

The Love of God and Neighbour according to Aquinas: An Interpretation

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Christian theologians' ruminations on the relationship between the commands to love God and neighbour in the New Testament traverse a broad spectrum. Some posit a unity or even the identity of loving God and the neighbour. Others insist on a clear distinction or disjunction between loving God and loving the neighbour, sometimes pointing to the variance of the scriptural formulations: we are to love God "with all our heart, soul, mind and strength," whereas we are enjoined to love our neighbour "as ourselves" (cf. Mt 22: 34-40; Mk 12: 28-34; Lk 10:25-29).¹ In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas deals with this issue under the rubric of charity (*caritas*) and the respective merits of the active and contemplative life (II.II. 25-27; II.II. 179-182, 185.2, 188). In the following essay, I will analyze Aquinas' thought on the relationship between the love of God and neighbour by examining these parts of the *Summa*. These articles will be the focus of my analysis as they represent the heart of Aquinas' writing on this issue. However, I will occasionally refer to other parts of the *Summa*, which either reinforce, clarify or perhaps obfuscate his position.² I will argue that Aquinas clearly emphasizes both the love of God and neighbour as constitutive elements of the moral life. However, his conception of the relationship between the two remains nebulous in various places. This essay will attempt to elucidate as far as possible the nature of the relationship between the love of God and neighbour according to Aquinas. As we shall see, his thought provides fertile ground for scholarly debate and various interpretations of the precise nature of the relationship between the love of God and neighbour. This essay will offer one possible interpretation.³

As stated above, Aquinas stresses a kind of unity of the love of God and neighbour in his treatise on charity in the *Summa*. First, he defines charity as the "friendship of man [sic] for God" (II.II.23.1) and deems it the end of all the other virtues (II.II.23.8).⁴ In other words, charity directs all virtues to their highest perfection, namely union with God. "Attuned by charity, the moral virtues serve friendship with God."⁵ Moreover, Aquinas states that

...[T]he aspect under which our neighbour is to be loved is God, since what we ought to love in our neighbour is that he [sic] may be in God. Hence it is

clear that it is specifically the same act whereby we love God, and whereby we love our neighbour. Consequently the habit of charity extends not only to the love of God, but also to the love of neighbour (II.II. 25.1).

This statement evinces that Aquinas envisions a link between the two loves, i.e. love towards God and neighbour.⁶ He claims that we love both in the “same act” and that charity extends to both God and neighbour. Hence, he posits a unity between the two loves. However, he does not explicate the nature of this unity lucidly in this passage. In this essay, we aim to clarify this issue by addressing the following questions:

- 1) Is neighbour love related to love of God because the latter motivates or causes us to love the neighbour? Is there are more integral relationship between the two loves?
- 2) Does all love of the neighbour entail loving God?
- 3) Can one love the neighbour without reflectively and intentionally loving God?
- 4) Can one love God without reflectively and intentionally loving God?
- 5) Does loving the neighbour ostensibly function as a means to loving God? In other words, does Aquinas instrumentalize the neighbour?
- 6) Are there individual acts of loving God that do not entail love of neighbour?
- 7) Is there a primary or superior way to love God, i.e. one that is required for love of God to exist at all?

These questions, not necessarily successively, shall serve as a guide through our reflections on Aquinas’ thought. In my judgment, the answers to these questions will enable us to construct a clearer picture of the precise nature of the relationship between the two loves according to Aquinas.

In attempting to answer these questions, we must examine several key phrases used by Aquinas. What does it mean, as Aquinas puts it, to love the neighbour: 1) “out of charity” and 2) “for God’s sake”? Let us take each in turn, looking at their usages in various texts.

Aquinas maintains “charity is the good which we desire for all those whom we love out of charity’s sake” (II.II.25.2). Hence, we desire friendship with God (i.e. charity’s definition, as we saw above) for those whom we love “out of charity.” Aquinas also contends that we should love ourselves out of charity, because we are to “*love thyself as thy friend*” (II.II.25.4). Following Augustine, he argues that we should love our bodies out of charity (II.II.25.5). Do these statements imply that we love all of these objects *in order to love God*? Does it equally or alternatively imply that we love the neighbour *because we love God*, i.e. our love for God *motivates* us to love the neighbour?⁷

In one instance Aquinas perhaps indicates that love of God functions as the conscious motive for our loving the neighbour: “For since man loves

his neighbour, out of charity, for God's sake, the more he loves God, the more does he put his enmities aside and show love towards his neighbour" (II.II.25.8). One interpretation of this statement is as follows: *Epistemologically* speaking, once we know that loving God requires and entails loving neighbour, we feel compelled to do so; the knowledge of the unity of the two loves motivates us to love the neighbour. Aquinas seems to have this in mind when he maintains that one can love one's friend "for another reason than God," whereas "God is the only reason for loving the enemy" (II.II.27.7). However, it could be said that love of neighbour here is seen simply as a "natural outgrowth" of the love of God; it need not be consciously intended. Aquinas does not explicitly state that all of our actions must be reflectively and overtly directed towards the love of God. He maintains rather that when we minister to our neighbour's need, which characterizes the "active life" according to Aquinas, we love the neighbour for God's sake and "the services we render our neighbour redound to God" (II.II.188.2). Thus, enlivened by the gift of charity, we may love God by loving the neighbour in even without explicit awareness of it.

A question still remains concerning in whom and under what conditions charity operates. Aquinas contends that charity, "that love of God, by which He is loved as the object of bliss" (I.II.65.1.Ad.1) is "impossible without faith" (I.II.65.1). We must therefore inquire about what constitutes "faith" for Aquinas. Aquinas asserts that "explicit faith in the mysteries of Christ," especially those promulgated by the church, was required "after grace had been revealed" (II.II.2.7). As a result, while all acts of love of God through loving the neighbour need not be explicitly referred to God, it appears that non-Christians cannot love God (at least not during Aquinas' era and presumably thereafter). This is the case because charity, which cannot be acquired by the "natural powers," but must be infused by the Holy Spirit (II.II.24.2), is not operative in them. To reiterate, charity, according to Aquinas, requires faith, i.e. "explicit faith in the mysteries of Christ."⁸ In addition, those believers who have lost charity by sinning mortally and remain in that state, cannot love God out of charity (cf. II.II.24.12). Thus, we can at least provisionally answer the question as to whether one can love God without reflectively and explicitly loving God. Christians who love the neighbour, and are not in the state of mortal sin, simultaneously love God as all of their actions are referable to God, even if individual actions are not explicitly intended to do so. Non-Christians, however, cannot perform acts of loving the neighbour that are referred to God because they do not possess the infused gift of charity to begin with, as it requires faith.⁹ Aquinas does add one caveat in his discussion of the active and contemplative life that may challenge this interpretation (cf. II.II.182.4.Ad.1), which we will

encounter when we discuss the merits of the active and contemplative life.

Elsewhere, Aquinas bases the relationship between the two loves on the *relatedness of God and humanity*:

...[W]e may speak of charity in respect of its specific nature, namely as denoting man's friendship with God in the first place, and, consequently, with the things of God, among which things is man himself who has charity. Hence, among these other things which *he loves out of charity because they pertain to God*, he loves also himself out of charity (II.II.25.4; italics added).

Moreover, all neighbours are to be loved "insofar as they are referred to the one good common to them all, namely God" (II.II.25.1.Ad.2). In other words, all members of God's family are to be loved because they are members of God's family. When one loves the parent, he or she will also love the children, even if the children are "unfriendly" to them (cf. II.II.25.8). *Normatively* speaking, we should love the neighbour because she is one of God's children and because she is "associated with us in the partaking of happiness," which God bestows upon us (II.II.12; cf. II.II.25.10). We share with the neighbour in a "fellowship of happiness" (II.II.12.Ad.3). However, Aquinas qualifies this notion of loving the neighbour as one of God's family in his discussion of loving the sinner. While we shall not dwell on this question here, it is important to note the following stipulation. On the one hand, we are to love "all men [sic] equally out of charity" insofar as we wish them all "everlasting happiness" (II.II.25.6.Ad.1). On the other hand, we ought not to love all with "equal intensity." Nor should we love all people in the same manner. For example, we should not show "friendliness" to sinners who remain recalcitrant and "incurable" (II.II.25.6.Ad.2). Succinctly stated, while all humans are to be loved out of charity, there are many different ways to love them, sometimes even by putting them to death (cf. II.II.25.6.Ad.2; see also II.II.26.7). Aquinas views the multiplicity of ways of loving as wholly appropriate.¹⁰

In another important passage, Aquinas underscores the notion that *love of neighbour emanates from one's love of God*.

Accordingly, we must assert that to love which is an act of the appetitive power, even in this state of life, *tends to God first, and flows on from Him to other things*, and in this sense charity loves God immediately, and other things through God. On the other hand, with regard to knowledge, it is the reverse, since we know God through other things, either as a cause through its effects, or by way of preeminence of negation as Dionysius states... (II.II.27.4; italics added).

Here, Aquinas highlights another dimension of the two loves, namely that love of God is in some way primary. This begs the question again, does love of God motivate us to love the neighbour? In other words, how

exactly does charity “extend” from love of God to the neighbour? First, in accordance with Deuteronomy 6:5 (“*Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart*”), Aquinas states that everything that we have and everything we do should be referred to the love of God (II.II.27.5). God is to be loved more than everyone and everything else because God is the very “cause of happiness” (II.II.26.2). Yet, Aquinas contends that the neighbour is “the first thing to demand our love” (II.26.2.Ad.1). This enigmatic statement leaves one wondering how both loves can be “first.” Let us attempt to follow the contours of Aquinas’ thought, as they seem to provide an answer.

In a sense, Aquinas’ emphasis on the primacy of the love of God “relativizes” the love of neighbour. “Relativization” of love of neighbour applies appropriately if by it is simply meant that “it would be wrong if a man [sic] loved his neighbour as though he were his last end, but not if he loved him for God’s sake” (II.II.25.1.Ad.3). However, Aquinas does not envision a necessary “tug of war” between the two loves, in which one must eventually succumb to the other. Rather, the two loves can and should harmoniously coexist. Aquinas points to an ontological unity between the two. While love of God is primary in the sense described above, the love of neighbour is in a way existentially prior. In other words, we “meet with” the concrete neighbour before we encounter God (cf. II.26.2.Ad.1) thematically (i.e. reflectively). Therefore, while our love for God ontologically precedes and flows onto the neighbour, it is the encounter with the concrete neighbour that provides the first opportunity to love God.¹¹ As Aquinas states, appealing to Gregory, “[f]or since our neighbour is more visible to us, he is the first lovable object we meet with, because the soul learns from those things it knows, to love what it knows not...” (II.II.26.2.Ad.1).¹² In the order of being, the two loves occurs simultaneously; we love God in the neighbour.¹³ In the order of knowledge, we first learn to love the neighbour, thereby implicitly loving God. This enables and fosters the subsequent, reflective, explicit loving of God. In this regard, love of neighbour is not borne of explicit love of God as the catalyst; it is not merely an “effect” of explicitly loving God. However, this does not negate the possibility of the love of God as a conscious motivation for the love of neighbour after the “hidden” encounter with God in the neighbour, if you will.¹⁴ Finally, we should also note that in Aquinas’ view God ultimately makes loving the neighbour possible. In this vein, we are responding to God’s offer of grace when we love the neighbour. In Aquinas’ words, “the charity whereby formally we love our neighbour is a participation of Divine charity” (II.II.23.2.Ad.1; cf. Ad.3).¹⁵ God is also “the cause of our loving God” (II.II.27.6).

Thus, it would be erroneous, in my judgment, to contend that Aquinas

sees love of neighbour as somehow of lesser importance than love of God. Love of God does not “relativize” love of neighbour, if “relativization” is understood to imply that love of God may sometimes come at the expense of loving the neighbour. It is true that Aquinas posits that sometimes we should not love the incorrigible sinner, as we saw above. He even goes as far as saying “we ought to hate our neighbour for God’s sake, if, to wit, he leads us astray from God” (II.II.26.2). However, it is important to notice that Aquinas argues that we should discontinue loving him or her in a certain way. Of sinners, Aquinas states that we should hate them “in respect of their guilt whereby they are opposed to God.” The weak, according to Aquinas, should not maintain contact with sinners, for they might become tainted by them. The “perfect,” however, should try to convert sinners as Jesus did (Ad.5). Moreover, sin does not destroy the nature of the human being who sins. In respect to their nature, we should love sinners. We should love them, out of charity, as persons who have the capacity for happiness in accordance with their nature.

Thus, we have seen how love of God and neighbour mutually entail one another in Aquinas’ thought. Aquinas underscores the normative status of this claim in the following passage, which is worth citing at length given its clarity and significance for our further reflections:

...First by considering the two loves separately: and then, without doubt, the love of God is more meritorious, because a reward is due to it for its own sake, since the ultimate reward is the enjoyment of God to Whom the movement of the Divine love tends: hence a reward is promised to him that loves God (Jo. xiv. 21): *He that loveth Me, shall be loved of my Father, and I will ... manifest Myself to him.* Secondly, the comparison may be understood to be between the love of God alone on the one side, and the love of one’s neighbour for God’s sake on the other. In this way the love of our neighbour includes love of God, while love of God does not include our love of neighbour. Hence, the comparison will be between perfect love of God, extending also to our neighbour, and inadequate and imperfect love of God, for *this commandment we have from God, that he, who love God, also loveth his brother* (1 Jo. iv. 21)” (II.II.27.8).

Once again, Aquinas declares the primacy of the love of God. More importantly for our present purposes, he introduces the notion of “perfect” and “imperfect” love of God. By introducing this concept, Aquinas opens the door to a way of loving God that does not include love of neighbour. However, he deems this love of God “inadequate and imperfect.” With this qualification, he perhaps intimates that there can be no true love of God that does not include the love of neighbour. An important question pertains to whether or not Aquinas refers here only to the virtue of charity

in general, or if he means that each individual act of loving God must somehow be related to love of neighbour. It would seem that he has the former in mind. We shall defer further analysis for the moment in order to turn to another issue, namely the use of the phrase “for God’s sake.” With this, the “instrumentalization of the neighbour” problem resurfaces.

Aquinas informs us that loving our friends is “meritorious if we love them for God’s sake, not merely because they are our friends” (II.II.27.Ad.1). Generally speaking, love of neighbour is only meritorious when she or he is loved “for God’s sake” (II.II.27.8). As we have seen, the sinner, or at least that part of his or her nature which is good, is to be loved “for God’s sake” (II.II.25.6). Likewise, one should love his or her enemy “for God’s sake” (II.II.25.8). We should even love demons out of charity, insofar as we wish their “natural gifts to endure unto the glory of God” (II.II.25.11.3). Does this mean that all people are to be loved in order to love God? Aquinas’ seems to answer affirmatively. He speaks explicitly of loving “ourselves and our neighbour to love God” (II.II.25.2.Ad.1). Moreover, “love of God out of charity surpasses all love” (II.II.180.7). It would seem then that Aquinas envisions all love as a means to attaining that highest love, which is love of God.

In one passage Aquinas mentions four different ways to love God, in accordance with the four types of causality (final, formal, efficient and material). According to the first three ways, God is to be loved as an end in God’s self. While we can love God for the something else, for example the favours God grants us (this refers to the fourth manner) we should love God “for Himself [sic].” In my judgment, this passage illuminates one meaning of the phrase “for God’s sake.” Citing Augustine, Aquinas notes that “*to enjoy is to cleave to something for its own sake. Now God is to be enjoyed...*” (II.II.27.3). Therefore, we love the neighbour “*because God is in the neighbour.*”¹⁶ We love him or her in order to love God.

The question may be asked as to whether this coheres with what was said above about loving the neighbour “first.” The answer will determine whether or not Aquinas ultimately “instrumentalizes” the neighbour, i.e. sees the neighbour merely as a means towards loving God. It should be acknowledged that in several passages Aquinas uses language that connotes this idea. For example, in his discussion of the “two precepts of charity,” Aquinas states that “[l]ove of our neighbour includes the love of God, as the ends is included in the means...” (II.II.44.2.Ad.4). The corpus of this passage once again exemplifies Aquinas’ stress on the unity of the love of God and neighbour. By the same token, however, his use of the terms “end” and “means” sounds problematic, at least to the ear attuned to one of Kant’s famous formulations of the categorical imperative: all human beings are to be treated as ends in themselves. In light of this maxim, which

arguably has attained “canonical status” in many moral systems, including official Roman Catholic morality, Aquinas’ following words may disturb, or at least confound us: “God is loved in our neighbour, as the end is loved in that which is directed to the end” (II.II.44.2.Ad.2) and “the means derive their goodness from their relation to the end” (II.II.44.2.Ad.3). In another instance, Aquinas speaks in Pauline fashion of loving our bodies as “instruments of justice unto God” (II.II.25.5). Does this confirm, along with the other passages cited, that he views all other goods to be used as instruments towards the ultimate goal of loving God?

While acknowledging that Aquinas runs the risk of “instrumentalizing the neighbour” in several passages, his reflections on charity taken as a whole modify, or at least mitigate, this interpretation of his theory. To recapitulate some of our earlier observations, Aquinas posits that we love the neighbour and in doing so we love God (given the “preconditions” elaborated above, of course). This is not tantamount to saying that we love the neighbour *because* we love God (i.e. the “motivation thesis”). Nor does it precisely equate with saying that we love the neighbour *in order to love God*. As we have seen, these notions do represent dimensions of the unity of the love of God and neighbour. Yet, there is an ontological dimension in which the neighbour, as well as God, is really and loved as an object. Once again, Aquinas’ own words are revealing: “since our neighbour is more visible to us, he [sic] is the first loveable object we meet with...Hence, it can be argued, *if any man [sic] loves not his neighbour, neither does he love God*, not because his neighbour is more lovable, but *because he is the first thing to demand our love...*” (II.II.26.2; italics added). Therefore, while love for God is the “ultimate destination,” and one that our love can attain¹⁷ we must truly love the neighbour out of charity. Succinctly stated, Aquinas conceptualizes the unity of the love of God and neighbour as an ontological necessity here.

Aquinas provides a nuanced discussion of concrete ways of loving the neighbour, which at the same time attests to his concern for truly loving the neighbour. For example, he repeatedly mentions “cases of urgency,” in which we must attend to the physical needs of those who suffer. For example, while we are not required out of charity to show outward “signs of our love” to our enemies, we must be ready “to come to their assistance in a case of urgency, according to Proverb xxv. 21: *if thy enemy be hungry, give him to eat; if he thirst, give him...drink*” (II.II.25.9). We are obligated to forsake “the care of our own body” in cases of urgency for the neighbour’s welfare (II.II.26.5.Ad.3). Furthermore, the love of charity encompasses all the moral virtues. “[T]hrough them man [sic] performs each different kind of good work”

(I.II.65.3).¹⁸ Aquinas stipulates, however, that we should never jeopardize our own salvation, i.e. commit mortal sin, for the sake of the neighbour (II.II.26.4). This makes perfect sense, given that our union with God represents the highest good we can achieve.¹⁹ Furthermore, loving the neighbour “for God’s sake” not only means loving the neighbour because God is in them; it also entails loving the neighbour “*so that they can be in God and God can be in them.*”²⁰ Not only are we to care for the physical needs of the neighbour, including enemies and sinners “in cases of urgency,” but we are to care for their souls, their spiritual welfare (cf. especially II.II.25.2).²¹ Thus, while it is wrong to love the neighbour as a “final end,” i.e. as the greatest good, Aquinas’ understanding of the love of neighbour demands more than using the neighbour as an instrument.²² We can treat the neighbour as an end in herself by seeing her as a child of God and caring for her welfare as such. We can love both God and neighbour as ends in themselves (not final ends, of course) because God and the neighbour are not two objects within the same sphere of existence (charity “extends” to both the divine and human realm). We can perform specific acts of loving the neighbour with the intention of doing good for him or her, while at the same time performing loving deeds which are ultimately referred to God.²³ Because Aquinas embraces this idea, he can maintain that “the whole Law is fulfilled through charity, for it is written (Rom. xiii. 8): *He that loveth his neighbour, hath fulfilled the Law*” (I.II.65.3).

These reflections provide a logical segue into another of our concerns that were introduced at the outset of this essay. Are all acts of loving God also acts of loving the neighbour? At first glance, Aquinas appears to answer in the negative. Recall in this vein Aquinas’ comparison of “love of God separately” and love of neighbour that includes love of God (cf. p. 9 above) Even though Aquinas states love of God in itself is “more meritorious,” he concludes that love of God that does not extend to love of our neighbour is “inadequate and imperfect.” However, this may refer to the virtue of charity, i.e. love of God as one’s definitive “yes or no” to God must include incarnate love for the neighbour throughout one’s life. As Simon Tugwell trenchantly writes, Aquinas “takes it for granted that there can be no Christian life at all without some acts of fraternal charity.”²⁴ Yet, in the passage referred to above (cf. p.9), Aquinas refers to “love of God that does not include love of neighbour.” If such acts exist, what shape do they take concretely?

Aquinas’ treatment of the active and contemplative life affords us further insight. According to Aquinas, the active and contemplative lives have different ends. The latter has as its end “the consideration of truth.” The former’s end is “external work.” The active life “principally, but not exclusively” pertains to our relations with other people (II.II.181.1, 1.

Ad.1). The contemplative life includes “rest from external action” (II.II.180.2) and “consist[s] in the love of God, inasmuch as through loving God we are aflame to gaze on His beauty” (II.II.180.1). Because the contemplative life “pertains directly and immediately to the love of God,” it is “generically more meritorious” than that which “pertains to directly to the love of neighbour for God’s sake,” i.e. the active life (II.II.182.2). Hence, it would seem that a life of contemplation, which is directly aimed at loving God, represents the best way to love God, and it is distinct from the love of neighbour. In one instance, Aquinas clearly asserts the superiority of loving God through contemplation:

External labour conduces to the increase of the accidental reward; but the increase of merit with regard to the essential reward consists chiefly in charity, whereof external labour borne for Christ’s sake is a sign. Yet a much more expressive sign thereof is shown when a man, renouncing whatsoever pertains to this life, delights to occupy himself entirely with Divine contemplation (II.II.182.2.Ad.1)

Yet, we have already seen that for Aquinas love of God that does not include love of neighbour is “inadequate and imperfect.” Perhaps Aquinas considers the individual act of contemplation to be greater than individual “external works” (under certain circumstances). Admittedly, Aquinas’ myriad distinctions and qualifications can be baffling. Let us, however, strive towards as much clarity as possible.²⁵ As difficult as this may be, the richness of Aquinas’ reflections makes the effort worthwhile.

Aquinas attempts to integrate the love of neighbour and the contemplative life. In several passages, he indicates that the active life, which focuses mainly on the love of neighbour, disposes or prepares one for the contemplative life. It precedes the contemplative life in “the order of generation” (II.II.182.4., corpus and Ad. 1.). Moreover, “the love of God and the love of neighbour is requisite to the contemplative life” (II.II.180.2.Ad.1); the moral virtues, which are “directed towards external actions,” i.e. the active life, “dispose one to the contemplative life by causing peace and cleanness of heart” (II.II.180.Ad.2). Unfortunately, Aquinas does not seem to draw the full implications from this concept. If he had stressed here that justice and mercy are the moral virtues that must serve as “prerequisites” for the contemplative life, it would be clear that love of neighbour is the prior, necessary foundation of the contemplative life. However, he goes on to state that “the virtue of chastity most of all makes a man apt for contemplation” (II.II.180.Ad.3). Nonetheless, many of his other statements indicate that he was perhaps moving in this direction.

First, Aquinas claims that mercy is the whole of the Christian life in regard to external actions, not chastity (II.II.30.4.Ad.2).²⁶ In addition, Aquinas challenges the notion that the love of God through

contemplation, albeit “more meritorious,” is the superior way of loving God in the following striking words:

...the active life is necessary for any degree of the love of neighbour. Hence Gregory says (Hom. iii, in *Ezech.*) *Without the contemplative life it is possible to enter the heavenly kingdom, provided one omit not the good actions we are able to do but we cannot enter therein without the active life, if we neglect to do the good we can do.* From this it is evident that the active precedes the contemplative life, as that to which is common to all precedes, in the order of generation, that which is proper to the perfect (II.II.182.4.Ad.1).

Does Aquinas contradict what he stated in regard to divine contemplation as a “more expressive sign” of love of God? On the basis of several passages, we might conclude that for Aquinas the best way to love God is through divine contemplation. However, he circumscribes this assertion with a plethora of qualifications. Perhaps they serve as admonitions to those who would hastily opt for the contemplative life without giving due accord to the active life, i.e. neighbour love. For certain, one who achieves the level of perfection of the true contemplative achieves the “highest” form of loving God, according to Aquinas. However, she or he cannot do so without loving the neighbour. Moreover, the key to salvation, as we see in this passage, resides not in the contemplative life but in the active life. One can enter the “heavenly kingdom” without contemplation, as long as she or he loves the neighbour.²⁷

Aquinas also argues that in some cases one “merits more by the works of the active life” (II.II.182.2). One might even conclude, given the reasons that Aquinas articulates in arguing that the “contemplative life is simply more excellent than the active life,” that the active life is the better path for the Christian. Aquinas repeatedly draws attention to “needs of the present” (II.II. 182.1) and “necessities of the present life” (II.II.182.Ad.3) as justifying the choice of the active life. When one reads Aquinas’ reasons for claiming that the contemplative life is superior, one may quite rationally concur: the contemplative life does “consist in more rest and leisure,” “delight” and “self-sufficiency.” But these reasons seem commendable *in abstractio*. In the sinful, broken world in which we live, the “necessities of the present life” have reached tragic proportions.²⁸ While Aquinas may not have had the same consciousness of the degree of need in the world, not to mention that he lived in a different world than ours, his concern for “need” caused him to make statements such as the following:

Although simply and absolutely speaking the contemplative life is more excellent than the active, and the love of God better than the love of neighbour, yet, on the other hand, the good of many should be preferred to the good of the individual. Wherefore Augustine says in the passage

quoted above: *Nor prefer your own ease to the needs of the Church*, and all the more since it belongs to the love of God that a man undertake the pastoral care of Christ's sheep. Hence Augustine, commenting on Jo. xxi. 17, *Feed My sheep*, says (Tract. Cxxiii, in *Joan.*): *Be it the task of love to feed the Lord's flock, even as it was the mark of fear to deny the Shepherd* (II.II.185.2.Ad.1).²⁹

Hence, it cannot be argued that Aquinas unequivocally sees the contemplative life as the best way to love God. His numerous stipulations, which stress the common good above all (cf. also II.II.26.4.Ad.3), disavow this claim. It also cannot be maintained that leaving the active life behind in order to pursue the contemplative life represents a praiseworthy goal, if the contemplative life is construed as devoid of love for the neighbour. In fact, Aquinas seems most of all to advocate the "mixed life." He maintains, for example, that prelates should excel in both the active and contemplative life (II.II.182.Ad.1). He also states that one should not totally abandon the contemplative life if one takes up the active life in order to attend to the needs of the day (II.II.182.1.Ad.3). This cautions those who might reduce religion merely to the ethical realm, as Kant attempted to do much later.³⁰ Furthermore, the effect of the delight of divine contemplation is that "love also becomes more intense" (II.II.180.1). Therefore, contemplation can be seen as a way to foster the love of neighbour. In this vein, Aquinas approvingly cites Gregory's contention that "*the contemplative life is to cling with our whole mind to the love of God and our neighbour, and to desire nothing beside our Creator*" (II.II.180.1). Conversely, engaging in the active life can also make one "become yet more apt for contemplation" according to Aquinas (II.II.182.Ad.3).³¹ Thus, once again we encounter the unity of the love of God and neighbour, expounded in different dimensions in Aquinas' discussion of both the active and contemplative life.

There remains, however, one aspect of Aquinas' thought that seems inconsistent with what we have concluded thus far. Aquinas could have stated that prayer, which belongs to the contemplative life (II.II.181.Obj.3, Ad.3), functions as a way in which the contemplative loves God and neighbour. However, Aquinas takes a different turn. In a bizarre remark, he contends that "[h]e who prays for another does nothing towards the man for whom he prays, but only towards God" (II.II.181.Ad.3). Therefore, Aquinas appears to envision prayer as a means by which we love God alone; it is not a means by which we love the neighbour.³² In this vein, individual acts of loving God that do not entail love of neighbour exist, according to Aquinas. Prayer and divine contemplation fill this role. Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that Aquinas heralds the active life as that which disposes one to the life of prayer. As a result, the very ability

to love God in prayer is in a way dependent on the love of neighbour³³

In conclusion, we may briefly recapitulate the answers to our initial questions, which we have arrived at throughout the course of this essay. This essay has attempted to clarify Aquinas' understanding of the unity of the love of God and neighbour. Admittedly, the interpretation offered in this essay consciously operated out of a "hermeneutic of appreciation."³⁴ In other words, this analysis has sought to synthesize Aquinas' ruminations as cogently as possible. I can only hope that I have not performed this task at the expense of accuracy and faithfulness to Aquinas' texts themselves. Having made this acknowledgment, we may conclude by summarizing our findings.

Aquinas clearly stresses the unity of the love of God and neighbour. Aquinas does conceive of love of God out of charity as a motivating force behind the love of neighbour. However, this represents one dimension of the unity of the two loves, which can be said to be on a "secondary" level. The original or primal unity of the two loves is more basic and exists on the pre-reflective level. In this regard, Aquinas posits the ontological unity of love of neighbour and the love of God: "since our neighbour is more visible to us, he is the first lovable object we meet with, because the soul learns from those things it knows, to love what it knows not..." (II.II.26.2.Ad.1) and "the services we render our neighbour redound to God" (II.II.188.2). When individuals persist in charity, a gift of the Holy Spirit to those who have faith, all of their loving actions towards the neighbour are "for God's sake," whether the agent reflectively intends this or not. While Aquinas' use of terms such as loving the neighbour "for God's sake" and as a "means" towards a "final end" sound distressing, we should not interpret them in such a way that the neighbour becomes a mere instrument. As I have argued, Aquinas' consideration of charity provides ample warrant for claiming that he sees truly loving the neighbour as an end in himself or herself as necessary for the moral life.

Aquinas' rich discussion of the contemplative and active life has prompted several conclusions. First, Aquinas demonstrates the unity between the two loves. There can be no love of God at all unless one engages in acts of loving the neighbour. In a sense, the ability to live the contemplative life depends on the prior engagement in the active life, i.e. performing deeds of love for the neighbour. We saw that Aquinas' mention of prayer and contemplation demonstrates his conviction that we can perform acts of love for God that do not formally constitute love of neighbour. Yet, Aquinas appears to postulate a dependence of these actions on other forms of love. While he takes care not to disparage the contemplative life (he indeed esteems it highly by calling it "more meritorious") Aquinas is ever so cautious about promoting a kind of contemplative life that would be completely detached from the "needs of

the present life” (he ultimately promotes some kind of “mixed life”). Despite the fact that his discussion of these vocational lifestyles may be lacking in some ways, Aquinas has done a great service by emphasizing the respective merits and the necessity of both and the unity of the love of God and neighbour.³⁵

- 1 The pericope in Matthew does not refer to “strength.” There are, of course, myriad other teachings in both the Old and New Testaments concerning love. For two very diverse understandings of the relationship between love of God and neighbour, see H.R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) 18ff and Karl Rahner, “Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God,” *Theological Investigations*, vol. VI, trans. Karl-H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon / London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1969). I have analyzed Rahner’s position in an unpublished paper entitled “Karl Rahner on the Radical Unity of The Love of God and the Love of Neighbour: Excessive Claim or Exigent Insight?”
- 2 There may still be other parts of the *Summa* that provide important insights on this topic. However, given the limited scope of this essay, I will only deal with those passages that appear to be the most salient.
- 3 As many scholars of Aquinas have acknowledged, his thought can be difficult to analyze and synthesize because of its sheer scope and depth. In order to reach conclusions with absolute certainty, one would have to know the entire vast body of his writings. The author of the present essay cannot pretend to have this kind of expertise. In addition, I wish to acknowledge at the outset that my own interpretation of Aquinas has been influenced by my study of Rahner’s thought. While this essay does not seek to be a comparative study, many of the questions that are raised in this essay and various perspectives pertaining to the issue at hand are indebted to Rahner.
- 4 All citations of Aquinas are taken from the English Dominican translation: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1948).
- 5 Eberhard Schockenhoff, “The Virtue of Charity,” Stephen Pope, ed., *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, forthcoming) 251.
- 6 I will refer to love of God and neighbour as “two loves” at times. However, this does not imply that they are envisioned here as completely distinct entities.
- 7 In the first case, loving these objects becomes a vehicle through which we love God. This raises the question of the instrumentalization of the neighbour, which we will address later. In the second case, our prior love for God functions as the catalyst for loving the neighbour *in se*. Another way to put the query is as follows: Is the unity of love of God and neighbour an ontological, normative (moral), or epistemological reality? Is it a combination of two or more of these elements? Karl Rahner discusses the issue in these terms. He states: “It is radically true, i.e. by an ontological and not merely ‘moral’ or psychological necessity, that whoever does not love the brother whom he [sic] ‘sees’, also cannot love God whom one does not see, and that one can love God whom one does not see only *by* loving one’s visible brother

lovingly.” Karl Rahner, “Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God”... 247.

- 8 A precise and helpful treatment of Aquinas’ ambiguities on the explicit need to profess Christ in order to be saved can be found in Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992.) Sullivan points out that Aquinas conceived of an implicit faith among those who came before Christ. However, Sullivan concludes that after Christ had come, and especially in his day, Aquinas believed all had the chance to hear of Christ. My remarks on Aquinas are indebted to Sullivan’s analysis.
- 9 Rahner appears to hold this interpretation, although he does not provide textual arguments for it. See Rahner, “Reflections on the Unity...” 237. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II. 89. 6. According to Francis Sullivan, some modern interpreters have seen this passage as an opening in Aquinas’ thought for the salvation of those who do not explicitly profess Christ as their saviour. However, while acknowledging the possibility, Sullivan states that “it would certainly be a singular lack of consistency in the thought of St. Thomas if he allowed the possibility of justification without the explicit Christian faith which he so emphatically declared to be necessary for all in his day.” See Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*...61. My own assessment concludes that this passage does not give sufficient grounds for positing that Aquinas believed one could attain salvation without explicit belief in Christ. See especially the reply to the third objection of this question, which states that a child must “turn to God as soon as possible” (i.e. as soon as it possesses the faculty of reason) in order to be free of mortal sin through omission.
- 10 A thorough discussion of Aquinas’ order of charity exceeds the scope of this analysis. I wish merely to draw attention to the fact that for Aquinas loving all human beings out of charity does not require the same kind of love in deed towards all.
- 11 Perhaps we can understand the idea in the following way. The human yearning for union, which is a constitutive element of the human being, tends towards the transcendent God first and foremost. It is this very anthropological trait that allows us to open ourselves up to the loving of the neighbour. In other words, it is the very condition of the possibility of loving the neighbour. Yet, loving the neighbour occurs prior to our conscious, explicit knowledge of our love for God.
- 12 As we can ascertain from Obj.1, Aquinas reflects here on I John 4:20. According to Aquinas’ citation, we read: “*He that loveth not his brother whom he seeth, how can he love God, Whom he seeth not?*”
- 13 Eberhard Schockenhoff points out that Aquinas uses the more precise formulation of “loving God in the neighbour” in *De Caritate*, q. un., a.4. See Schockenhoff, 252, 257, n.30. We may note that Aquinas states in II.II.44.2.Ad.2: “God is loved in the neighbour...”
- 14 Cf. II.II.27.3.Ad.2: “Knowledge of God is acquired through other things, but once we know God we no longer know God through these things.” See also II.II.180.4. Aquinas here contends that we come to know God through God’s created goods, or other “categorical realities,” to use Rahner’s language.

- 15 In II.II.25.8.Ad.1, Aquinas states: “The different relations between a lover and the various things loved make a different kind of loveableness. Accordingly, since the relation between the human lover and God is different from his relation to himself, these two are reckoned as distinct objects of love, *for the love of the one is the cause of the love of the other, so that the former love being removed the latter is taken away*” (emphasis added).
- 16 Schockenhoff 252. I am indebted here to Schockenhoff for the phrase “because God is in the neighbour.”
- 17 See especially II.II.27.4, on loving God immediately in this life.
- 18 This means, for example, those who persist in charity will act in accordance with justice towards the neighbour.
- 19 We might ask, “Should we care for the souls of others more than are own?” This would not seem to make sense. How could one who is in the state of mortal sin help another reach union with God? Perhaps, however, one could argue that someone in mortal sin may reestablish union with God by helping another to achieve it. Yet, Aquinas seems to argue cogently when he says that we should not endanger our own union with God by committing sin to help another achieve it.
- 20 Schockenhoff 252.
- 21 What this care for the souls of others entails will, of course, vary in accordance with our relationship to them. It seems clear, however, that we are in some way to love all persons “for God’s sake,” i.e. to wish that they be one with God.
- 22 In II.II.44.8., Aquinas states that we should love the neighbour not for our own profit, but “in the sense of wishing [the] neighbour well,, even as...[we wish ourselves] well, so that [our] love for a neighbour may be a *true* love...”
- 23 In other words, Aquinas does not seem to contend that every time we do something good for another we must be consciously motivated by the desire to love God. Yet, even if we were, charity requires that our love for the neighbour care is real. In other words, we must treat our neighbours as human beings, not as mere stepping-stones on the way to union with God. Treating the neighbour this way neither achieves love of the neighbour, nor does it achieve love of God. On this issue, see also II.II.30.4 regarding mercy, especially Ad.1 and Ad.2.
- 24 Simon Tugwell, “Introduction,” Simon Tugwell, ed., *Albert & Thomas: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988) 284. Tugwell contends that Aquinas makes this clear in II.II.182.4. We will analyze that text momentarily.
- 25 Tugwell notes that regarding Aquinas that it “is far from clear that he has seriously committed himself to this answer,” namely that the contemplative life is superior to the active life. In his judgment, Aquinas was simply not “interested enough” to work through the implications of his basic premise. See Tugwell, 282-283. Thomas Merton also deals with Aquinas’ qualifications in an intriguing and helpful manner. See the epilogue in Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990).
- 26 In my judgment, this claim makes the statement about charity seem

enigmatic. The logic of it is clear enough; chastity “curbs the impetuosity of the passions, and quell[s] the disturbance of outward occupations” (cf. II.II.180.2). However, we may ask if this negative element of restraint suffices to prepare one for contemplative life. I am arguing that Aquinas implies elsewhere that this is not the case.

- 27 For the sake of clarity, we reiterate that this presumes “faith” as Aquinas defines it. In other words, this is not akin to Rahner’s “anonymous Christianity.”
- 28 World hunger, poverty, AIDS, the threat of nuclear war all contribute to the enormous amount of need in our world. I wish to acknowledge that this section of the present essay moves beyond Aquinas’ own contentions to an interpretation that may be somewhat tenuous. In my judgment, this interpretation would at least be valid for contemporary Christians.
- 29 Aquinas states the same idea in II.II.182.1. Rather than citing Augustine as in the above passage, he quotes Aristotle, who says “it is better to be wise than to be rich, yet for one who is in need, it is better to be rich... .” Tugwell demonstrates that Aquinas was willing to say that “contemplatives” love God less than “actives.” See Tugwell 282.
- 30 The likelihood of the conscious, explicit reduction of religion to ethics in Aquinas day was probably small. However, many may have been tempted to forget about the life of prayer and contemplation indeliberately in order to perform “good works.” The fact that the discussion reaches back to the very origins of Christianity attests to this fact. We find it in The Gospel of Luke in the story of Mary and Martha (cf. Lk 10).
- 31 Aquinas unfortunately does not elaborate on how this may be the case.
- 32 Tugwell argues that Aquinas unfortunately operated with an impoverished notion of prayer in his treatise on the contemplative life in the *Summa*. Tugwell, 283. An exploration of Aquinas’ understanding of prayer exceeds the scope of the present essay. Tugwell’s essay provides a detailed analysis of this issue. Aquinas’ remark on prayer here seems all the more bizarre in light of a statement he makes on worship of God: “We worship God by external sacrifices and gifts not for his own profit, but for that of ourselves and our neighbour. For he needs not our sacrifices, but wishes them to be offered to Him, in order to arouse our devotion and to profit our neighbour.” See II.II.31.4.Ad.1.
- 33 In this regard, I would argue that much more convergence between Aquinas and Rahner exists than at first glance. Aquinas, does not, of course, draw the radical conclusion that Rahner does, namely that every act of explicitly loving God is also formally love the neighbour. Cf. Rahner, “Reflections on the Unity...” 237. I have attempted to explain Rahner’s claim in detail in my above-cited essay.
- 34 I am indebted to William Spohn for this term. See William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999).
- 35 In a lengthier essay, I would elaborate on why I believe this is an urgent issue for Christians, and people in general, today. I have presented such an argument in my above-cited essay on Rahner.