

# Who is my Neighbor?

by Fr. Ken James Stavrevsky

*Certainly the obstinate rage of an angry soul brings about the same injury to one's self whoever may be the subject against whom it is aroused. ~ John Cassian*

Who is my neighbor, Lord Christ, that I may love him? For I acknowledge that my neighbor is to be loved as myself, for all are in Your love; and without such love for You and neighbor I wither and die in prideful isolation, the victim of a vicious deceit, destined to a hell rightly called the land of forgetfulness (Ps 88:12).

A Samaritan came upon one in desperate need and through action became an icon of what it means to be a loving neighbor (Lk 10:25ff). In embracing his example and seeking to emulate his love, I yet wonder what this requires of us as a community of neighbors. Through a synaxis of believers inspired of the Holy Spirit, we stand before You not only as uniquely fashioned persons but also as a people... "the people of God."

How do we as a people as Church deal with the great command to love You and our neighbor as ourselves? As if the lesson of the parable came upon hardened hearts, we raise the ancient question anew: "Who is our neighbor?"

Our common home is a place of worship where the Holy One is encountered. Here we receive the new birth; here we receive the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit; here we repent of sin and are reconciled; here we receive the Eucharist; here we are given in marriage; here we share in abundant life; here we shall be presented before God when our earthly members cease to live. The Church is our true and common home. It is the place of solemn and sacred residence common to all, and confirmed in the one bread and cup of our unity in Christ. Coming from every direction, leaving behind for a time our temporal dwellings, our processional journeys converge as the Holy Temple is approached. At last we assemble, or more properly are assembled by the Holy Spirit. We are home. The journey has ended. Entering the Temple we, like the Samaritan of old, pass by our common neighbor.

How tragic it would be for us to "walk by on the other side" in the presence of a neighbor in need. Many of our parishes are situated in urban areas surrounded by souls needful of physical and spiritual care. The neighbor dimension of parish life can be rendered impotent by a consumer mentality which approaches the Temple as if it were a "Spiritual Wal-Mart" dispensing goods, services and various assortments of grace. We go, we shop, we return home. But the Church demands more of those who gather in her embrace. Her location is not accidental.

To be sure, many were the sacrifices, labors and prayers that brought construction to fruition. The Holy Spirit guided and empowered the process. Like a farmer, those

founding fathers and mothers sowed the seeds of faith. How strange it would be for them, or their children, to abandon efforts that enable the reaping of a bountiful harvest!

Yet the neighbors are not our kind. Some act as enemies to us, and we would do well to disassociate from them like the ancient Jews and Samaritans. Perhaps we need a better alarm system, or maybe we should relocate to a "better" place. It is odd that this sacred and consecrated place can be in a bad neighborhood, yet proclaim the transfiguring power of the Gospel within its walls. Did the Bishop err when he prayed that God would "establish it immovable unto the end of time and glorified in Thee" (prayer at the consecration of a Church)?

How many years has this Temple been the place where the Lenten theme of the Last Judgment was proclaimed in song, saying "Let this be our way of life: Let us feed the hungry, let us give the thirsty drink, let us clothe the naked, let us welcome strangers..." (Vespers). Could this possibly apply to the people living nearby? They have food and water and clothing.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta may strike a chord of truth in reflection of the Lord's words "I was hungry and you gave Me to eat." She says, "Not only for bread, I was hungry for love. I was naked, not only for a piece of cloth, but I was naked for that human dignity of a child of God. I was homeless, not only for a home made of brick, but I was homeless, rejected, unwanted, unloved, a throwaway of society, and you did it to Me."

Following the Eucharistic celebration, as we "depart in peace" from the consecrated Temple of God, we would do well to remember words penned by Fr. Harakas: "The most important concern of Christian love...is for those who have need of the knowledge of God." We, the unworthy inheritors of the Apostolic proclamation that reached the ends of the world, now find ourselves on the other side of the western door in the world which Christ came to save. We may smile, remembering the lovely couple married last week who stood in this spot with showers of rice falling upon them as the relatives and friends cheered; and perhaps consider anew the prayer which said: "Fill their houses with...every beneficence, that they may bestow in turn upon the needy." We will travel to our residences, but not without passing by our neighbor. St. Theophan the Recluse urges us to act saying, "...you must always have this thirst for the salvation of your neighbors." But it is a rundown neighborhood, and we live so very far away. For now, we hurriedly pass by en route to the better side of town. The car radio plays a favorite beat that silences the words of Chrysostom: "I am now ashamed of speaking of almsgiving... I see you sowing, but not with a liberal hand. Wherefore I fear too, lest you also reap sparingly."

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