Persistent Acts of Mercy,
Not Random Acts of Kindness:
Building a Culture of Pro-Life Virtue

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I offer a philosophical diagnosis of two cultural ailments that hinder the development of a culture of life: the discredited yet perennially influential ethical theories of egoism and relativism. After discussing of the philosophical roots of these cultural problems, I draw on the thought of Thomas Aquinas to examine two common but ineffective approaches to a solution. I then propose a more promising one, "persistent acts of mercy." It combines mercy with humility and the persistence-related virtues of patience and perseverance. The solution proceeds on this model: example, invitation, accompaniment, repetition. After pointing to well-known practitioners such as Mother Teresa, I suggest some ways in which university faculty members might use the model to contribute to a culture of pro-life virtue.

1. The Problem: The Hijacking of the "Right to (My) Life"

There is good news and there is bad news. The good news about our culture is that everyone seems to believe in the right to life. The bad news is that many seem to believe that it applies only to themselves. In many circles people seem to have traded belief in the basic human right to life for belief in a "right to *my* life" – a right to live as I wish. The good news of prosperity and technological advancement has led to the bad news of a culture characterized by distraction, disengagement, and desires for instant gratification, including the illusion of being connected to hundreds or even thousands of "followers" and "friends."[1] Those who receive most of their information from social media

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[1] Of the many articles addressing these phenomena, several seem to attribute them primarily, or even exclusively, to millennials. Others point out that we have been

feeds might get the impression the only things happening in the world are the things in which they are most interested and that almost everyone agrees with them about almost everything. If a culture travels too far down this path, its members could easily avoid meaningful engagement with those who are suffering and those whose views threaten to make us uncomfortable. A little farther yet and we will be left with something like a collective sociopathy: a serious deficiency in our ability to empathize with those around us.

A clinical psychologist might link this cultural phenomenon to the individual-level problem of narcissistic personality disorder. But as a philosopher I see the cultural issue more in terms of our susceptibility to problematic ways of thinking: in particular, ethical egoism. Philosophy tends to be a slow-changing discipline. It can take decades or even centuries for a philosophical theory to develop fully; it can also take decades or centuries to get rid of a bad theory, and philosophers may never rid the world of a discredited theory's subtle influence. That, it seems to me, is the problem we face with egoism. It is an "ethical" theory that holds that there is no need to worry about ethics, for all that matters is what's in it for you. Philosophers (at least since the time of Plato[2]) and psychologists (at least since the 1990s[3]) have given powerful arguments for holding that egoism fails on its own terms. Taking an egoistic approach to life will not even be in your own interest, much less the interest of everyone else. Yet, various forms of it keep cropping up in business, in politics, and among ordinary people like my undergraduate students.

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trending in this direction for a long time and that the millennial generation must have been influenced by *somebody*. See, for example, Jean Twenge, "Millennials: The Greatest Generation or the Most Narcissistic?" *The Atlantic* (2 May 2012), http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/05/millennials-the-greatest-generation-or-the-most-narcissistic/256638/; and Abby Ellin, "The Beat (Up) Generation," *Psychology Today* (11 March 2014), https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201402/the-beat-generation.

[2] For example, Plato's *Republic* is largely an extended argument that egoism is self-defeating.

[3] Ethical virtues and related qualities tend to be related to at least certain aspects of a good human life. See, for instance, Jane Gillham et al., "Character Strengths Predict Subjective Well-Being During Adolescence," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 6/1 (2011): 31–44; and Willibald Ruch, A. Huber, Ursula Beermann, and Rene T. Proyer, "Character Strengths as Predictors of the 'Good Life' in Austria, Germany and Switzerland," *Studies and Researches in Social Sciences*, ed. W. Ruch (Cluj-Napoca, Romania: Argonaut Press, 2007), vol. 16, pp. 123–31.

Of course, we also tend to have egalitarian sensibilities. Even though these sensibilities are incompatible with egoism, we tend not to notice. But, at best, egalitarianism will push us from sociopathy or egoism to a vague moral relativism: the idea that we all have equal rights to make up our own ethical rules as we go. Philosophers call this type of relativism ethical subjectivism. It is the theory that whatever I believe is true for me, and whatever you believe is true for you, and only for you. Like egoism, this subjectivist variety of moral relativism fails on its own terms. It suffers from a logical fallacy called self-referential incoherence, which means that, when applied to itself, it refutes itself.[4] If I assert that moral relativism is *true*, I am saying that anyone who disbelieves it is mistaken, but by my own theory, no one can be mistaken in his ethical beliefs. Also like egoism, its cultural influence remains maddeningly pervasive. Apparently, we do not mind embracing an incoherent theory any more than we mind endorsing two contradictory ones.

We can see the subjectivist approach to life figuring prominently in young adults. A seminal study by Christian Smith and colleagues found that current 18–24 year olds (and those who influence them!) tend to endorse a confused, skeptical sort of subjectivism or "moral individualism" wherein moral truths are difficult to know, entirely inscrutable, or simply subjective by definition. For them the only truth knowable with any certainty, apparently, is that it is bad form to argue for (or even express!) your moral views. To do so is called "judging" people and "imposing your beliefs" on them.[5]

Given the odd combination of egoism and subjectivism that pervades our culture, it is no mystery that so many have embraced "rights" to abortion and euthanasia. I have the "right" to believe and do whatever I want, except that I have no right to form an opinion about what anyone else does. So, if I want to kill my fetus or myself, or if you do, it is no one else's business.

The upshot of my analysis thus far is that building a pro-life culture will almost certainly continue to be an uphill battle for the foreseeable future. We

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[4] For example, if I say "I can't speak a single word of English," my statement is self-referentially incoherent.

[5] Christian Smith et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), ch. 1. I see this phenomenon regularly in the undergraduate ethics courses I teach. But, to be fair, I saw it regularly among my peers when I was an undergraduate too. One change I have noticed, though, was that when I was in college, it did not seem to be bad form for an ethics professor to express a judgment about an ethical issue; more recently, however, some of my students have told me that it is.

have to overcome distraction, detachment, entitlement, and even outright incoherence. How? After considering a couple of woefully insufficient yet distressingly common approaches that are called "slacktivism" and "RAKtivism," I will advocate an alternative that I term "persistent acts of mercy." It is based in Thomas Aquinas's virtue ethics.

2. A Non-Solution and a Pseudo-Solution: Slacktivism and Random Acts of Kindness

2.1 Slacktivism: No Action, No Result

     With the conveniences and distractions made possible by our technology, the advent of slacktivism as a "solution" to the world's misfortunes and injustices is not surprising, even if it *is* a bit discouraging. "Slacktivism" refers to the phenomenon of people's advocating something via social media -- via liking, re-tweeting, or something similar – and thinking that they have thereby contributed to the cause. Some even describe it as "donating" their networks. The problem with slacktivism, as many have pointed out, is that it *does not* in fact do anything to contribute to the cause. My liking the local crisis pregnancy center via Facebook, for example, does nothing to provide diapers, ultrasounds, or mentorship to anxious young women. Further, as researchers have recently discovered, social media support – unlike more private acts of support such as signing petitions – tends not to lead to further engagement with the cause: if anything, it may lead to *less* engagement because people think they have already done their part.[6]

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     [6] See Kirk Kristofferson et al., "The Nature of Slacktivism: How the Social Observability of an Initial Act of Token Support Affects Subsequent Prosocial Action," *Journal of Consumer Research* 40/6 (2014): 1149–66, doi http://www.jstor.org/stable/ 10.1086/674137?seq=1# page_scan_tab_contents. Interestingly, this finding contrasts with earlier observations about the effectiveness of appeals to identity, e.g., through display of small posters advocating safe driving. See Jonathan L. Freedman and Scott C. Fraser, "Compliance Without Pressure: The Foot-in-the-Door Technique," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 4/2 (1966): 195–203. This also happens through identity-signaling via food choices; see Jonah Berger and Lindsay Rand, "Shifting Signals to Help Health: Using Identity Signaling to Reduce Risky Health Behaviors," *Journal of Consumer Research* 35/3 (2008): 509–18. The article regarding food choices, however, involved *not* wanting to be identified as a member of an outgroup. I wonder whether a campaign to make slacktivists a disfavored outgroup might be effective in encouraging people to act on their online words. One may also wonder whether "donating one's network" causes *other* people to donate time or money to the

To understand this social busyness coupled with lack of real engagement, let's look at the ethical theory of Thomas Aquinas. Although his technological gadgets were primitive in comparison with ours, he has the distinct advantage of being the most systematic and thorough appropriator of Aristotle's virtue ethics and is among the most systematic and thorough ethical theorists ever. Relying on his insights into human nature and character development, we can see that, despite its surface-level appearance of industry and generosity, habitual slacktivism borders dangerously upon a moral vice: *acedia* or sloth. In its most general description, sloth is "sluggishness of the mind that neglects to begin some good." It is a laziness that prevents us from even starting to engage in a meaningful and genuinely helpful way.[7] Further, as Aquinas argues, sloth (as a capital vice) leads to other problems such as avoidance of good means – and even of good ends – and seeking distraction, sometimes via things that are themselves morally problematic.[8] Interestingly, we have support in Aquinas for suggesting that distractions and pseudo-activities like social media may be a sign of preexisting sloth rather than its cause and may well exacerbate the problem.

Clearly there is need for more than just the virtual talk of slacktivism. Only real action can bring about cultural change. I next consider – and reject – a common approach to such action.

2.2 From Slacktivism to RAKtivism

Given the fast-paced, ever-changing environment in which we live, it is no wonder that many of those motivated to make a real difference in the world

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relevant cause. Although I know of no studies addressing that specific question, a bit of reflection on the pervasiveness of social media and the sheer quantity of, e.g., tweets or likes to which someone with hundreds of "friends" is exposed leads me to suspect that the answer is a resounding "no," with the possible exception of sharing particularly poignant crowdfunding requests.

[7] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter ST) II-II.35.1. To be clear, I do not claim that slacktivism entails sloth or even that it cannot be an exercise of virtue (e.g., it may take some courage to "come out" as pro-life via social media). I claim only that it is dangerously close to sloth when practiced regularly.

[8] ST II-II.35.4. Aquinas rather quaintly refers to this last phenomenon as "wandering after unlawful things" (ad 2). For more on this vice and its modern applications, see Dom Jean-Charles Nault, *The Noonday Devil: Acedia, the Unnamed Evil of Our Times* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 2015). See also Dennis Okholm, *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins* (Ada MI: Brazos, 2014), ch. 7, which analyzes the classical text on sloth in some depth.

have embraced the "random acts of kindness" movement. In contrast to slacktivists, RAKtivists (as the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation calls them[9]) actually do things or donate things to help others. So far, so good: the recipients of the kindness benefit. Further, the kind person gets a benefit too: according to psychologists, performing random acts of kindness is a great mood-booster.[10]

For a philosophical understanding of random acts of kindness, let's turn once again to the wise and thorough Thomas Aquinas. In his thought there is a fitting label for acts of kindness: beneficence, which "simply means doing good to someone."[11] While beneficence should, at least potentially, be extended to all,[12] generally it is most fittingly directed toward those closest to us in the relevant way, e.g., in "natural" matters to our families, in spiritual matters to members of our faith communities, and in civic matters (including, I take it, pro-life matters) to our fellow citizens.[13] For example, a pro-life physician might perform a random acts of kindness by standing in front of an abortion clinic one afternoon and offering free prenatal care to the first woman who attempts to enter. A religious education teacher might take her class to a local crisis pregnancy center for a one-time service project. Or I might impulsively tell a pregnant student that she can move in with me. Such random acts of kindness certainly have their place, but they also have serious limitations, which I discuss next.

Despite the good qualities of random acts of kindness, their potential for lasting social impact is quite limited: hence, I label them a "pseudo-solution." The nature of random acts of kindness as isolated *acts* rather than as virtues means that they do not require – either as a prerequisite or as an outcome – any change in the character of the person who performs them. Similarly, the vague nature of "kindness" eliminates the need to conform to any standard of goodness or helpfulness in action or even intent. Any sort of do-gooding will do. And the "randomness" of such acts allows one to perform them when, where, and how s/he wishes as part of exercising the "right" to her own life. If

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[9] https://www.randomactsofkindness.org/.

[10] See, for example, Elizabeth Svoboda, "Pay It Forward," *Psychology Today* (July 2006), https://www.psychologytoday.com/ articles/200607/pay-it-forward.

[11] ST II-II.31.1. Although Aquinas labels beneficence as an external effect of the Christian virtue of charity, he acknowledges that beneficent actions can be performed by people motivated by human friendship and virtue rather than by love of God.

[12] Ibid., 31.2.

[13] Ibid., 31.3; see Cicero, *De Officiis*, bk. I.

the "random" act one chooses turns out not to provide a sufficiently warm and fuzzy feeling, no problem: she can simply move on to the next activity and hope it suits her better.[14] Further, this randomness is antithetical to the reliability and collective effort needed for advancing the common good: a random act is, by its very nature, the sort of thing others *cannot* count upon.[15]

So, while RAKtivism is certainly an improvement over slacktivism, it is not nearly enough. Those who wish to build a pro-life culture must move well beyond random acts of kindness. We need something more lasting, more reliable, more compassionate: we need virtue. Fortunately, unlike slacktivism (which, as noted above, tends to be a dead-end behavior), RAKtivism may be an accessible starting point or "gateway behavior" for those just starting to familiarize themselves with a cause and its work, or just starting to develop their own character. Given the way in which positive reinforcement leads to habituation, we can reasonably hope that its psychological benefits provide sufficient reinforcement to lead eventually to virtue. However, although RAKtivism may be a starting point for engagement with a worthy cause, it too can easily become a dead-end behavior if undertaken in an impulsive, self-centered, or unreflective manner. And perhaps even more importantly, as noted above, even if RAKtivism changes me, it will not change the world. So, in the next section I describe the set of virtues most needed to move beyond randomness toward lasting impact.

3. A Real Solution: Persistent Acts of Mercy

A culture, of course, is not some impersonal force that exists independently of the people who inhabit it. To a large extent, it *is* those people. To improve our culture, we need to improve ourselves and those around us. Psychologists might call that "moral development." Theologians might call it "growth in holiness." As a philosopher, I call it "acquiring virtue." Once again, let me turn to the Thomistic account of virtue ethics for handy labels and

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[14] I put "random" in scare quotes here to acknowledge that chosen acts are necessarily not random in the sense that they have no, or at least no known, cause. They are caused by our choices. In the more scientific sense of "random," though, meaning something like "lacking obvious correlations or patterns," such acts may indeed be random.

[15] Jill Koyama makes a similar point in her brief opinion piece entitled "Stop Performing Random Acts of Kindness!" *Huffington Post (*25 February 2014), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jill-koyama-phd/stop-performing-random-ac_b_4854045.html.

descriptions before applying them to our contemporary context.

3.1 Mercy: The Virtue of Compassion

In contrast to the acts – random or not – of beneficence described in the last section, mercy (also labeled an effect of charity in Aquinas's ethics) is not just an external action but an internal disposition to feel and act rightly toward our suffering neighbor. It is a moral virtue. Aquinas defines the virtue of mercy or *misericordia* – literally "compassionate heart" – as "heartfelt sympathy for another's distress, impelling us to succor him if we can."[16] While one can perform acts of kindness or beneficence randomly or with a poor attitude, mercy is habitual and compassionate.

How does the virtue of mercy work? As Aquinas explains, it is based in sympathy, or what we might more typically call empathy: grieving for another's "corruptive or distressing evil" as one's own. This happens in two main ways: first, through union of affections via friendship or love, so that I adopt the joys and sorrows of those I love. Second, empathy or compassion ("feeling with") can come about through "closeness" of the evil suffered: I more acutely feel the impact of others' sorrow if I imagine that something similar might befall me. We can work to improve our empathic responses both by growth in love and friendship for others and by reflections of a "there but for the grace of God go I" sort.

We can also cultivate empathy in ourselves less directly by combatting its obstacles. Aquinas mentions three: anger, pride, and envy. The quality most directly opposed to mercy is envy. Whereas mercy is sorrow at the evil that has befallen another, envy is sorrow at his good.[17] Fortunately, as far as I can tell, we are blessed not to have a significant envy problem in the pro-life movement: those seeking "solutions" in abortion or euthanasia tend to have difficulties that are decidedly *un*enviable. Despite varying approaches among pro-life organizations, I have not observed significant rivalries between them. While pro-lifers may experience sorrow at the "goods" of pro-abortion and pro-euthanasia movements and organizations, such sorrow does not strike me as envious. It is directed, presumably, toward the evils that such movements and organizations promote rather than toward genuine goods.

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[16] Aquinas, ST II-II.30.1. Mercy is not to be confused with clemency, which involves mitigating punishment and is not necessarily based in empathy or compassion. See ST II-II.156.

[17] Ibid., II-II.30.2R3, 36.1.

So, it seems to me, in this context the more serious threats to mercy and to the compassion from which it arises have less direct sources: anger and pride. The angry and proud, according to Aquinas, are not merciful "because they despise others and think them wicked, so that they account them as suffering deservedly whatever they suffer."[18] To grow in mercy, we need to be on guard against anger and pride. With pride, its opposite – humility – is the main weapon. As above, thoughts of the "there but for the grace of God go I" type are helpful. So is reflection on our failings and limitations more generally, as long as we do not take that sort of approach all the way to the other extreme of despair. As Aquinas explains, humility includes "knowledge of one's own deficiency" as well as deference to others' wisdom and recognition of their strengths.[19]

Like other ethical virtues, humility makes life better both for its possessor and for those around her. Recently psychologists have been inquiring empirically into the benefits of humility. For example, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, pioneers of the positive psychology movement, count humility as an important character strength linked to temperance and spirituality – a stance strikingly similar to that of Aquinas. They suggest that humility (like temperance) is valuable for self-regulation: humble people are less likely to take foolish risks or make poor decisions in order to impress others and more likely to make efforts to overcome their flaws.[20] And in a recent series of studies, some of their colleagues in that movement found that humble people consistently tend to be more helpful than those who are less humble.[21] As psychologist June Price Tangney notes, whereas individuals typically have a strong tendency to "self-enhance" (to emphasize and remember positive information about themselves while downplaying or ignoring the negative) and to be overly self-focused, humility makes us more likeable to others and more emotionally stable.[22] So, the cultivation of humility,

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[18] Ibid., II-II.30.2 ad3.

[19] Ibid., II-II.161.1–2.

[20] Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), p. 470.

[21] Jordan P. LaBouff et al., "Humble Persons Are More Helpful than Less Humble Persons: Evidence from Three Studies," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 7 (2012): 16–29.

[22] June Price Tangney, "Humility: Theoretical Perspectives, Empirical Findings and Directions for Future Research," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 19 (2000): 70–82; for further analysis of the virtue of humility and its psychological

including accurate assessment of our abilities and achievements, the ability to acknowledge mistakes, low self-focus, and appreciation of others' contributions, is a great aid to the cultivation and exercise of mercy.

Although anger has its place (for one *should* be angry at serious injustices), it tends to be counterproductive, both for our cause and our character, when directed toward a target that is too general or too specific. For example, anger at injustice can shift into a sullenness or crankiness that has a negative impact on our relationships with those around us -- both those with whom we should be cooperating to address the injustice and those whom we might otherwise be persuading to stop perpetrating it. Or our target can be excessively narrow: we might focus not on the social and cultural problem but direct our anger toward individuals working for the "other side" or influenced by it. For these sorts of anger, a great preventive approach and a great enhancer of our mercy is the development of patience, which I address in the next subsection.

3.2 Perseverance and Patience: The Virtues of Persistence

Although the fact that mercy is a moral virtue implies that it is ongoing or habitual, it can be quite difficult to sustain a high level of compassionate engagement. The rates of compassion fatigue (i.e., physical and psychological difficulties arising from over-empathizing with those in physical or emotional distress) are alarmingly high among caregivers and in the medical and counseling fields – as high as 90% among new physicians, according to one study.[23] And compassion fatigue may be especially likely, given the promise of a long-term struggle without a definitive end in sight, which certainly characterizes the prospect of rebuilding our culture. To avoid compassion fatigue, to complement the virtue of mercy, and further to combat randomness and temptation to sloth, we need to develop a virtue of persistence. Perhaps we need two virtues. Aquinas associates persistence with both perseverance and patience.

Why both? Because there are two main kinds of difficulties that arise

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benefits, see Heidi Giebel, *Ethical Excellence: Philosophers, Psychologists, and Real-Life Examplars to Show Us How to Achieve It* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2020), ch. 12.

[23] See Suzanne Babbel, "Compassion Fatigue: Bodily Symptoms of Empathy," *Psychology Today* (4 July 2012), https://www.psychologytoday. com/blog/somatic-psychology/201207/compassion-fatigue.

when trying to persist in mercy, or in virtue more generally: one that is internal (to the act) and one that is external. Perseverance helps us overcome the more internal difficulties: those that arise in connection with the sheer endurance needed to accomplish the goal. As Aquinas puts it, "to persist long in something difficult involves a special difficulty. Hence to persist long in something good until it is accomplished belongs to a special virtue... it consists in enduring delays in...virtuous deeds, so far as necessity requires."[24] When fighting a battle that has been going on for almost fifty years, or since Nazi Germany, or since ancient Athens, showing mercy (or any virtue) depends on having perseverance. As a complement to perseverance, patience includes a constancy that helps one "persist firmly in good against difficulties arising from any other external hindrances."[25] Patience, according to Aquinas, "safeguards the good of reason against the passion of sorrow"[26] by strengthening its possessor to bear the hardships that would first cause sorrow, then (if the sorrow is unchecked) anger, hatred, and injustice.[27] Indeed, he agrees with Augustine that "those are patient who would rather bear evils without inflicting them, than inflict them without bearing them."[28] So, by protecting us against the progressive deterioration of sorrow at encountering difficulties and injustices into anger and hatred and ultimately into our committing injustices ourselves, patience assists mercy by making room for us to develop and exercise it. Patience also works directly with mercy once both virtues are developed.

3.3 Combined Mercy and Persistence

Given the length of the battle and the enormity of the political, legal, and interpersonal obstacles involved in inducing a cultural shift toward valuing human life and dignity, we do indeed need two types of persistence: perseverance for longevity and patience for enduring opposition. And when these two virtues accompany mercy, which Aquinas calls the greatest virtue we can exercise toward our neighbor,[29] the group that has them just might be in a position to bring about significant change for the common good.

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[24] Aquinas, ST II-II.137.1.
[25] Ibid., II-II.137.3.
[26] Ibid., II-II.136.1.
[27] Ibid., II-II.136.2 ad1.
[28] Ibid., II-II.136.1 ad2.
[29] Ibid., II-II.30.4.

At this point, the advantage of persistent acts of mercy over random acts of kindness may be sufficiently apparent. But, at the risk of belaboring the obvious, let me summarize: the compassion in which mercy is based permits a deeper, more personal, and more sympathetic engagement with those on whom we seek to have impact: those at risk for abortion and euthanasia, those who have already suffered from them in some fairly direct way, and those who endorse them. Perseverance in that compassionate engagement not only enables us to keep working for the good until it is accomplished; it also makes us more reliable and readily accessible to those whom we seek to assist and influence (and the accompanying virtues of humility and patience make us more likeable to them). The fact that mercy, humility, perseverance, and patience are all moral virtues means that by developing them we are improving ourselves: a further means of improving the culture we partly compose.

Thus far we have considered theoretically how persistent acts of mercy can bring about cultural change. But what does it look like in practice? As a philosopher, I deal mostly in theories and tend to leave most of the application to others. But in the final section of this essay I would like to sketch at least a preliminary picture in the hope that those more practically-minded than I will help fill in the details.

4. Being Persistently Merciful: Some Examples and Implications

To get an idea of what persistent acts of mercy look like in real life and how they can help to build a virtuous pro-life culture, it may be helpful to start with an image. Imagine that you are alone in the dark, not knowing where to go or what to do. You are hoping something or someone will come along to shed light on your problem so that you can see it – and its solution – clearly. Suddenly, you see dozens of random flickers of light – some farther away and some nearer, some to your left and some to your right. They are pretty, but will one of them flash near enough and long enough to be of any help? You do not know, and the uncertainty may be almost as distressing as the problem itself. But now you see a beacon. Its light shines brightly and continuously. It is not just pretty. It is literally *attractive*. You are drawn to its steady glow. You can trust that if you simply approach the beacon, its light will help you see and solve the problem at hand.[30]

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[30] Philosophers have used light as an image representing both knowledge and goodness since at least the time of Plato: see his Simile of the Sun in book VI of *Republic*, beginning at 507b. And of course, the creation story in the Bible begins with

4.1 Exemplar Beacons

With this general image in mind, let's look at a couple of real-life examples of people and organizations that have been beacons for those around them: first, a global example and then a more local one. On a global scale, it is hard to find anyone who has been more beacon-like in recent decades than Mother Teresa. Discerning a call to serve among the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, she ministered personally, compassionately, and persistently to their needs. The Sisters of the Missionaries of Charity, the order she founded, continues to do so throughout the world.[31] In my own community, the Twin Cities, we have a similarly beacon-like figure in Mary Jo Copeland. Her organization, Sharing and Caring Hands, focuses on assisting local people experiencing homelessness. With her tireless, hands-on leadership over the last few decades, it has grown from a small storefront (or from the trunk of her car, depending on how early one starts the counting) to a complex that provides food, shelter, and even services such as dentistry to hundreds of people every day.[32] The persistent mercy of Mother Teresa and Mary Jo Copeland have steadily drawn in both supporters and those in need of the services their organizations offer.

Fortunately, we already seem to have exemplar organizations of this sort of thing too, at least in the direct-service area. In every major city in this country, I suspect, we can find crisis pregnancy centers that offer mentorship and assistance to young mothers. In many cities, maybe we can also still find hospices devoted to preserving dignity at the end of life and thus serving as illustrations that euthanasia is neither necessary nor preferable. Again, just to take one example based in my local community (although this one serves people worldwide), Prenatal Partners for Life serves as a beacon for those with adverse prenatal diagnoses. Its founder, Mary Kellett, is a model of empathy. She began the organization to address the lack of support in the medical community for her pregnancy and subsequent care of her son Peter, who was diagnosed prenatally with Edwards Syndrome.[33] Her organization compassionately arranges for (and she often provides herself) advocacy within hospitals,

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God's making light.

[31] For more information on Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity, see http://www.motherteresa.org/.

[32] For more information on Mary Jo Copeland and Sharing and Caring Hands, see http://sharingandcaringhands.org/.

[33] For more on Prenatal Partners for Life, see www.prenatal partnersforlife.org; you can find Mary's and her son's story at http://prenatalpartnersforlife.org/the-rest-of-peters-story/.

connections with families who have undergone similar experiences, goods and services to assist families in caring for their children with special needs, and, when necessary, funeral grants and tiny coffins. This compassionate service coupled with tireless advocacy for justice (including legislative advocacy) is a powerful illustration of persistent mercy in action.

4.2 Becoming Beacons

How do we create something in the pro-life movement that will be analogous to the examples of Mary Jo Copeland and Mother Teresa? Something more like a beacon – or several beacons – than like dozens of random flickers? I think the basic method goes something like this: example, invitation, accompaniment, repetition. That is, we should not shy away from offering invitations, whether to engage in civil dialogue or to receive tangible assistance, but those invitations should be preceded by our own example of patience and compassion and followed by willingness to accompany those with whom we engage on their intellectual, emotional, and/or physical journeys. Example paves the way for successful invitation, but the tricky part is that it will not work nearly as well if it is undertaken merely in the service of successful invitation. That is, our patience, humility, and mercy need to be genuine if they are to be effective. No one wants to be manipulated by a false friend or mentor. And it should not surprise us that creating a virtuous culture would require, first and foremost, that we become virtuous.

Following upon virtuous example is invitation – the more naturally the occasion of the invitation arises from the example, the better. It would be ideal, for instance, if people came to *us* in time of crisis or doubt precisely because they knew us to be paragons of wisdom, compassion, and respect. Barring that ideal situation, the next best is an invitation, whether to dialogue or action, issued in a respectful and patient manner and in a non-threatening context. When the non-threatening context is not possible either, and we discern that an invitation is necessary or prudent, our own exercise of virtue is all the more essential. Here, it seems to me, humility comes in second only to mercy: we may need to acknowledge the non-ideal setting of our outreach, and we will almost certainly need to be excellent listeners, ready to hear and learn from the other's experience and point of view.

Finally, there is the accompaniment stage, when and if those we engage at least partly accept our invitations. The goal is not to score a win in a debate, or even just a saved life in a moment of crisis (though that is really important!),

but also to love and befriend those we invite – to show them ongoing (i.e., persistent) mercy. As with the issuing of invitations, accompaniment requires a deep acknowledgment of the other's dignity and humanity, and a willingness to listen at least as much as we talk. The features of accompaniment, then, bring us back to the necessity of being an example of humility, patience, and compassion.

Abby Johnson's story of her journey from directing an abortion clinic to becoming a pro-life activist shows persistent acts of mercy at work in the protestors who ultimately won her over. Rather than shout combatively at Abby through the fence, they engaged her in conversation and even befriended her. When she experienced an intellectual and emotional crisis upon assisting with an ultrasound-guided abortion, she turned to those protestors, driving to their pro-life organization to talk. They listened compassionately and patiently before attempting to persuade her to leave her job at the abortion clinic. And they continued to support her during her uncertain journey away from her former career and into the pro-life movement.[34]

4.3 University Faculty as Beacons?

"That's all great," one might say, "but I'm already a full-time academic. I'm not in a position to run out and start a beacon-like organization. So what am I supposed to do?" That is my own position as well, so (again despite being a philosopher by profession) I will conclude by offering a few concrete ideas. First and perhaps most obviously, we can add our light to pre-existing beacons. If your city already has a great organization whose needs match your gifts, there is no reason to reinvent the wheel. (And, of course, any great charitable organization is at least a good match for your gift of money!)

Second, we can exercise persistent acts of pro-life mercy within academia, an environment that could benefit greatly both from pro-life voices and from mercy. The type and amount of persistence needed may vary among disciplines and institutions, but the general attitude of the academic world toward our cause really helps demonstrate why Aquinas classifies perseverance and

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[34] For more of Abby Johnson's story, see her book *Unplanned: The Dramatic True Story of a Former Planned Parenthood Leader's Eye-Opening Journey Across the Life Line* (Carol Stream IL: Tyndale House, 2011). For ethical analysis of her story, particularly her reaction to seeing the ultrasound image of the abortion, see Heidi M. Giebel, "Ultrasound Viewers' Attribution of Moral Status to Fetal Humans: A Case for Presumptive Rationality," *Diametros* 17/64 (2020): DOI: 10.33392/diam.1472.

patience under the cardinal virtue of fortitude. On the teaching side, we might start with mercy toward our students in ordinary ways – making connections with them as people, and being willing to work with, listen to, and advise them: that is the example part. Then at some point we need to, well, *teach* them in a way that promotes a life-affirming world view. What this looks like will of course vary with the subject matter. I imagine that life issues arise less frequently and naturally in a calculus class than in a biomedical ethics one, but respect for human dignity can be apparent in any classroom, and we all need to be prepared for unplanned teachable moments.

Although my own experience is, of course, not necessarily normative, it is the only concrete example with which I am especially familiar. So, I will start with a few things I have tried in the course I have taught most frequently: Introductory Ethics. (1) In regard to providing an example and a human connection, I really do try to take interest in my students as real people with real lives and to show that I am a real person too. I have my ethics students write several reflective assignments about a chosen virtue and their efforts to develop it. My in-class illustrations often involve my own, sometimes wildly unsuccessful, efforts to cultivate virtue and weed out vice.

(2) In regard to intellectual invitations, I assign readings on at least one life issue (usually abortion) each term. While I try (as always) to model charitable interpretation and fair-minded critique, I make no pretense of "neutrality" and the "so what do *you* think?" question tends to arise naturally from students anyway.

(3) Regarding accompaniment, at the end of our discussion of abortion, I (non-impulsively) offer to adopt my students' babies should they ever find themselves expecting children whom they are unable or unwilling to parent. (I offer to find suitable alternate adoptive parents, too, in case anyone thinks I already have more than my fair share of babies!) No one has taken me up on it yet, but I think the students know I mean it. Now that I think of it, though, I should also offer to help students find resources to raise their children, should they find themselves expecting babies they would like to parent but lacking the necessary support.

What about beaconship in other aspects of our academic careers? On the professional engagement side, what this looks like once again varies with one's disciplinary expertise. A model of overt pro-life activity as professional engagement is a colleague at my university's law school who uses her legal expertise for pro-life litigation, congressional testimony, bill authorship,

consultation with organizations, and running an academic pro-life center. Those of us in the humanities and sciences can offer research providing information and arguments that lend support of varying degrees of subtlety to pro-life causes. And, as some of us may have discovered already, simply "coming out" as pro-life in academic circles can be a real conversation starter.

On the service side of an academic career, we can exercise persistent acts of mercy toward those difficult fellow committee members. That is a start. But how can our service to our institutions work to further a more life-affirming culture? Another colleague of mine is the faculty advisor for our pro-life student group, which entails patient endurance as she clearly yet charitably responds to the annual barrage of unreasonable questions, requests, and demands from university administration as the group prepares for "Save the Humans Week." Not everyone can have that unenviable honor, of course, but we can all look specifically for ways to serve the cause of human dignity while discharging our service to our universities. Once again, the example with which I am most familiar is my own. I joined the Fringe Benefits Advisory Committee in order to more effectively campaign for more family-friendly policies such as pregnancy leave and adoption benefits.

Finally, on the collegiality side of our faculty roles, when we are interacting with our colleagues, we can be persistently merciful toward them by being models of respect, empathy, and helpfulness. When chatting with them, we can make a point of talking about how great our (or their!) families are – especially their very young, very old, and/or special needs members. And, once again, we can really *listen* to them – even the long-winded or less-upbeat ones – in spirit of genuineness and humility.

That's my quick sketch of possible avenues for persistent acts of mercy in academia. I will conclude with just one final, unsettling suggestion: Don't rule out the possibility that you may indeed be called upon to start a beacon-like organization. Mary Jo Copeland had twelve children, most still at home, when she started Sharing and Caring Hands. Mary Kellett had eleven children, the youngest with significant special needs, when she started Prenatal Partners for Life. So, being too busy may not be a sufficient excuse for any of us.