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**Review: *The Ethics of Encounter:
Christian Neighbor Love as a Practice of Solidarity*
by Marcus Mescher**

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“Jesus’s contemporaries could never have imagined the possibilities of ‘loving your neighbor as yourself’ in an age of globalization, digital technology, and the internet,” theologian and professor at Xavier University, Marcus Mescher remarks in *The Ethics of Encounter* (98). Taking on the challenge of re-imagining neighbor love, Mescher’s recent monograph offers a well-written and accessible meditation on how to engage and apply Catholic social teaching in today’s digital, global, and politicized world.

Mescher begins with the notion of “solidarity.” Pointing to its roots in Catholic social teaching, he builds on the idea of solidarity to envision “a culture of encounter” and, in the space of five chapters or steps, takes up the theological task of providing his reader with “a blueprint for living Catholic social teaching in everyday life” (xx).

Step one begins with a recognition of the inadequacy and disconnect of the current social status quo. In the “divided state of America” empathy, compassion, civility, and tolerance are not enough (1-2). Chapter one tackles the divisions and barriers keeping people from a true culture of encounter in the USA. Mescher draws on sociologist Allison Pugh’s characterization of American society as a “tumbleweed society,” political scientist Robert Putnam’s diagnosis of “incipient class apartheid,” and political scientist Edward Banfield’s observation of the rise of “amoral familism” to underscore that Americans increasingly have less and less understanding of one another and are also less likely to extend their sphere of moral concern beyond a closed circle of family and friends. In a disconnected culture characterized by moral tunnel vision, the “I do me, you do you” mentality amounts to indifference to the suffering of others or

desensitization to the moral injustices around us. For this reason, something like tolerance is not sufficient to bring people together. Tolerance has a dark side that comes out in environments where solidarity and concern for the common good are not actively practiced or valued. Mescher captures this ethical quandary with Charles Taylor’s notion of the “buffered self” of modernity which has replaced the “bonded” or “porous” self of more communitarian societies less inflected by the concern for individualism. This “buffered self” is more likely to exhibit indifference towards the suffering of others and disinterest in devoting personal resources and efforts to the common good. For instance, as Mescher points out, this buffered self is at work in the phenomenon of “white innocence,” where white buffered selves are able to live in comfortable ignorance of the negative impact of their own white privilege. In this spirit, Mescher goes on to point out different gender, class, and racial disparities that continue to plague American society, taking care to stress that social iniquities will persist and multiply as long as they are met with indifference and lack of solidarity. The solution is to build a culture of encounter, a pluralistic society that can bring together various viewpoints in active and intentional pursuit of the common good.

The next step moves from general social overviews to the Bible and a brief history of Catholic social teaching. The task is not to promote only a general culture of encounter, but, moreover, to build a culture of encounter from an insightful and sincere engagement from the starting points of Scripture and Catholic teaching. Mescher begins with an affirmation that Jesus was a poor person of color from what we now call the Middle East who dared to challenge the status quo. He then hones in on the tale of the Good Samaritan—a pericope he would rather call an

example than a parable. Mescher stresses that the question “who is my neighbor?” is the wrong question to ask. That is, when the lawyer asks Jesus “who is my neighbor?” he is asking where the limit of moral concern lies. It is essentially a selfish question. As Mescher puts it: “The question seeks a limit: who are the people I am less obligated—or not obligated at all—to help? It implies there is a nonneighbor, a person beyond one’s moral concern” (45). Mescher contrasts this with ample insights from liberation theology. According to Mescher, we must not be like the lawyer in this example; our task is to instead accept that, as followers of Jesus, our sphere of potential moral concern is not limited. Regardless of our apprehension, discomfort, or indifference, in Christ there is no nonneighbor. Accordingly, Mescher takes up liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez and the latter’s notion of the preferential option for the poor, which Mescher understands as a preference not exclusively for the poor, but an orientation to begin acts of solidarity with those in greatest need (58).

Chapter three takes up the challenge of discernment in applying Mescher’s proposed ethics of encounter. This chapter is arguably the most theologically weighty chapter in the book. While Mescher recognizes that in practice “a person’s moral vision excludes more people than it includes” (69), our human finitude does not preclude an ideal of moral concern for our neighbor. This standard is an ideal we strive toward in grace, even if we cannot meet it. Mescher again frames this ethical ideal in terms of solidarity, which he now clarifies is a life pattern with three dimensions: 1) “a virtuous identity formed by practicing courage, mercy, generosity, humility, and fidelity,” 2) a practice of “attentiveness and appropriate response to those nearby,” and 3) responsibility for promoting “inclusive participation” and the common good (71). As Mescher notes, solidarity first appeared in church teaching with Pope Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno*, a commemoration of Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the first document in the canon of Catholic social thought. Solidarity then gained more attention in John XXIII’s encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), then in Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio* (1967), and was a favorite term of John Paul II. He has already been citing Pope Francis throughout. Mescher also criticizes earlier church

views on solidarity for not consulting “social theory or social analysis in order to address how solidarity functions as an organizing principle, moral norm, or virtue;” in his view, this top-down approach, which assumes unity and fails to address the challenges of specific societies, is not enough to “address the realities of individual self-interest, anxiety and social conflict” (75). This gap is something Mescher has already attempted to address with his extensive reference to social theory in the previous chapters. In addition to social analysis, a deeper theological push is needed. To this end, Mescher asserts that it is imperative to cultivate a Catholic social imagination, a sacramental vision of neighbor encounter that is Christocentric. Such a vision should address several moral concerns to ensure a balance between serving those who already depend on us and moving out of our comfort zones to respond to neighbors in need. First, a Catholic social imagination should help us address the matter of loving neighbors from afar. It is one thing to uproot ourselves seeking out neighbors in need; it is another to move closer in response to a neighbor in need. The latter is Mescher’s proposal. Second, this vision must help us discern how and to whom we should respond in cases of competing moral claims. Third, discernment should be based on a priority of responding to those nearest and neediest first without neglecting our family and friends. Fourth, this process must mediate loving those near whilst still incorporating the preferential option for the poor. This brings us to the question of preferential love. Is preferential love incompatible with universal neighbor love? For Mescher, the two loves compete for our attention and resources, but they are not incompatible. For him, their compatibility is a question of balance and discernment. Mescher thus seeks a “virtuous midpoint” between potential neglect of family and friends or self in kenotic service to those in need and a cold and indifferent giving of alms from afar. As Mescher puts it, “solidarity is the mean between the vicious extremes of excessive individualism and coercive collectivism” (101).

The fourth chapter entails a step towards concrete practices of solidarity. For Mescher, these practices are embodied in the virtues of courage, mercy, generosity, humility, and fidelity. Courage is the act of accepting accountability for social

change. Practicing mercy here means taking up the difficult process of recognizing and addressing implicit bias in the world. Generosity is the practice of engaging across differences rather than sticking to one's own comfort zone or echo-chamber. Humility means recognizing that we are shaped by our environments, for better and for worse. Lastly, fidelity is the follow through that leads to deeper healing. To better cultivate courage, Mescher also introduces five fortifying practices: 1) mindfulness, 2) contemplation, 3) prayer, 4) participation in the sacraments, and 5) imagination. Importantly, he writes that "imagination serves as the bridge between personal and social change," and affirms the imagination as a crucial tool for testing the limits of what is possible and for probing the possibilities for positive change (116). As Mescher concludes on the virtue of fidelity, he brings in the example of Homeboy Industries and Father Greg Boyle's successful ministry to gang members in Los Angeles. Mescher uses this example to show how sustaining and life-giving long-term relationships with our neighbors are what lead to deep and lasting change.

The fifth and final chapter moves towards addressing a culture of belonging. Mescher starts with the family. He asserts that as long as families band together to promote greater solidarity and responsibility this will help guard against "family amorality" that exhibits no moral concern beyond one's nearest family and friends. In concrete terms, this means that limits should be placed on how much time and money is spent on family. He then moves from family to church, calling all churches to "foster a culture of encounter *ad intra* and *ad extra*" (157). From church, Mescher moves to the hybrid world of online and real life identities. While he does not demonize digital technology, he does stipulate that in order for digital technologies to abet a culture of encounter they must facilitate concrete action and not stop at spectator sports. It is not enough to speak from a social media soap box. Online connection should facilitate real life change. To close, Mescher takes up the question of the non-human neighbor. Can an ethics of encounter based on the Catholic social teachings of solidarity apply to nature and the environment? For this, he takes up the work of ecotheologian Thomas Berry.

Overall, Mescher offers his reader an impressive weft of social issues framed with respect to Catholic social teaching, closing on a note of hope. Nevertheless, there are three main points where I would have liked him to elaborate more.

First, while he acknowledges the challenges of human finitude in cultivating an ethics of encounter, he could have spent more time addressing the real brokenness that occurs when encounters are not always safe or fruitful, or when those striving to encounter others are themselves already broken. It is one thing to give a road map to the destination. It is quite another to have a AAA card or a spare tire handy when the car breaks down on the way. Admittedly, he only promised a blueprint for encounter and he also acknowledges that our brokenness can hinder us from encounter. However, while Mescher acknowledges human brokenness and finitude, he does not fully bring them into the creative theological imagination. His attempt to portray a virtuous midpoint between preferential love and universal neighbor love is admirable and much needed today. At the same time, the act of balancing love for family and friends and accountability to neighbors in need cannot always be a happy midpoint. Sometimes it is an act of taking up the cross and hoping for grace amid brokenness. In such moments, the question becomes, what does it mean to practice virtues of courage, mercy, generosity, humility, and fidelity in and from a place of brokenness? His account of discernment might have delved a little deeper into this question.

Second, Mescher calls for discernment but disparages judgment, juxtaposing judgment negatively with compassion. Understandably, he is trying to guard against divisive mentalities and false feelings of moral superiority. That is all laudable and necessary. Nevertheless, is it not possible to use discernment as a theological tool to recast our ideas of healthy assessments of others (i.e., judgments) in ways that are encounter-forming rather than "judgmental"? This is an especially pertinent question when applying discernment to healthy boundaries and self-care, a topic he mentions on several occasions. Further, encountering others means learning about others, and learning about others requires making guesses and judgments about them, as an expression of

natural curiosity. In both senses, individual judgment is necessary yet should never be absolute. The question becomes, how do I trust my own judgment in such a way as to respect my limits and boundaries without idolizing my own judgment and presuming it means I stand on moral high ground vis-à-vis another?

Third and finally, while he introduces the idea of the nonhuman as neighbor early on, he only takes it up towards the end of the book and in a rather cursory way. His proposal that the example of the Good Samaritan might apply to nature and the environment was an exciting prospect. Mescher might have explored this avenue in greater depth. For instance, how could the virtues outlined in

chapter four apply to our relationship with the environment specifically? Are there any practical examples like Father Greg Boyle's Homeboy Industries that illustrate Mescher's vision for being a better neighbor to the environment?

To conclude, *The Ethics of Encounter* offers a timely, informative, and inspiring digest of both social and theological perspectives on the challenges of human disconnect, moral indifference, systemic injustice, and environmental exploitation. It is a hopeful reminder that Catholic social teaching provides a well of resources from which to draw on when trying to face the often-daunting challenges of our age. 