and ideal is to be virtuous, to be a real neighbor. Again, a neighbor possessing these virtues will be broad in mind not looking only for the bad qualities in his fellow men but for the good as well. Queer as it may seem, human nature as a whole is very short-sighted, in so many cases it can only see the faults of a neighbor, never the good, and should the good be mentioned it is done so with a suggestive shrug or sneer. A real neighbor will never be a destructive critic over the conduct of his fellow men. All men have their faults, some more than others but the true man and neighbor loves and serves in spite of them. It is in cases of this kind that the true neighbor is tested. A word, a counsel, a hint, how often and easily it would dispel a failing or a mistaken idea. It seems such a little thing and the reward is so great. This is known as fraternal charity and St. Thomas places it immediately after the affects. It is not to be confounded with the notion that one should talk about or retail our neighbor's faults, far from it. It means to help and guide. A friend points out our mistakes in a sincere and constructive way, so will the real neighbor. On the other hand a neighbor does more than correct and point out the faults or mistakes of his fellow men, he will always strike a happy medium and it is for the wise and prudent to know when and how to suggest the correcting of a fault.

The effects of these virtues practised with sincerity and well meaning will without a doubt bear much good fruit. Then indeed will the world be a brotherhood in its truest sense. Na-

tions are clamoring for peace, yet they overlook the Prince of peace and His teachings. St. Thomas in speaking of the principal acts of charity and their effects says, "peace will accrue to the man who is a real neighbor, not the peace of the outward world but peace of the soul." And no greater peace can be found than the peace of a good conscience. Joy will find a large place in the neighborly man. He will find joy in the joys of others and will rejoice that others are finding joy.

Thus does St. Thomas answer our question. The word neighbor means very much more than the altruistic and commercial institutions of today would have us believe. A real neighbor will be an asset to society, a help to those who come in contact with him and a man of character and worth. If men have failed to grasp the meaning of it all,—and it seems impossible that they should, for it has been preached and taught in the Catholic churches and schools since the time of Christ,—they alone are to blame. For the implications of the word "neighbor" are not meaningless ideals but happy realities. Look to the Catholic Orphanages, homes for the aged, the blind, hospitals, homes for incurable diseases, foundling asylums, insane asylums and the thousand and one charitable organizations of the Catholic Church, conducted by men and women who have given their lives for their fellow men, asking no reward for their labors but good will and then we discover in the concrete the answer to the question, "Who is my Neighbor?"

