

**THE
ETHICS
OF
ENCOUNTER**

CHRISTIAN NEIGHBOR LOVE
AS A PRACTICE OF SOLIDARITY

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Introduction

Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself,
your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.¹

To encounter is to live. Each person is the result of an encounter between one's parents and is subsequently shaped by countless encounters with others. These encounters inform our sense of identity and purpose, beliefs and values, deepest fears and hopes. Some encounters are singular, but most are mundane interactions with the people who share our lives: family and friends, neighbors and co-workers, acquaintances and strangers. Some encounters offer affirmation and support; others place demands on us that test our character and resolve. Some encounters produce wisdom while others leave wounds and varying degrees of pain. Some encounters are risky, dangerous, and even deadly. We also shape others by how we encounter them: our gestures, words, and actions can have long-lasting effects on how others see themselves, ourselves, and the world. Even a single comment or action can send powerful messages to others, confirming or undermining their feeling of welcome and safety. All encounters make change possible and sometimes growth, too. Encounters offer a glimpse that there is always more to learn about ourselves, others, and the world.

Each encounter is also an opportunity to become more attentive and responsive to God who is both transcendent (as infinite mystery) and immanent (as always and everywhere present). Coming face-to-face with another person is an encounter with someone “wonderfully made” (Ps 139:14) in the “image and likeness” of God (Gn 1:26). In this way, encounters are sacraments—visible signs of God’s invisible grace—such that encountering another person not only reveals the sacred in our midst but also bears an inexhaustible potential for greater discovery. Because God is love (1 Jn 4:8), encounters have the potential to be an experience of love, an invitation to share in the divine life: a Trinitarian communion of love that is offered, received, and returned. When we encounter others, we encounter God. How we treat others is how we treat God; Dorothy Day reflects, “You love

¹C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 1949), 46.

God as much as the one you love the least.”² Encounter is a willingness to share life together. It involves both an act of reception, in openness to the goodness around us, and service as self-gift, as we strive to meet the needs of others. Where there is hurt or harm, encounter aspires to reconciliation. Encounter is how we heal ourselves and the world.

Such a soaring vision for encountering others can seem exceedingly out of step with our lived experiences, however. Many encounters seem random, trivial, and fleeting. Some may be pleasant but inconsequential. Others may be awkward or confusing, uncomfortable, or even traumatic.³ Encounter can produce conflict. The etymological root of the word *encounter* is “to meet as an adversary,” a meaning that suggests an encounter is a meeting *against* another person. It implies difference if not a clash; the other is not reducible to another me. Every encounter involves a choice: to engage or ignore, to accept or reject. This is a choice each person makes, especially when encountering someone we do not know, the “other.” But do we think of ourselves as the stranger or the “other”? Do we ever feel like the one who does not belong? What is it like to feel vulnerable to and perhaps dependent upon the hospitality and generosity of others? How does this enlarge our imagination of how we can better encounter the other in our midst? Every other is a mystery to me, an other I cannot totally understand. Spouses married for years discover there is more to their partner than they knew before—and might ever fully know—indicating that even in this mystical union of two-becoming-one, otherness remains. To encounter another is to be open to a mystery that extends beyond our reach: there is always more to learn about our self, others, and who we are becoming in and through the encounters that we make and miss.

Just as we are shaped by our encounters with others, we also fail to be shaped by those we never encounter. When we withdraw from others, we also keep others from being affected by an encounter with us, a missed opportunity to learn and grow. Aside from rightfully protecting ourselves from those who would harm us, our lives are impoverished by failing to share life with others. Life in America today is marked by social fragmentation and fragility that keep people separate and sometimes fearful of others, especially those who are different. The result is not only a loss of community or a shared commitment to the common good but also rising rates of alienation and loneliness. Social divisions separate individuals and groups across a number of identities, including but not limited to age, abil-

²Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 247.

³On college campuses, for example, too many intimate encounters become an experience of coercion and even violence. By some estimates, close to 90 percent of unwanted sexual encounters take place in a hookup (under the guise of being harmless experimentation or expression). See Donna Freitas, *The End of Sex: How Hookup Culture Is Leaving a Generation Unhappy, Sexually Unfulfilled, and Confused about Intimacy* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 49.

ity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, legal status, class, geographic location, political affiliation, and religious belief. In view of the volatile and violent state of the world, Mother Teresa's insight rings true: "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

If we understand social separation as sin (a failure to love God by loving our neighbor), then redemption lies in encounter. Insofar as social separation is an illness harming individuals and the community, the cure will not be found in papering over our differences in identity, belief, or experience. Neither does the solution lie in calling for civility and tolerance, since "live and let live" just as easily becomes "live and let die," or at least, "live and let suffer." To tolerate the existence of another person deprived of respect and rights does nothing to provide what they need. Neither does tolerance heal the social separation that makes it hard for us to understand, respect, and appreciate those who are different from us. Rather, the cure lies in restoring innate and equal human dignity, repenting for discrimination and exploitation, recognizing our mutual interdependence, and galvanizing a shared commitment to the common good. This requires rebuilding social trust, and trust is impossible without mutual equality, freedom, respect, and responsibility. Given the delicate and divided state of our social context, this reciprocal concern and commitment seem a distant goal. Around the globe, emotions like sadness, anger, and fear are at the highest rates on record.⁴

In the face of these and other experiences of division and isolation, Pope Francis calls the world to foster a culture of encounter that sees Christ in the other, receives Christ through the other, and tries to be Christ for the other. Francis's vision for a culture of encounter aims to bring people together across differences, to celebrate diversity rather than fear it, to enjoy solidarity as life-togetherness, and to promote the global common good. He proposes that building a culture of encounter cuts through the self-interest, cynicism, and "globalization of indifference" that serve as buffers against widespread suffering and injustice.⁵ A culture of encounter is the foundation for peace and reconciliation, built by overcoming isolation and distrust.⁶ It is inspired by the gospel, which

⁴Sadness, anger, and fear were at record levels in 2017, only to rise higher in 2018. See *Gallup 2019 Global Emotions Report*, <https://www.gallup.com>.

⁵Pope Francis reflects, "Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 54; hereinafter EG).

⁶In a homily just a few months into his time as pope, Francis describes the culture of encounter as a "beautiful path towards peace." He states, "If we, each doing our own part, if we do good to others, if we meet there, doing good, and we go slowly, gently, little by little, we will make that culture of encounter: we need that so much. We must meet one another doing good. 'But I don't believe,

tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy that infects us in our close and continuous interaction. True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness. (*EG*, no. 88)

This “revolution of tenderness” moves us closer to the other, in a posture of open reception, humility, and solidarity. It gives us the strength to keep from “closing our eyes to our neighbor [that] also blinds us to God.” Encounter helps the soul feel its worth and worthiness, reminding us that everyone belongs to the family of God. This means that no one should be considered an outsider or outcast, limits that we sometimes place on those we do not know or like. It also requires efforts to heal stigma and shame and to thwart a “throwaway culture” that degrades and excludes certain individuals, communities, and members of creation.⁸ Pope Francis explains:

When we live out a spirituality of drawing nearer to others and seeking their welfare, our hearts are opened wide to the Lord’s greatest and most beautiful gifts. Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God. Whenever our eyes are opened to acknowledge the other, we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God. If we want to advance in the spiritual life, then, we must constantly be missionaries. The work of evangelization enriches the mind and the heart; it opens up spiritual horizons; it makes us more and more sensitive to the workings of the Holy Spirit, and it takes us beyond our limited spiritual constructs. A committed missionary knows the joy of being a spring which spills over and refreshes others. Only the person who feels happiness in seeking the good of others, in desiring their happiness, can be a missionary. (*EG*, no. 272)

Pope Francis makes this appeal—to encounter God and cooperate with God as missionaries—to the world’s one billion Catholics and two billion Christians, but this is not an exclusively Christian duty. A culture of encounter draws from biblical themes embraced by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. This includes

Father, I am an atheist!’ But do good: we will meet one another there.” Pope Francis, “Pope at Mass: Culture of Encounter Is the Foundation of Peace,” Vatican Radio, May 22, 2013, vaticannews.va.

⁷Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 230.

⁸Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no. 22.

the work of Jewish philosophers like Martin Buber and Emmanuel Lévinas. Buber is best known for his philosophy of dialogue rooted in relationships of “I-Thou,” replacing the “I-It” that renders the other an object rather than a subject.⁹ Lévinas described the other’s otherness as infinite, a portal into the infinity of the Divine, representing a moral priority that supersedes self-interest.¹⁰ The Jewish discipline of *tikkun olam*, “to heal the world,” involves a commitment to reconciling social divisions and unjust inequalities. Hospitality and special concern for the marginalized members of a community have long been central practices for Jewish people: the command to “love your neighbor” is repeated twice in the Jewish Scriptures, whereas the command to love the stranger, the widow, and the orphan—those denied status and security—is repeated at least thirty-six times.¹¹ Likewise, the Quran is filled with dozens and dozens of verses about honoring the neighbor, showing hospitality to the stranger, and serving those in need.¹² Inspired by verse 21:108, the poet Rumi writes that Muhammad came to bring intimacy and compassion among the people of God.¹³ Muslims call on Allah, the Infinitely Good and Most Merciful, “Names with which daily human acts are consecrated” because the “aim of the Quranic revelation has also been to create a compassionate society.”¹⁴ As someone passes by, a Muslim prays, “inna lilla hai wa inna illahai rajaeoon,” which means “from God we are and to God we must return.” A culture of encounter resonates with other spiritual traditions as well. Practitioners of yoga are familiar with the word *namaste*, but they may not know it means “the divine in me recognizes the divine in you.” Followers of Buddhism aspire to treat every other person with respect and compassion.¹⁵ A

⁹Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1970). I-Thou is manifest through mutual presence, openness, and connection; it receives the freedom and individuality of the other.

¹⁰Lévinas explains, the “dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face . . . God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative of the justice rendered unto men.” He concludes that the other “is indispensable for my relation with God.” He later adds, “The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, the orphan, to whom I am [always already] obligated.” See Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1994), 78, 215.

¹¹Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 103. Often this command is linked with the reminder to the Israelites that they know what it is like to be a stranger from their years of enslavement in Egypt (see, for example, Ex 23:9 and Dt 10:19).

¹²For example, verse 4:36 of the Quran reads, “Worship Allah and associate nothing with Him, and to parents do good, and to relatives, orphans, the needy, the near neighbor, the neighbor farther away, the companion at your side, the traveler.” See also 19:97, 59:9.

¹³Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 204–05.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁵Thich Nhat Hanh describes approaching the other as you would a family member, or a beloved

culture of encounter can be considered a practice of the Golden Rule, shared by countless religions and moral codes: treat others as you would like to be treated. Perhaps the Platinum Rule provides an improvement: treat others as they would like to be treated.¹⁶

Pope Francis has repeatedly called on political and religious leaders as well as people of all beliefs and lifestyles to build a culture of encounter. He often describes a culture of encounter as involving the tender caress of mercy, the inclusive fidelity of solidarity, and the persistence to hope for a new future, one where everyone belongs and flourishes.¹⁷ Even though an encounter might be envisioned as taking place between two individuals, a culture of encounter implies a collective approach, a commitment shared by people who facilitate encounter by cultivating dispositions, which become habits, which become normative practices for community life. In this way, a culture of encounter should be envisioned less as dyadic (wherein one person encounters another person), and more as a collective endeavor to break down walls, build bridges, and create opportunities for meaningful gatherings. This is an urgent task in light of how many people express disappointment with their encounters at work or church, in their neighborhoods, and even among friends.¹⁸ Contemplating a culture of encounter is an opportunity to rethink how we connect with others and recalibrate our expectations for ourselves and others. It is also a charge to dismantle the beliefs and practices that generate distrust, division, and isolation. We must shatter the illusions that blind us to our shared belonging and interdependence.

ENCOUNTERING GOD IN AN UNEXPECTED PLACE

When I think about the encounters that have most deeply shaped the person I am today, I am amazed at the variety of circumstances: some encounters were by sheer accident—some by substantial good fortune, others by some degree of misfortune—while others were well planned; some encounters were embedded

child. If people welcomed the other as “my darling” this would lead to radical interpersonal and structural change. Among his many books, see Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Non-violent Social Change* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993).

¹⁶The Platinum Rule was popularized by Dave Kerpen in his book *The Art of People: 11 Simple People Skills That Will Get You Everything You Want* (New York: Crown Business, 2016). Or consider Wendell Berry’s version: treat those downstream as you would have those upstream treat you.

¹⁷Pope Francis, “The Only Future Worth Building Includes Everyone” [Video file] (April 2017), <https://www.ted.com>.

¹⁸According to a 2013 study, three-quarters of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their friends. See “The State of Friendship in America 2013: A Crisis of Confidence,” *Lifeboat*, May 21, 2013.

in long-term relationships, others quite singular and profound. One of the most formative encounters of my life happened in a garbage dump in the Dominican Republic. I was seventeen years old and part of a team of ten students commissioned by my all-boys, Jesuit high school to help build a school for a rural community, Comedero Abajo. To prepare for our time in the *campo*, we learned about Dominican culture in the capital city, Santo Domingo. We visited a lighthouse built to commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's landing on the island, and shortly after that, we took a trip to the city dump. I did not understand why we were driving through piles of garbage, but soon I began to see that people were living there. The Jesuit priest who led our program, Terry Brennan, SJ, explained that these people were so poor that they were forced to make their homes among other people's refuse. I do not think I have ever felt so distant from people so physically close to me. Here I was, a white, middle-class boy from the suburbs of Milwaukee, riding in an air-conditioned van while dozens of Dominicans hunted through garbage for anything they could eat, use, or sell. Then Fr. Brennan stopped the van and told us to get out. We opened the van doors and were hit with a wave of heat, stench, and smoke. The dump was perpetually on fire to make room for more garbage. The intense heat and smells were sickening, but we were not able to dwell on that for long because in mere moments we were tackled by children who lived there—kids wearing rags who hugged us like we were old friends. They grabbed our hands and turned us into human jungle gyms, and we played tag until we were exhausted, conversing as best we could across the language barrier. After some time, a man approached Fr. Brennan and asked him if he would bless his home. So we walked through the garbage, greeting people as they searched for anything of value amid the smoldering trash. When we reached the man's home, we found a small shelter in a hill of garbage, which was divided into two areas: on the right, some old clothing and linens that made for a sleeping area for his family; on the left, a table, a chair, and a framed picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I did a double take. It was the exact same image that adorned a wall in my home parish.

I am ashamed to admit this, but it took that image of Jesus to feel connected to the people living in the garbage dump, to see them as brothers and sisters, not strangers. The image enabled me to recognize God's presence in the garbage dump and in the people we met. I have never been able to forget that moment or the weight of the discovery that, in the eyes of God, we are all equals who belong to each other. But the man who had invited us into his home already recognized this. As soon as we all squeezed in together, he grabbed Fr. Brennan's hand and another student's hand and insisted, "hermanos, rezemos" (brothers, let us pray). We bowed our heads and recited the Our Father in Spanish. In the van, it felt like we lived in a separate world from these Dominicans. Now, we felt like long-lost family.

I often reflect on that icon of the Sacred Heart and what it might be like for Jesus to look through that image at us, in a world marred by sinful divisions and unjust inequalities. How have we made it so hard to recognize each other as belonging to a single human family, as sharing in the same level of dignity, as bound together by one source and destiny? I imagine God's heart breaking for those cast aside and left behind while others pursue an agenda guided by self-interest and security. What does God want for the people living in this dump? For me? For all of us?

It is not an overstatement to say that that single encounter changed the trajectory of my life. It shaped my college aspirations, the courses I took, how I spent my free time, the conversations I initiated, and the friendships I made. It motivated me to apply to graduate school and a career dedicated to Catholic social thought.¹⁹ I would not be the same person without that encounter; it has been a defining lens for how I see myself and others. Now, personally and professionally, I often evaluate my decisions in light of the people I met in the Dominican Republic, as I feel accountable to them. By carrying them in my heart and mind, I hope that this one-time encounter can initiate a life commitment to practicing solidarity. My purpose in writing this book is to propose how a culture of encounter can become a step along the way toward building a culture of solidarity.²⁰

GENERATING SOLIDARITY

I imagine my experience in the Dominican Republic twenty years ago as reflecting what Pope Francis has in mind when he speaks of a culture of encounter. However, Pope Francis has not articulated what a culture of encounter entails at the individual, social, and institutional levels. As the title of this book implies, I am proposing what the ethics of encounter involves in a more comprehensive manner: a framework for practicing encounter that affirms innate and equal human dignity, practices neighbor love, heals social divisions, and fosters social trust through mutual respect and responsibility. I envision this as a dynamic and diverse process with steps advancing from encountering others, to accompanying others, to meaningful exchanges with others, to cultivating the kind of rapport and tenderness that animate an embrace of others, thus building an inclusive belonging and accountability that generates solidarity.

¹⁹I found it particularly inspiring to read Roberto Goizueta's assertion that "the poor deserve the very best scholarship," as he writes in *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), xi.

²⁰Pope Francis has discussed a culture of solidarity in a number of settings, including in his July 25, 2013, Address to the Community of Varginha, Brazil, w2.vatican.va. At times I will use culture of belonging and culture of solidarity interchangeably.

The word *solidarity* is commonly used to convey a sense of unity or strength in numbers. In Catholic social teaching, solidarity takes on a more nuanced meaning as a moral principle rooted in human interdependence. The classic definition of solidarity describes it as “social charity” for the just ordering of society and the universal common good, “that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”²¹ The common good signifies the social, political, and economic conditions that facilitate the comprehensive flourishing of people and communities. This includes certain rights (like access to education, housing, nutrition, healthcare, and employment) as well as protections from certain deprivations or threats that would undermine the safety, agency, and relationships necessary for peace, integral development, sustainability, and justice. Solidarity is a crucial ingredient of the common good because it fosters the welcome, affinity, agreement, and accountability that aspires for an expansive—even global—common good, instead of a parochial or patriotic agenda motivated more by self-interest or security. In addition to proposing a vision of interdependence, solidarity also requires “learning how to see social problems in new ways that allow for the development of new models and structures” in the political, economic, and social realms.²²

In addition to these social and structural dimensions, solidarity is also a Christian virtue, a personal disposition and habit of cultivating “total gratuity, forgiveness and reconciliation” for the sake of building ever more inclusive communion in the world.²³ When solidarity is adopted on the individual, social, and structural levels, it “pushes us to build a fully human community through practicing respect for human rights.”²⁴ For this reason, the ethics of encounter entails building a culture of encounter that honors the dignity of each person, fostering right-relationships with others, and moving toward creating a culture of solidarity that results from the just ordering of social, economic, and political systems and structures. The

²¹*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1939–41; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38.

²²Rebecca Todd Peters, *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 10. Peters proposes an ethic of solidarity that involves understanding social location and personal privilege, building relationships with people across lines of difference, and engaging in structural change.

²³Pope John Paul II explains that solidarity is to include everyone, aiming for an encompassing unity that “is a reflection of the intimate life of God, one God in three Persons, is what we Christians mean by the word ‘communion.’ This specifically Christian communion, jealously preserved, extended and enriched with the Lord’s help, is the soul of the Church’s vocation to be a ‘sacrament,’ in the sense already indicated. Solidarity therefore must play its part in the realization of this divine plan, both on the level of individuals and on the level of national and international society” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 40).

²⁴Meghan J. Clark, *The Vision of Catholic Social Thought: The Virtue of Solidarity and the Praxis of Human Rights* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 8.

ultimate goal for the ethics of encounter is to construct a culture of mutual respect and responsibility, healthy interdependence, and inclusive belonging robust enough to overcome exclusion, heal division, and dismantle unjust inequalities.

Solidarity is a key principle in Catholic social thought, a body of teachings drawn from Scripture and church teaching to construct a vision for the integral flourishing of individuals, communities, and the planet. These principles include human dignity and rights, environmental stewardship, the preferential option for the poor, and the common good.²⁵ However, the great failure of Catholic social teaching (aside from its lamentable reputation for being the church’s “best kept secret”) is that it exhorts people to adopt universal principles into their life without consistently describing how these ideas can be practiced by individuals and families or integrated into schools, parishes, and other institutions. Out of the many hundreds of pages that constitute the canon of Catholic social teaching, only a few paragraphs are dedicated to material focusing on how to learn and live these tenets. Not only does solidarity become a vague term—often confused with togetherness or unity that defines “us” against “them”—but it gets lost in abstraction without being applied to concrete dispositions, actions, relationships, and structures. *The Ethics of Encounter* provides a blueprint for living Catholic social teaching in everyday life. In the pages that follow, I propose how the ethics of encounter fulfills the duties of Christian neighbor love by practicing solidarity on the personal, social, and structural levels.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book proceeds in five steps. Chapter 1 addresses some of the chief experiences of social separation in our country today. This includes hyperpartisanship and polarization, social sorting into lifestyle enclaves, racial tension and segregation, class divides, and other forms of discrimination by sex, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. In a time when too few of our political and religious leaders denounce white supremacy and Christian nationalism, this is an important moment to acknowledge the anxiety, fear, threats, and violence generated by these hateful beliefs and words. Innate human dignity and solidarity are irreconcilable with mantras like “America First!” and worldviews that stifle compassion and refuse responsibility for migrants and refugees forced to flee their homes. These social trends contribute to moral malaise, *anomie*, and a pathological permis-

²⁵See, for example, Thomas Massaro, SJ, *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 81–122.

siveness that grows numb to suffering and injustice.²⁶ This chapter then pivots to examine some of the root causes of these divisive viewpoints and practices. In particular, I highlight the problem of tolerance for the way it makes room—but fails to take responsibility—for the other. The philosophy of Charles Taylor helps us better understand obstacles to building a culture of encounter in light of the prominence of the “buffered self,” a view of people free to disengage from their social context and duties.²⁷ This trend is linked to the rise of secularism and the declining influence of religion, which has contributed to confusion and disagreement about moral norms. Then, the “buffered self” is contrasted with a “networked self” or the “connected self,” in light of the state of hyperconnectivity afforded by digital technology, the internet, and social media. Finally, I consider some of the alienating effects of these digital tools and structures, including the unprecedented rise of social isolation and loneliness.

Chapter 2 draws on the example of the Good Samaritan—among the most well-known stories from the Bible—in order to propose a “theology of neighbor” that guides the dynamic process of moving from encounter, to accompaniment, to exchange, to embrace, and ultimately toward cultivating mutual care and concern and inclusive belonging with others. Popularly, the Good Samaritan is a story about a moral hero, someone who helps another in a personal emergency. But this passage is better understood as an essential way to love God and neighbor, as it is framed in the gospel (Lk 10:25–27). This story makes it impossible to see the world as “us versus them” or “left versus right” (among other labels), instead asserting—with the moral core of the biblical tradition that reminds us that we encounter God through encountering others, including those we might pity, deride, or fear—that there is no “us and them,” but only “us.” There is a strong coherence between Luke 10:25–37 and Matthew 25:31–46: to emulate the Samaritan by going out of one’s way and into the ditch to draw near another in need, a person can see Christ in, receive Christ from, and be Christ to the least and lost. An encounter is an epiphany: Christ meets Christ.²⁸ Strength and weakness meet. Love and hope can overcome fear and division. A culture of encounter relies on a conversion to the sacrament of our neighbor and a commitment to imagine—in creative fidelity—how we can “go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37) according to our abilities, limitations, and circumstances.

Chapter 3 outlines the ethics of encounter informed by the Samaritan’s ac-

²⁶Émile Durkheim defined “anomie” as “normlessness,” a product of excessive individualism and social disconnection. See, for example, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) and *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897).

²⁷See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

²⁸James Finley, *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1978), 68.

tions on the road to Jericho in displaying courage, mercy, generosity, humility, and fidelity. Taken together, these five virtues inspire Christian neighbor love to realize boundary-breaking solidarity. The ethics of encounter is also inspired by Gustavo Gutiérrez's analysis of the Samaritan's actions, including his claim that there can be no solidarity without friendship with the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable. Gutiérrez's emphasis on friendship provides a practical framework for assessing the moral demands of solidarity, especially in relation to one's pre-existing relationships and responsibilities. By exercising the practical wisdom of prudence, people discern how to order these dispositions and habits in their life by honoring commitments to friends and family while also seeking to forge mutual and inclusive bonds of belonging.

Chapter 4 proposes what it will take to practice the ethics of encounter. This means applying courage, mercy, generosity, humility, and fidelity to attitudes and actions in order to cultivate a culture of encounter with others. This process begins with courage as an interior spiritual discipline of being more amenable to drawing near to others and receiving them. Next, mercy inspires the work necessary to combat implicit bias and more intentionally develop positive attitudes and associations for those who are unfamiliar or unknown. Then, generosity is exercised through clear, effective, and meaningful conversation in order to more graciously engage in conversation across differences. Humility shapes the next step, attending to the kinds of formation that take place in the *habitus* of our interactions and shared practices. Finally, fidelity is illustrated through the example of Fr. Greg Boyle, SJ, and his work with gang members at Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. Boyle's words and actions provide a living witness for how to mend what is broken in and around us, giving us a powerful template for how a culture of encounter can lead to an inclusive culture of belonging that makes everyone feel safe, valued, respected, and loved.

Chapter 5 presents a vision of the personal and social transformation that is possible when Christian neighbor love and solidarity bring the ethics of encounter into existing relationships and communities of belonging. This begins by considering family life, the foundation for church and society, as well as local businesses and parishes. Next, I outline how a culture of encounter can be mediated through a screen by applying the ethics of encounter to the content and connections engaged through digital technology, the internet, and social media. Finally, it would be tragically nearsighted to restrict the ethics of encounter to human interactions. Given that environmental degradation may well be the most urgent moral crisis of our time, this book concludes by exploring how a culture of belonging can include nonhuman creation. Encountering nature and being a neighbor to nature are vital ways to not only encounter God, but also to construct a more integral solidarity that mends our broken bond with nonhuman creation.

In the end, the ethics of encounter is envisioned as a practice of hope, a way to respond to our vocation to be Christ's ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18–20), healing the wounds in ourselves, our relationships, our communities, and the world. This is what it means to love God and neighbor and to be transformed by God's love at work in the world. Trusting in this love, the ethics of encounter guides the way to building a culture of encounter that becomes a culture of inclusive belonging. This is the path to an undivided solidarity, the practice of right relationships that incarnate who God is in the world.