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Please contact me (Yves.Demaeseneer@kuleuven.be) if you do not have access to the published version.

Visitatio Christi: Matthew 25: 33-46 as Apocalyptic-Ethical Impulse

Yves De Maeseneer (KU Leuven)

Abstract:

Through an exploration of the interpretation history of Matthew 25: 33-46, this article develops an apocalyptic ethics based on Christ's encountering us in the least of his brothers and sisters. Proposing the newly coined expression '*visitatio Christi*', the article offers a counterpoint to the common theological-ethical theme of *imitatio Christi*. First, it recalls how Jesus' eschatological parable has time and again inspired love of the neighbor in need (e.g., the works of mercy) and challenged the scope of the required option for the poor (e.g. the debate about charity and structural change). Next, the article shows how an apocalyptic ethics based in Matthew 25, which imagines our moral life as a response to the *visitatio Christi*, implies a transformation of attitude/perception, a reversal of roles, and finds its source in the sacramental presence of Christ in the poor. Finally, the different aspects of the argument are recapitulated drawing upon Pope Francis' use of Matthew 25.

Keywords: apocalyptic ethics; Matthew 25; works of mercy; option for the poor; *imitatio Christi*; attitude.

Introduction:

Cyril O'Regan has rightly observed that there is not really a Roman Catholic apocalyptic theology.^{1 2} One of the reasons for this non-apocalyptic or even anti-apocalyptic tendency is the strong institutional, doctrinal and juridical character of this tradition. In the 20th century

¹ I am very grateful to Ellen Van Stichel, Erik Borgman and the editors of this special issue for their comments upon earlier drafts of this article.

² Cyril O'Regan, 'Two Forms of Catholic Apocalyptic Theology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20.1 (2018), pp. 31-64, esp. 31-39; O'Regan, *Theology and the Spaces of Apocalyptic* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette UP, 2009), pp. 9-15.

some Catholic systematic-theological attempts have been undertaken to retrieve the apocalyptic – O'Regan points to Johann Baptist Metz and Hans Urs von Balthasar as two major figures. In Catholic *moral* theology, however, the apocalyptic has been even less prominent as a theme, in line with its major source, Thomas Aquinas, who explicitly positioned himself against the apocalyptic ideas of Joachim de Fiore.³ If there would be a point of departure for a Catholic apocalyptic ethics, it would be Matthew 25: 33-46.⁴ This parable, in which the coming Christ identifies himself with “the least of these my brothers” (Matt. 25: 40), has functioned time and again as a stimulus for religious commitment for the vulnerable and poor. In an often paradoxical way, this apocalyptic vision has been organized in the form of ‘works of mercy’ and, especially in the modern era, institutionalized into structures of charity.

In this article, I will explore the interpretation history of Matthew 25, focusing mainly upon the Roman Catholic tradition – both its theology and ecclesial practices (the ‘works of mercy’) – and bring to the fore a particular perspective, which I call ‘*visitatio Christi*’. First, I will reflect on how to deal with the apocalyptic unsettling of the boundaries of community and solidarity. Second, I will address with Paul Ricoeur the tension between system and personal encounter in light of Matthew 25. Third, I will draw attention to attitude as a key to apocalyptic ethics – a point highlighted by Protestant interpreters – and to the implied reversal of roles. Fourth, I will treat the motive of the sacramental presence of Christ in the poor as an apocalyptic catalyst for radical love. To conclude, I will briefly hint at how Pope Francis is employing this very apocalyptic-ethical imagination for a world in crisis.

1. The Works of Mercy and the Limits of Love

“I was hungry and you gave me (no) food, I was thirsty and ...” (Matt. 25: 35/42)

As a final story in a series of eschatological parables, Matthew 25: 33-46 describes an apocalyptic judgment in which all the nations are divided into sheep and goats, according to the acts done or omitted for persons in need. The exegetical debates often concentrate upon a double identity problem: who are ‘the nations’ who will be gathered and judged? And who are ‘the least of these my brothers’ with whom Jesus identifies himself?⁵ For both questions, there are

³ Jürgen Moltmann, ‘Christian Hope: Messianic or Transcendent? A Theological Discussion with Joachim of Fiore and Thomas Aquinas’, *Horizons* 12.2 (1985): 328-348.

⁴ From now on referred to as ‘Matthew 25’. The Bible translation used is NRSV.

⁵ See the overview of the interpretation history in: Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25: 31-46: A History of Interpretation* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), pp. 331-364; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), pp. 267-274.

particularist responses, which, for instance, claim that ‘the nations’ is referring to ‘pagans/non-Christians’ who would be called to take care of brothers and sisters of Christ (in particular, Christian missionaries). Another particularist interpretation reduces the question at stake to an internal affair of fraternal care within the Christian community. For a long time, particularist interpretations were common in Christian traditions. More recently, however, universalist interpretations have broadened the scope of this parable to all people: *all* human beings will be judged according to what they have done to *all* human beings in need.⁶

In the reception history of this parable, this text has often provided a strong impulse to do good works in the hope of eternal reward, or at least out of fear of punishment.⁷ The parable has been translated into a to-do list for disciples of Christ, as sanctioned by eschatological judgment. There were debates about which acts were required. Jesus, however, simply alluded by means of synecdoche to existing summaries of good works, which could be typically found in surrounding cultures. It is significant that the list appears within a parable, a provocative literary symbol which is trying to convey something other than a comprehensive list of practices. The originality of this parable lies in the way in which Jesus identifies himself with the person in dire need – radicalizing a preceding Jewish tradition of situating the Lord among the poor.⁸

Inspired by Jewish traditional practices, the so-called ‘works of mercy’ developed as a concrete ethical implementation of the parable in the life of the Church.⁹ At best, the works of mercy did indeed embody a Christ-centered spirituality of solidarity with people in need. James Keenan goes as far as to call them ‘the heart of Catholicism’.¹⁰ They were developed into two sets of seven works: alongside the ‘corporal works of mercy’ (i.e., to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to ransom the captive, to shelter the homeless, to visit the sick and to bury the dead) were placed the ‘spiritual works of mercy’ (i.e., to admonish the

⁶ We will not elaborate upon which interpretation is historical-critically most adequate, as these exegetical issues have already been discussed time and again in articles on Matthew 25, but we will rather look at the reception of the text.

⁷ See Irénée Noye, ‘Miséricorde (Oeuvres de)’, in Marcel Viller (ed.), *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*. Volume X (Paris: Beauchesne, 1956), pp. 1328-1349, pp. 1334-37.

⁸ Sigurd Grindheim, ‘Ignorance is Bliss: Attitudinal Aspects of the Judgment According to Works in Matthew 25: 31-46’, *Novum Testamentum* 50.4 (2008), pp. 313–331, pp. 315-16.

⁹ James F. Keenan, ‘The Evolution of the Works of Mercy’, *Concilium* 4 (2017), 33-43.

¹⁰ James F. Keenan, *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

sinner, to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the sorrowful, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive all injuries, and to pray for the living and the dead).¹¹

The Catholic philosopher Paul Moyaert has positively appreciated the wisdom of this tradition as it would help to direct the measureless love to which the Gospel is calling us.¹² According to Moyaert, unchecked love of neighbor could end up in what he calls an ‘apocalyptic universe’,¹³ in which people lose themselves and have to sacrifice everything they hold dear as this love demands limitless responsibility. Moyaert critically distances himself from Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*, in which the latter praises an excessive and humanly impossible selfless love of neighbor.¹⁴ The works of mercy seek to limit and embody neighbor love, thereby respecting the limits of our human condition and making Jesus’ commandment bearable. The works of mercy are a way of bringing measure and order into the realm of love, while at the same time not reducing it to utilitarian practice within a merely immanent frame – as, for instance, the spiritual work of praying for the living and the dead illustrates.

Moyaert’s realism about the limits of human capacities for love contrasts with a more recent Roman Catholic reading, in which Matthew 25 has been interpreted in a universalist way.¹⁵ The Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et spes*, the *magna carta* of modern Catholic theological ethics, clearly states:

In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor *of every person without exception* and of actively helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign laborer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of an unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by recalling the voice of the

¹¹ Pope Francis recently proposed an eighth corporal work of mercy: ‘care for our common home’. Anna F. Rowlands and Robert E. Czerny, ‘The Eight Works of Mercy’, *Thinking Faith*. <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/eight-works-mercy> (accessed 22 April 2021).

¹² Paul Moyaert, *De mateloosheid van het Christendom: Over naastenliefde, betekenisincarnatie en mystieke liefde* [The Measurelessness of Christianity: On Neighbor Love, the Incarnation of Meaning and Mystical Love] (Amsterdam: SUN, 1998), pp. 42-51, 72-96; ‘On Love of Neighbour’, *Ethical Perspectives* 1.4 (1994), pp. 169-84.

¹³ Moyaert, *De mateloosheid van het Christendom*, pp. 64-71.

¹⁴ Rob Compaijen, ‘Do I Ever Have a Place in the Sun? A Critical Perspective on Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*’, *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 75.4 (2014): pp. 347-364.

¹⁵ See John R. Donahue, ‘The “Parable” of the Sheep and the Goats: A Challenge to Christian Ethics’, *Theological Studies* 47.1 (1986), pp. 3-31. Donahue is critical of this universalist interpretation which he considers a *Hineininterpretierung*.

Lord, “As long as you did it for one of these the least of my brethren, you did it for me” (Matt. 25: 40).¹⁶

Elsewhere the document alludes to the parable from Matthew: “since the greater part of the world is still suffering from so much poverty that it is as if Christ Himself were crying out in these poor to beg the charity of his disciples”.¹⁷ Recent popes have consistently invoked this biblical passage in the same universalist way.¹⁸ In a Latin American context, Jesus’ parable has been one of the major scriptural arguments for liberation theologians to defend ‘the option for the poor’.¹⁹ The judgment of all nations urges the faithful to radically side with the excluded and change unjust systems.

For Johann Baptist Metz, the German political theologian who explicitly reclaimed the critical potential of the apocalyptic, the major biblical reference is also Matthew 25.²⁰ Inspired by Jewish philosophers Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin, Metz does not interpret the apocalyptic as foretelling some future event; rather it voices the cry of the victims of history, who were often made and forgotten in the name of progress. For Metz, Matthew 25 functions as an ‘apocalyptic sting’²¹ to push us towards overcoming the boundaries of our solidarity to include the disenfranchised. Recently, Justin Ashworth has invoked Matthew 25 in the context of the debate on migration, specifically in order to defend a Christian witness against borders. He does so by answering the question ‘who are our people?’ with an apocalyptic ecclesiology.²² For Ashworth, ‘the presence and activity of God among the crucified peoples of today’s

¹⁶ Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, nr. 27.

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed 22 April 2021).

¹⁷ Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, , nr. 88; see also nr. 93. See also Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, nr. 8.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Pope Paul VI, Address during the Last General Meeting of the Second Vatican Council, 7 December 1965. http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651207_epilogo-concilio.html (accessed 22 April 2021); Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, 1979, nr. 16; *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 1987, nr. 13, 43; *Centesimus annus*, 1991, nr. 57-58; *Evangelium vitae*, 1995, nr. 87; Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 2009, nr. 27. For the papal documents mentioned in this article, see http://www.vatican.va/offices/papal_docs_list.html (accessed 22 April 2021) Further evidence of the universalist reading of Matthew 25 in: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nrs. 544; 1038-1041; 1373; 2447-2448 and especially 2463. https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM (accessed 22 April 2021).

¹⁹ See the classical work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Theology of Liberation*. Translated by Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), pp. 196-203; ‘Option for the Poor’, Translated by Robert R. Barr, in Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (eds.), *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, Vol. 2 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), pp. 235-250, pp. 247-250.

²⁰ Johann Baptist Metz, ‘Hope as Imminent Expectation, or – The Struggle for Lost Time: Untimely Theses on Apocalyptic’, in his *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*. Translated by James Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2011), pp. 156-165, p. 163.

²¹ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, p. 210.

²² Justin P. Ashworth, ‘Who Are Our People? Toward a Christian Witness against Borders’, *Modern Theology* 34.4 (2018), pp. 495-518, pp. 511, 515.

world'²³ calls Christians to become radical witnesses of solidarity with the vulnerable, that is, without regard for state borders or citizenship.²⁴

2. The Dialectics between System and Encounter

‘And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family [literally: ‘these my brothers’], you did it to me.’’
(Matt. 25: 40)

In a lecture for Catholic bishops in Paris, 2009, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben criticized the Church as having lost the Messianic tension in its attempt to embody the Kingdom of God. Agamben quotes Alfred Loisy’s famous dictum that ‘Christ announced the coming of the Kingdom, but what came was the Church’.²⁵ Reminding the Church of its origins, Agamben does not refer to Matthew, which has been the gospel so much cherished in the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, he has a preference for Paul, whom he interprets as a radical Messianic thinker diametrically opposed to any form of system. Part of Agamben’s strong anti-institutional bias can be understood in terms of his Italian context, where from the 19th century onwards the Catholic Church consolidated its worldly power through a large institutional network of care and education services. The works of mercy became organized as ‘apostolic works’, which the Church presented as the realization of the God’s kingdom on earth.²⁶ Within this triumphalist ecclesiology, Matthew 25 was still a major reference point. However, it was turned into a socio-political program and its apocalyptic dimension was largely ignored. Too often the service to the least was turned into a routine within an abstract system in which the concrete person in need was kept out of sight. Scandals in Catholic charity institutions, which have come to light in recent decades, illustrate how such instances could produce the opposite of the intended heaven on earth.

²³ Ashworth, ‘Who Are Our People?’, p. 515.

²⁴ See also Alfred R. Brunson and Christopher Magezi, ‘Fostering Embrace, Inclusion and Integration of Migrants in Complex Migration Situations: A Perspective from Matthew 25: 31-46 and Hebrews 13:1-2’, *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 76.2 (2020), pp. e1–e10.

²⁵ See Giorgio Agamben, *The Church and the Kingdom*. Translated by Leland de la Durantaye (London: Seagull Books, 2012), p. 27; *The Kingdom and the Glory. For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*. Translated by Lorenzo Chiesa (California, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 7-8. Agamben distinguishes ‘the Messianic’ from the eschatological and the apocalyptic. In this article we use the latter terms interchangeably and do not assume them to be in opposition to what he means with the Messianic.

²⁶ See Anton Lingier, ‘Gods rijk in aanleg De eschatologie in het apostolaat’ [‘The Kingdom of God under Construction: Eschatology in the Apostolate’], *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 60.4 (2020), pp. 360-374, pp. 365-369.

The answer to institutional derailment, however, is not necessarily to withdraw oneself into small scale initiatives of direct solidarity. The French Protestant philosopher Paul Ricœur takes Matthew 25 together with the parable of the Good Samaritan as his point of departure for a reflection on the dialectics between the neighbor and the socius.²⁷ For Ricœur, ‘neighbor’ and ‘socius’ refer to two ways in which we relate to other human beings. The neighbor stands for the direct encounter with a concrete human person, while ‘socius’ indicates the human being as an abstract social category, to which we are linked by institutions and structures. Ricoeur distances himself from what he calls ‘personalist anarchism’²⁸, which in the name of neighbor love would exclusively focus upon the personal encounter with persons in need who are near to us, ignoring distant others and the structures of injustice that often keep them out of sight. Especially in complex modern societies, Christians cannot limit themselves to face to face charity, which would be naïve or even hypocritical.

On the one hand, the eschatological parable in which Christ identifies himself with an individual person cannot function as an excuse for not working for structural justice. On the contrary, the latter also bears Christological significance. Playing with the theme of the incognito Christ (Matt. 25: 37-39.44 ‘When was it that we saw you...?’), Ricoeur suggests that we do not know in which relations – neighbor or socius – we will have encountered Christ. The ultimate meaning of our acts and institutions remains hidden: love is not always where it appears to be, but can be present in the abstract service of a social security system, to which we contributed without being aware of what it meant for the least of our brothers and sisters. In other words, the institutional is a necessary dimension for extending the ethics of love to a more universal level.²⁹

On the other hand, the neighbor dimension, the personal encounter, remains a critical moment in the machinery of technocratic systems. Time and again the mystery of human relations and the dynamic of love risk being overshadowed. Institutions have a tendency to reduce people to numbers, to objectify the human subjects that they are meant to serve, and foster the abuse of the power which can be unleashed by institutional relations:

[M]easured over against the love of neighbor, the socius relation is never intimate enough, nor broad enough. It is never intimate enough, since social mediation will never

²⁷ Paul Ricœur, ‘The Socius and the Neighbour’, in Id., *History and Truth*. Translated by Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1965), pp. 98-109; Olivier Abel, ‘La philosophie du proche’, *Cités* 33 (2008), pp. 109-118.

²⁸ Ricoeur, ‘The Socius and the Neighbour’, p. 105.

²⁹ For the institutional level, Ricoeur refers to Romans 13:1-7.

become the equivalent of an encounter, of immediate presence. It is never large enough, since the group only asserts itself against another group and closes in on itself.³⁰

Through the encounter with the destitution of concrete persons, Jesus' apocalyptic voice breaks into the course of history, both calling us to invest in whatever is needed at the institutional level and judging our efforts by continually questioning us. It is often through the concrete presence of one person to another that structures gone astray are interrupted. And this encounter dialectically becomes the impetus for radical institutional innovation – as individual acts will not suffice to respond to the needs of the destitute.

3. *Visitatio Christi*: Attitude and Reversal of Roles

“When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food?” (Matt. 25: 37)

An important clue in Matthew 25 is that both the sheep and the goats are surprised to hear that they either did or failed to do the right thing. Readers of the parable are seemingly in a different position: they receive a warning not to miss Christ when he appears in the figure of the needy. On this basis the parable has been used as a lesson to lead people on the way to heaven, tending towards a form of self-righteousness through works. Protestant interpretations have often objected to this reading by emphasizing that the perplexity of the righteous when they hear about their right actions points at their humility and radical dependence upon Christ for the eschatological vindication they receive – in contrast to the self-asserting attitude of the condemned who question the charges brought against them (Matt. 25: 44).³¹

Even if we are informed by the parable, there might still be a sense in which we are unable to identify Christ or the kind of action required of us. As Ricoeur hinted at above, the meaning of history and our acts remains ultimately hidden to ourselves. And this ignorance is precisely a blessing in that it opens us towards a different attitude. Apocalyptic ethics is not about informing us by a special revelation of which works to do in order to get eternal rewards, but it primarily implies a transformation of attitude.³² It is not about knowing *what* to do, but

³⁰ My own translation of Paul Ricoeur, ‘Le socius et le prochain’, in Id., *Histoire et vérité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964), pp. 109-110: ‘à la mesure de l’amour du prochain, le lien social n’est jamais assez intime, jamais assez vaste. Il n’est jamais assez intime, puisque la médiation sociale ne deviendra jamais l’équivalent de la rencontre, de la présence immédiate. Il n’est jamais assez vaste, puisque le groupe ne s’affirme que contre un autre groupe et se clôt sur soi.’

³¹ See Grindheim, ‘Ignorance is Bliss’, pp. 313–331. This interpretation of Matthew 25 presenting the works as fruits of faith is already present in Reformers Zwingli, Luther and Calvin. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, pp. 202-208.

³² Dan O. Via, ‘Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness In Matthew 25: 31–46’, *Harvard Theological Review* 80.1 (1987), pp. 79-100; Hermie C. Van Zyl, ‘Discernment as ‘Not Knowing’ and ‘Knowing’: A Perspective from Matthew 25: 31-46’, *Acta Theologica* 33.17 (2013), pp. 110–131.

rather about a different way of seeing, which involves different ways of being and doing. Alicia Vargas points to the emphasis upon attentive perception as a precondition for service when those addressed by the king ask: “When was it *that we saw you hungry* and gave you food?”³³ The surprise of the people in Matthew 25 might instill in us the openness to being surprised as well.³⁴ Apocalyptic ethics implies an optics of hope, a reshaping of our vision into a receptivity towards the coming of the O/other.³⁵ Over against the activism which characterizes much of modern mentality and policies, Erik Borgman calls for a ‘contemplative’ turn.³⁶ In the present, here and now, the apocalyptic awareness is oriented towards the in-breaking of the reign of God. The human act emerges as a response to and a participation in the coming of Christ in our broken world.

In the Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia (480-547), the founder of Western contemplative monasticism, we find the following counsel for his community: “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Matt 25: 35).”³⁷ Matthew 25 inspires a radical form of hospitality. In this context, I would like to offer a counterpoint to the common interpretation of the works of mercy as a form of *imitatio Christi*. When James Keenan, for example, argues: ‘We respond to the sick, because Christ did’³⁸, discipleship is conceived of as following in the footsteps of Jesus, as imitating the master. By contrast, Matthew 25 imagines the ethical life more as a dynamic of what I would call *visitatio Christi*³⁹: Christ is visiting us in unexpected and unnoticed ways, and this visitation elicits acts of love. For example, when we provide hospitality to refugees,

³³ Alicia Vargas, ‘Who Ministers to Whom: Matthew 25: 31–46 and Prison Ministry’, *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 52.2 (2013) pp. 128–137, p. 133.

³⁴ George Njeri draws the opposite conclusion in his ‘Surprise on the Day of Judgment in Matthew 25: 31–46 and The Book of the Watchers’, *Neotestamentica* 54.1 (2020), pp. 87–104.

³⁵ Robert P. Doede & Paul E. Hughes, ‘Wounded Vision and the Optics of Hope’, in Miroslav Volf & William Katerberg (eds.), *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition amid Modernity and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, MI): Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 170–199.

³⁶ See Erik Borgman, *Leven van wat komt: Een katholieke uitzicht op de samenleving* (Utrecht: Meinema, 2017), pp. 30–34.

³⁷ *The Rule of St. Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry OSB (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1982), 53.1. See Margaret R. Pfeil, ‘Love and Poverty: Dorothy Day’s Twofold Diakonia’, *Journal of Moral Theology* 1.2 (2012), pp. 61–71, pp. 67–68. See, e.g., the German Benedictine abbess Mechtilde Thürmer who practices monastic asylum for undocumented migrants: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/28527/german-abbess-in-conflict-with-the-law-i-have-no-choice-i-have-to-help> (accessed 22 April 2021).

³⁸ Keenan, ‘The Evolution of the Works of Mercy’, p. 33–35. In the end, also the Protestant interpretation of Matthew 25 is often connecting it to the imitation theme. See, e.g., Grindheim, ‘Ignorance is Bliss’, pp. 323–328.

³⁹ I coined the Latin phrase ‘*visitatio Christi*’ as an allusion to the traditional ‘*imitatio Christi*’. The ‘visitation of Christ’ can be interpreted in two ways: it can refer to the movement of someone who goes and visits Christ (in this case identified with a person in need), or, inversely, to Christ who visits us (identifying with a person in need and waiting for us to receive him). Both meanings refer to an ‘encounter with Christ’, but the difference lies in who is having the initiative. In the apocalyptic ethics I propose I lean towards the second meaning, which corresponds to the motive of the coming of Christ.

the perspective of Matthew 25 does not depict this as our way of representing Christ to the suffering persons in need. Rather, Christ is to be located in the latter: Christ appears in the other.

This is the radical reversal that Matthew 25 brings to our ethical stance. It questions the ways in which we often implicitly locate ourselves vis-à-vis those in need, and also where we locate Christ. In her article on prison ministry, Vargas points out that in their outreach to society's outcasts, Jesus' disciples are perhaps not being sent primarily to evangelize or serve the lost, but rather to encounter Jesus through the prisoners, that is, those who embody the suffering Christ, as well as his love, trust and hope in a dehumanizing context. Vargas aptly formulates the paradox:

Jesus becomes the subject of ministry as he perplexes us, we who might have thought that we would be talking about Jesus to others, and are surely surprised to find him there opening our eyes so that we might "see." So: Who ministers to whom?⁴⁰

The ministry becomes reciprocal when inmates, for example, help those Christians visiting them to discover their need for liberation from their own prejudice and blindness concerning systemic injustice.

As such, apocalyptic ethics subverts the hierarchical relationship which so often lets contexts of care drift into paternalism and abuse of power.⁴¹ "The least' are, therefore, not only objects of our compassion, but also subjects embodying the Son of Man in whose presence we live."⁴² The dichotomy between being the subject and object of charity is in this way broken down.⁴³ In a similar way, Matthew 25 has inspired liberation theology to claim that the poor

⁴⁰ Vargas, 'Who Ministers to Whom', p. 136. Another radical example of this Matthew 25 inspired reversal is L'Arche communities where care-givers share their lives with care-receivers (persons with disabilities) and live this life as mutual service and love. See Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992). The recent revelation of L'Arche founder Jean Vanier's secret life does not undermine the experiment in liberated relationships which these communities embody. Rather, Vanier's power abuse illustrates once more the risk of an imitation of Christ spirituality. While his public discourse stressed – in our terms – the *visitatio Christi*, his secret life was based upon role-plays in which he pretended to play Jesus – in a perverted *imitatio Christi*. See Vanier's identification with Jesus in the quotes describing his behavior taken from the inquiry in: L'Arche International, *Summary Report*, p. 6 <https://www.larche.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=139bf786-3bbc-45f5-882a-9f78bfb99e9> (accessed 22 April 2021).

⁴¹ It is telling that in none of the three models of apostolic activity, identified in Annelies van Heijst's historical research on the institutionalization of the works of mercy, the objects of care (i.e., children) play an active role. My thesis is that this passive role is a major source of the ambiguous effects of the 'works of charity'. See her *Models of Charitable Care: Catholic Nuns and Children in Their Care in Amsterdam, 1852-2002* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 377-85.

⁴² Van Zyl, 'Discernment', p. 118. From a Latin-American context, David Cortés-Fuentes goes so far to refuse to play the role of the least as this would condemn the poor to be waiting for mercy: 'The Least of These My Brothers: Matthew 25: 31-46', in *Apuntes* 23.3 (2003), pp. 100-109.

⁴³ Keenan points at examples in the tradition of the works of mercy where this shift occasionally happened as well: for instance, former prostitutes organized themselves as a religious congregation (the Penitents of St Mary

should be considered as the subjects of liberation with their own agency: ‘the poor evangelize’.⁴⁴

4. The Sacrament of the Least: Relocating Christ and Participating in Incarnate Love

The shift in attitude and perspective sketched above goes beyond the current sensitivity about asymmetrical power relations, as has been articulated, for example, in feminist care ethics. Matthew 25 provides a theological underpinning which embeds the moral life within a transcendent dynamic.

In his interpretation of Matthew 25, Jürgen Moltmann claims that it grounds ethics in an ecclesiological question: where is the fellowship of Christ to be found?⁴⁵ Moltmann distinguishes a threefold promise of Christ’s presence: as the exalted one manifest in the word and sacrament of the church; as the crucified one hidden in the least of his brothers and sisters; and as the Christ who will come in glory. Through Christ’s identification with the poor, a latent brotherhood appears, which dislocates our imagination of the body of Christ. Matthew 25 confronts us with ‘the apocalyptic Christ, the poor, hungry, forsaken Judge, [who] has generally remained outside the door of church and society.’⁴⁶ Moltmann also points to what we called *visitatio* when he states that what happens in the encounter with the disinherited other is not only that I become – referring to an expression of Luther’s – ‘a Christ like Christ’ [the familiar theme of *imitatio Christi* or *alter Christus*] to the other when I open myself in love, but also that the other becomes to me ‘a Christ like Christ, a savior and judge’.⁴⁷ When Christ, the coming judge and savior, says ‘whoever visits them, visits me’, he gives the downtrodden an eschatological dignity and joins their yearning for justice.

Combining Matthew 25 with a spiritual theology of love, Hans Urs von Balthasar developed the idea of ‘the sacrament of the brother’.⁴⁸ In his sacramental approach, he highlights how Christ’s hidden presence in the poor and forsaken makes God appear in our world in a very concrete way:

Magdalene founded in 1215) serving the excluded people to which they once belonged. Keenan, ‘The Evolution of the Works of Mercy’, p. 40.

⁴⁴ Gutiérrez, ‘Option for the Poor’, p. 250; see Ignacio Ellacuría, ‘The Crucified People.’ Translated by Phillip Berryman and Robert R. Barr, in Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (eds.), *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, Vol. 2 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), pp. 580-603, esp. pp. 602-603.

⁴⁵ See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*. Translated by Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 126-132.

⁴⁶ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 128.

⁴⁷ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 127.

⁴⁸ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The God Question and Modern Man*. Translated by Hilda Graef (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), pp. 142-155. In the quotes, we will find von Balthasar not using gender inclusive language.

[C]harity is not asked to discover Christ “behind” the brother, “representing” him in a kind of hide and seek game, still less to love Christ “in the place of” the brother, so that here would be an indistinct to and fro between the two subjects. It suffices for him to love the brother together with Christ; then he will love him with a love that ascends towards the Father, seeing, too, through the hidden and disfigured face of the brother the original of all this disfigurement [i.e., the Crucified] – for love.⁴⁹

In this divine presence in our daily life, even if barely noticeable, the Holy Spirit enables and dynamizes the fraternal love which is humanly impossible. In the encounter with the poor, God enters into our life as the source, motive and end of love – whether one recognizes God or not. This distinguishes the love provoked by Christ from a humanitarian view on love: God is the first to love and move us, and our love is directed towards God. ‘It loves God through the brother, God in himself and God for us in Christ and the Church.’⁵⁰ The human person, both the poor and the one loving them, is situated in a dynamic of coming from and going to God – created, called, redeemed. This opens neighbor love to a hope in God.

In an approach to Matthew 25 that is also explicitly sacramental, liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez claims that such a strong identification of Christ in the least of our brothers and sisters helps to avoid the risk of instrumentalization of the poor:

The neighbor is not an occasion, an instrument for becoming closer to God. We are dealing with a real love of man for his own sake and not “for the love of God,” as the well-intended but ambiguous and ill-used cliché would have it...⁵¹

Love of the least ones is only authentic if it is a truly human love for concrete human persons treated as ends in themselves – embedded in the horizon of the ultimate source, motive and end of love. At this point Gutiérrez offers a helpful corrective to von Balthasar who has a tendency to present neighbor love as so divine that both the neighbor and the moral agent risk being reduced to channels of God.⁵² For Gutiérrez participation in the ongoing movement of incarnation implies that our love of neighbor is not only fully divine, but also has to be fully human. Given the fact that human beings cannot be considered in isolation from the society

⁴⁹ von Balthasar, *The God Question and Modern Man*, p. 148.

⁵⁰ von Balthasar, *The God Question and Modern Man*, p. 147.

⁵¹ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, p. 202. In this context he refers to Yves Congar’s notion of the ‘sacrament of the neighbor’.

⁵² See von Balthasar, *The God Question and Modern Man*, p. 145: ‘Love can only love itself. God’s love can only love God, even in the world and in all that is lost. If the Son goes out to bring back his enemy [the sinful human creature] and to give him the love that he has not, he must see God behind him and in him.’

they live in, this emphasis upon the full humanity of Christian love also inevitably requires commitment for structural change beyond the traditional works of charity.⁵³

The references to Church and sacrament in the authors do not imply the exclusion of those who are not members of the official Christian communities, but rather disrupt closed notions of Church and sacrament and direct them towards any place where the encounter with the least happens. In this light, a contemporary activist like the French farmer Cédric Herrou who practices hospitality to undocumented migrants, going against the logics of the state system which declares them ‘illegal’, might appear as a secular apocalyptic.⁵⁴ The hardening migration policy increasingly criminalizes citizens helping undocumented persons in dire need. Arrested and brought before the judge, Herrou appealed to the French core value of fraternity, to defend his acts of solidarity beyond borders. In his case which became known under the paradoxical name ‘*délit de solidarité*’ (solidarity delict), he claimed to belong to a universal brotherhood which had been occulted by the reigning regime which limited the fellowship of humans to those possessing state citizenship.⁵⁵

Let me conclude this section by pointing at the way in which the theological interpretation of Matthew 25 opens a different track in apocalyptic ethics, one which integrates the Christian belief that the incarnation already happened, and is sacramentally continued at all places where Christ can be encountered, in particular, in the least of our brothers and sisters. This incarnational/sacramental dimension, as inspired by Matthew 25, makes a crucial difference from the political-philosophical retrieval of the apocalyptic Paul, which often offers a variation of Jacques Derrida’s apophatic ‘Messianism without Messiah’ or ‘apocalypse without apocalypse’.⁵⁶ From a Christian perspective, the Messiah has already come, and the apocalyptic mode of being consists in living in the tension between the already and the not yet of the second coming. Even more, what Moltmann, von Balthasar and Gutiérrez highlight is a

⁵³ This means that the sacramental approach to Matthew 25 needs to be held together with the preceding aspects in our article (in particular, Ricoeur’s dialectics of system and encounter). If not, a Mother Teresa of Calcutta like spirituality of seeing Christ in the suffering risks ending up in a paternalistic charity approach.

⁵⁴ See documentary *The Valley Rebels* in *The Guardian*, 28 April 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2017/apr/28/the-valley-rebels-the-french-farmer-helping-refugees-cross-europe-video> (accessed 22 April 2021).

⁵⁵ Paul Mathonnet, ‘Le délit de solidarité à l’épreuve du principe de fraternité’, *Plein droit* 118.3 (2018), pp. 41-44. For a theological-ethical sacramental interpretation of this solidarity drawing upon Matthew 25, see Luis N. Rivera-Pagán, ‘Toward a Theology of Migration’, in Joerg Rieger (ed.), *Theologies on the Move: Religion, Migration, and Pilgrimage in the World of Neoliberal Capital* (Lanham: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2020), pp. 167-185, pp. 177-78.

⁵⁶ See John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion Without Religion* (Indianapolis, IN: Indianapolis University Press: 1997), pp. 69-159; O’Regan, *Theology and the Spaces of Apocalyptic*, pp. 68-74, 113-116.

third way in which Christ is coming in the here and now.⁵⁷ They avoid the political-philosophical tendency to resolve the tension between revealing and hiding by giving up the real presence of Christ. The apocalyptic dimension is not only about Christ dislocating, but also Christ relocating each time anew.

5. Pope Francis, a Catholic Apocalyptic?

By way of conclusion, I would like to recapitulate the preceding points by indicating ways in which the current pope is drawing upon a Matthew 25 apocalyptic imagination to develop his account of a Church and world in crisis.⁵⁸ Significantly, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church chose a name that refers to the apocalyptic saint Francis of Assisi, whose conversion to a life of identification with the poor Christ (*imitatio Christi*) had been provoked by an experience of encountering Christ in the lepers (*invitatio Christi*).⁵⁹ Pope Francis' manifold references to Matthew 25 integrate the different steps in our article.

First, Pope Francis invokes Matthew 25 in his recovery of the works of mercy as a concrete form of neighbor love shown to the least of the human family.⁶⁰ At the same time he highlights the universalist scope of a fraternity beyond borders, as he recently did in his social encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* applying Matthew 25 in the context of global migration movements.⁶¹ In line with this first point stands the second: Pope Francis focuses upon encounter as a key for criticizing and transforming systems of oppression, yet he never places the personal level and structural change over against each other. Indeed, he dialectically maintains the tension which we also saw in Ricoeur's reading of Matthew 25.⁶² The third aspect of the apocalyptic ethics developed in this article is situated at the level of attitude and perspective. Pope Francis claims

⁵⁷ Compare with the threefold coming of Christ in the liturgy of Advent.

⁵⁸ Antonio Spadaro, 'Defy the Apocalypse', *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 20 January 2020; <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/defy-the-apocalypse/> (accessed 22 April 2021). My interpretation of Pope Francis' theological ethics is inspired by Erik Borgman, 'A Field Hospital after Battle: Mercy as a Fundamental Characteristic of God's Presence', *Concilium* no. 4 (2017), pp. 33-43.

⁵⁹ Paschal M. Corby, 'Awakened by Love. Saint Francis of Assisi as Model for the Church's Mission to Health Care and Charitable Service', *The Linacre Quarterly* 85.2 (2018), pp. 118-24. Ian Boxall, 'Francis of Assisi as Apocalyptic Visionary', in John Ashton (ed.), *Revealed Wisdom. Studies in Apocalyptic in Honour of Christopher Rowland* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 253-66.

⁶⁰ Pope Francis, 'Works of Mercy (Mt 25: 31-46)', Jubilee Audience St Peter's Square, Thursday 30 June 2016 http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160630_udienza-giubilare.html (accessed 22 April 2021); Pope Francis, *The Works of Mercy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017).

⁶¹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, nrs. 84-85.

⁶² See Martin Owchorukwu Eijowhor, *The Dynamics of Justice and Love in Benedict XVI: A Theological-Ethical Investigation* (unpublished Master Thesis, KU Leuven, 2020), pp. 91-97; Eijowhor, 'Pope Francis' "Culture of Encounter" as a Paradigm Shift in the Magisterium's Reception of *Justice in the World*: Implications for the Church's Mission', in *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* (forthcoming)

that Matthew 25 is provoking us to see differently and to contemplate Christ's presence in unexpected places. The option for the poor does not spring from our own initiative, but is rooted in the movement of God who became poor in Christ and keeps on visiting us in the least of our brothers and sisters. This implies a radical reversal of roles: Pope Francis calls not only for a conversion towards a 'Church *for* the poor' and 'a poor Church', but with Matthew 25 he calls for 'a Church *of* the poor', where the latter are the subjects teaching the community what it means to live in Christ.⁶³ The poor are the location where the *visitatio Christi* happens, the dynamic which elicits our response of love and opens the way to an *imitatio Christi* – our first imitation of Christ, however, being the identification with the least.⁶⁴

To be clear, in my article I did not intend to reject the *imitatio Christi* outright, which can be based upon solid scriptural grounds indeed (for instance, John 13); my point is that Matthew 25 brings to the fore a different theme which is situated at a deeper level. The *visitatio Christi* is an apocalyptic-ethical motive which ignites our moral life and calls us forth.⁶⁵ This intuition is deepened in a fourth step, the sacramental approach of recognizing Christ in the suffering other and responding to God's invitation to participate in Christ's transformative love. This apocalyptic-ethical tone is apparent in a homily at Madison Square Garden, New York City, 25 September 2015, where Pope Francis evoked the hidden presence of Christ as follows:

Knowing that Jesus still walks our streets, that he is part of the lives of his people, that he is involved with us in one vast history of salvation, fills us with hope. A hope which liberates us from the forces pushing us to isolation and lack of concern for the lives of others, for the life of our city.

A hope which frees us from empty "connections," from abstract analyses, or sensationalist routines. A hope which is unafraid of involvement, which acts as a leaven wherever we happen to live and work. A hope which makes us see, even in the midst of smog, the presence of God as he continues to walk the streets of our city.

⁶³ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, nrs. 71, 179, 197-198, 209-210.

⁶⁴ Pope Francis refers in *Fratelli Tutti*, nr. 287, to the mystic Charles de Foucauld who 'wanted to be, in the end, "the universal brother"'. Yet only by identifying with the least did he come at last to be the brother of all.'

⁶⁵ The relation between *visitatio* and *imitatio Christi* can be compared with the one between discipleship and apocalyptic expectation as it is formulated by Metz: 'The Christian idea of discipleship and the apocalyptic idea of imminent expectation absolutely belong together. It would not be possible to live a radical following of Jesus—that is, one that gets at the roots – "if the time were not shortened." Jesus' call, "Follow me!" cannot be separated from Christians' call, "Come, Lord Jesus!"' ('Hope as Imminent Expectation', p. 163.) What imminent expectation does to our temporality, visitation does to our spatiality. The respective apocalyptic notions are transforming the time and space where we are.

What is it like, this light travelling through our streets? How do we encounter God, who lives with us amid the smog of our cities? How do we encounter Jesus, alive and at work in the daily life of our multicultural cities?⁶⁶

⁶⁶ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150925_usa-omelia-nyc.html (accessed 22 April 2021).