

# Review of: Marcus Mescher, *The Ethics of Encounter. Christian Neighbor Love as a Practice of Solidarity*

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MARCUS MESCHER, *The Ethics of Encounter. Christian Neighbor Love as a Practice of Solidarity*, Maryknoll, New York (Orbis Books) 2020, xviii + 197 S., ISBN: 978-1-62698-376-2.

Marcus Mescher explores the social and cultural differences and develops a compelling argument to build a culture of encounter in the light of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37).

In the “Introduction” (xi–xxiii), Mescher provides the etymological root of the word encounter: “to meet as adversary” (xii). He identifies social separation in America as “sin” and recognizes the need to rebuild a culture of encounter inspired by God’s Word and in faith. Mescher’s service in Dominican Republic serves him as a powerful experience to foster oneness between the “poor” and the “haves.” His aim is to provide “a blueprint for living Catholic social teaching in everyday life” (xx) that focuses on the “how” to create a culture of encounter around solidarity.

Chapter 1, “The Divided State of America” (1–34), exemplifies discrimination and inequalities between the “us” (the privileged ones) and “them” (the poor). This polarization demonizes those who are segregated by race, ethnicity, economy, and political ideology. Using data, Mescher shows the social and economic separation, and the racial, gender, and sexual orientation discrimination (6–9), emphasizing the lack of awareness, which has exacerbated not only social separation but also human interaction and tolerance. For Mescher, “tolerance” is not “passive” or “excessive,” but a virtue understood within the command to “live your neighbor as yourself” (15). He speaks about the problem of lack of bonding (with others) and knowledge (among young people), and whiteness, which are the causes of the growth of spatial segregation. By “whiteness” Mescher refers to a “condition” rather than color. The decline of religiosity increases the sense of “connected self”; indeed, he believes that religion is key for conversion and transformation. Mescher also poses the dangers of digital technology, Internet, and social media (27–34); showing data he notes their negative sequels: pornography, narcissism, technostress, and social loneliness.

In chapter 2, “A Theology of Neighbor” (35–64), Mescher describes his understanding of the theology of the neighbor in light of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. He focuses on justice as an important virtue related to love and solidarity and points out that Jesus does more than the rabbis by transforming the question “Who is my neighbor?” into “To whom am I a neighbor?” or “How neighborly am I?” (49), a question that breaks the barriers of social differences. He enlightens five observations of the parable (50–57) that strongly support the theology of neighbor, particularly engaging Gustavo Gutiérrez’s interpretation. In Mescher’s view, the theology of the neighbor is a “sacrament” and a Christian duty that recognizes solidarity with the poor and mutual respect. To “go and do likewise” means mutual encounter, friendship with the poor, and he ties these with the practice of five virtues: courage, mercy, generosity, humility, and fidelity.

Chapter 3, “Discerning the Ethics of Encounter” (65–102), illuminates how to understand “doing likewise” around the five virtues. The moral demands of encountering others must raise the question, “Who is ‘near’ me?” and offer a new moral vision of solidarity as depicted in Luke 10:25–37. Mescher offers a brief overview of the theological understanding of solidarity and its various applications and visions. He claims that “church teaching on solidarity still requires a more grounded development of its possibilities and limits” (75) and discusses divided attitudes toward immigration in America. He boldly urges to free oneself from the “buffered self” to see and participate with God in the world. He further asserts that a moral vision of solidarity seeks a virtuous midpoint, where the ethics of encounter not only “fits each person’s social context” (84) but also embraces the preferential option for the poor in solidarity, rather than excessive individualism or coercive collectivism.

In chapter 4, “Practicing the Ethics of Encounter” (103–45), Mescher explicates the cultivation of a culture of inclusive belonging through the practice of virtues. Courage and compassion make connection possible to encounter another person and God in our midst; this reinforces human interrelationship and interdependence as co-equal members of God’s family (108). In light of Pope Francis’s exhortation in *The Name of God is Mercy*, Mescher calls us to become people of “boundless mercy,” practiced in mindfulness, contemplation, prayer, sacraments, and imagination (110–16). Mescher believes that human *telos* overcomes biases and helps to become sensitive to the existing tensions between people; it motivates to be attentive to people’s beliefs, attitudes, and intentions. Engaging thinkers in his argument, Mescher encourages communication through different ways of practicing a culture of encounter, especially the formation of *habitus*, for it builds relationships across diversity. Fr. Greg Boyle’s ministry depicts powerfully what a culture of belonging looks like today; he is an example of love, hope, and a solidarity that imitates the Samaritan.

Chapter 5, “Toward a Culture of Belonging” (147–84), explores how a community of belonging is like. Family life represents a focal unit to practice virtues of charity, magnanimity, and justice in order to reconcile racial, ethnic, political, and religious differences. Mescher argues that “seeing Christ in the other and being in Christ for the other” (157) mean to welcome strangers; he challenges the political claim, “America First,” because it worsens the gap between “us” and “them.” There is a great need for ecumenical dialogue and interfaith solidarity to foster common good and strengthen “civic friendship” (158–61). For a positive impact on the ethics of encounter, digital technology, Internet, and social media should be built

by virtues, so that they can be used as powerful tools to bridge connectedness and build relationships. Using an impressive data and in light of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*, Mescher exhorts an ecological conversion that integrates sustainability and solidarity with the Earth. An encounter with others requires an encounter with the natural world framed by the five virtues, for nature is a "sacrament of God's presence and continuing activity in the world" (182). In this way humanity encounters and embraces "nature love" and "neighbor love."

In the "Conclusion" (185–87) Mescher perceives the ethics of encounter as a hopeful practice of "neighbor love" that seeks solidarity, draws people near others, and calls to share life together to embrace a commitment to inclusive belonging that empowers humanity.

Mescher makes a compelling argument that fosters higher ethics of encounter. His presentation of the various social issues (esp. racism, migration, and environment) in American are well-presented and impressively supported with data. His use of theologians from different religious and cultural backgrounds clearly strengthens his interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan and its outstanding application to practice a greater Christian love with the most vulnerable people in society. His view of nature as "a sacrament of God's presence" is an interesting relationship, which would require a further exploration in connection with his statement, "God gives Godself to us" (187). Despite this small observation, Mescher's book creates conscience to practice virtuous actions to build a culture of encounter that truly reflects who God is in the world. This is a book that should be read by anyone who teaches or studies ethics and/or Catholic Social Teaching.