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Disciplinary Responses to Theology Brief Preview

**UNIFYING LOVE IN RELATION TO DICTATES OF JUSTICE  
AND THE PRIORITY OF MERCY**

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I feel uncertain about Professor O'Donovan's provocative statement that "the relation of love to justice...does not follow the pattern of the other virtues," according to which love is the "golden chain" that connects other virtues, which are themselves "governed by special norms." If the image of the golden chain is intended to communicate that love is the essential virtue that underlies and connects all other virtues, and that other virtues are distinguished from love by particular norms or situations in which they make love operative, I agree readily. I find this a theologically parsimonious way to root all virtues in love as the essential attribute of God (as per 1 John 4:8). But it is precisely the attractive nature of that parsimony that makes me reticent about positing that the relationship of justice to love differs from other virtues' relation to love.

I do appreciate that the tension between love and justice is often understood as a paradox that is generative for much Christian theology. Nonetheless, I am inclined to think that justice, like other virtues, is also bound by the golden chain of love while being governed by its own particular special norms (e.g., the demand to treat all others in accordance with their created dignity, as Nicholas Wolterstorff earlier argued in his Theology Brief on Justice.)

For me, the vexing theological question is not the relationship between love and justice, but between mercy and justice. If justice has to do with treating people in a manner that corresponds to their irreducible dignity and treatment of others, and if mercy refers to extending kindness and grace to people irrespective of what they deserve, one could argue that acts of justice are sometimes violations of the virtue of mercy, and vice versa. This question crops up repeatedly in the work I do: whether with Ukrainian theologians who refuse to share the sacraments with their Russian occupiers, or in relation to victims of persistent abuse who sometimes need to be encouraged not to reconcile with their abusers. These seem to be instances in which the dictates of justice generally speaking, and the priority of mercy upon the vulnerable, render appropriate the withholding of mercy to the victimizer. In situations such as these, how does one reconcile

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both justice and mercy as expressions of a single, unifying virtue of love?

Perhaps an earlier section of the Preview provides a way forward. I resonated with the idea that “desire, good-will, admiration, friendship, etc.” are “moments of experience that succeed one another variously in the course of a life that gives and receives love.” Does this notion provide us with a way to understand the withholding of mercy to victimizers in favor of justice and mercy to the victims? In other words, might we say that when the Ukrainian pastor withholds the sacraments from a Russian occupier, he is not withholding love from the soldier in favor of justice, but rather he is exercising love by rendering a truthful witness of judgment against the occupier, thereby calling him to repent for his violent injustice and seek the restoration of relationship with his Ukrainian neighbor and fellow Christian? Such an expression of judgment functions as a loving action toward the soldier, insofar as it aims to bring the soldier back into right relationship with God and neighbor. Likewise, the same action would be loving a different fashion toward occupied Ukrainians, truthfully vindicating them as righteous victims who can look to the Lord for rescue. And, in future moments of the Russian soldier’s biography, if he repents of his injustice and is restored to God and neighbor, he can again receive love in the form of (eventual) mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Might this be a more satisfying way to construe both justice and mercy as different expressions of the same love operative in distinct moments in a given person’s biography? I would be grateful for Prof. Donovan to shed light on these knotty pastoral and theological challenges.

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