

Friendship, Love, and Mass Shootings: Toward a Theological Response for Gun Control

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This essay explores the place of assault weapons in a theology concerned to emphasize human well-being and community. Current debates and recent tragedies that have included assault weapons raise questions beyond the usual appeals to political rights and individual freedoms. Drawing on the analysis of community in Aristotle and particularly Aquinas, this work seeks to promote a Christian vision of human action and friendship grounded in the church's confession of the crucified Christ. The essay concludes with a section on the role of the church in a society that includes the use and advocacy of assault weapons.

In the aftermath of a mass shooting like that at the Sandy Hook Elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012, a number of questions were pressed upon us: why did it happen, who is to blame, and can something like this be avoided? But there are other questions that are also worth considering, such as, how does an event like this fit within our understanding of what constitutes appropriate human activity, and are there any conceptual tools to help discern where such an event falls within traditions of thought and practice that privilege something like friendship and love over conflict and combat? These later questions are a different kind to the more journalistic questions of who, what, and why, yet they are no less important in providing a path of response to the horror of such an event.

On the questions of why and who, we might look for answers to this kind of an event via the analysis of the psychological state of the perpetrator. Other tools from the social sciences might be equally deployed to describe the historical and sociological details of the

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perpetrator, and his or her (of course, it is generally a *him*) family and even immediate community. Such analysis can construct an individual “map” that gestures toward certain conclusions: it was mental illness; it was family dysfunction; it was a cruel community; or, simply, it was all of the above.

Alternatively, we might be led to believe that such events are part of a larger problem, namely, the availability of guns. Whereas the psychological approach reveals something personal about the perpetrator, the ability to buy and own guns is a personal *and* a political piece of information. I am using political in the broad sense of belonging to a particular community that is shaped by a certain understanding of the world.¹ In the case of gun ownership, an individual might be a hunter, or collector, or someone invested in personal projection (or again, all of the above). They might even carry NRA membership. There are many reasons that people give for gun ownership, and most of them display a politics of one form or another.

To attend to the politics associated with mass shootings is a matter of attending to the function and shape of the human community. “Human community” might seem too broad a term when considering specific events at specific times. What I have in mind is using this term is an analysis of the way we organize ourselves as people, that is, the general reasons and purposes that we might provide if asked: why community, and what’s important to humans that we would form communities in the first place? Addressing these questions will provide a basis for addressing the more specific issues associated with a response to mass shootings and the use of *militarized, civilian semi-automatic weapons*.²

¹ I am, in essence, conflating Aristotle—every polis is a species of association, and all associations come into being for the sake of some good, for all people act with a view of achieving something which is, in their view, a good (Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve [Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998], I, 1)—and Charles Taylor’s notion of “social imaginary”: “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004], 23).

² The distinction between a properly named *military-grade automatic weapon* (“machine gun”) and a *militarized, civilian semiautomatic weapon* (“assault weapon or gun”) is the single matter of gunfire mechanism. A machine gun fires continuously as long as its trigger is held back—until it runs out of ammunition. The trigger of a semiautomatic weapon, on the other hand, must be pulled back separately for each round fired. The latter are principally semiautomatic versions of military machine

The Human Community

The conventional wisdom is that it is no business of society to interfere with or influence anybody's values—this is a matter purely for the individual conscience. Society, says the conventional wisdom, exists to protect us from each other, to keep the peace between people with quite divergent views of what it would mean to live humanly well. This is the theoretical foundation or credo of the secular or liberal society: society is a peaceful coexistence of potential or real enemies. Even when liberal society is reimagined by a political liberal such as John Rawls and his “liberalism of reasoned respect,” political cooperation remains a matter of ordering society by means of “public reason” that is reached by avoiding the conflict inherent to specific communities that are shaped by normative traditions.³ Friendship and love do not come within the purview of society as such. They are too personal and too sacred to be bothered with by any political arrangement with which we are not somehow directly involved.⁴

Despite the rationale that would push normative traditions to the side when conceiving a peaceful society, there is, in fact, a great deal of shared belief and even political wisdom handed down in various groups within our society, although, because it is unrecognized, disowned, or sentimentalized, it is undoubtedly being eroded. We might

guns, and include many variants of the AR-15 (the civilian version of the U.S. military M-16 assault rifle) like that used in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. See Tom Diaz, *The Militarization of the U.S. Civilian Firearms Market* (Washington, D.C.: Violence Policy Center, 2011); <http://www.vpc.org/studies/militarization.pdf>. See also Erica Goode, “Even Defining ‘Assault Rifles’ Is Complicated,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/17/us/even-defining-assault-weapons-is-complicated.html>. For the purposes of the essay, I will use the term “assault weapons” with the recognition that for some this term is overly politicized. For the overall argument, however, the term used is secondary to what the weapon can do as a particular artifact of human invention.

³ For an analysis of Rawls's position, see Paul J. Weithman, “Introduction: Religion and the Liberalism of Reasoned Respect,” in *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism*, ed. Paul J. Weithman (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 1–37. Luke Bretherton provides a critique and corrective to the claims of political liberalism, particularly in relation to the church-state relationship, in Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness*, first edition (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 31–70. For a recovery of what “public reason” can mean in theological reflection, see Nigel Biggar, *Behaving in Public: How to Do Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011).

⁴ Herbert McCabe, OP, *The Good Life: Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness* (London: Continuum, 2005), 10–11.

think here of schools, charitable organizations, and to some extent universities, as sites where we see fruitful attempts to maintain the community through something other than the personal preference of each individual involved. Luke Bretherton contends that we see examples of formative traditions of common cause in the community organizing of the Industrial Areas Foundation, and even the organizational rationale and structure of Fair Trade companies. Such attempts to foster alternative political arrangements to the “liberal project” are, Bretherton notes, signs of hope in the ashes of a world that Alasdair MacIntyre refers to as fragmented.⁵

The notion that a community (or an entire society) is organized by values deeper than “public reason” is one that belongs to, among others, Aristotle. In his work on politics, Aristotle argued that the city-state, the *polis*, had its basis in *philia* (a word perhaps not adequately translated by “friendship” in the modern sense: it is more like companionship with trust, a kind of solidarity). The *polis* is intended to enable all, in their households and their kinships, to live well, meaning by that a perfected and self-sufficient life.⁶ This “living well” is made possible by *philia*. Like our notion of friendship, *philia* involves affection, but precisely the affection arising from solidarity in a shared important project (such as education), a solidarity that Aristotle regards as the precondition for human well-being, including the role of justice. As Aristotle notes, “Complete friendship is the friendship of those who are good and alike in point of virtue. For such people wish in similar fashion for the good things for each other insofar as they are good, and they are good in themselves.”⁷ In Aristotle’s understanding of society, acts incompatible with this *philia* are the ones absolutely ruled out, especially acts that not only caused harm in the community, but also destabilized the solidarity so that trust between people became impossible.

There is, I believe, a connection between a society no longer ordered by *philia* and the fragmentation we encounter in the political arrangements of today. The dislocation of people and communities is

⁵ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, esp. chap. 2 and 4. For MacIntyre’s account of “fragmentation,” see Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, third edition (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, III, 9.

⁷ Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2011), VIII, 3.

due in part to the erosion of the common thread of human solidarity created through sharing in common projects like education but also through the limiting (or banning outright) of activities that threaten the kind of companionship that society has as its source.

Before turning to what all of this means in relation to the questions of gun control, I want to begin shifting matters to a different key, mainly, a specifically theological perspective. A particularly fruitful adoption of Aristotle's notion of a society shaped by friendship came from the pen of St. Thomas Aquinas. In his own work on politics, Aquinas took Aristotle's political notion of *philia* (*amicitia* in Latin) as his model for the *caritas* (generally translated as love, though love understood as a sharing in the life of another, what the New Testament refers to as *koinonia*), which is the foundation of the community of the human family as not merely creatures, but children of God. As Thomas notes:

Now there is a sharing (*communicatio*) of man with God by his sharing his happiness with us, and it is on this that a friendship is based. St Paul refers to it, *God is faithful by whom you were called into the fellowship (koinonia) of his Son*. Now the love which is based on this sort of fellowship (*communicatio*) is charity. Accordingly, it is clear that charity is a friendship of man and God.⁸

In his writings on love, Aquinas envisions a twofold failure of *communicatio* that weakens both *philia* and *caritas*: first, there is not living the life of the Spirit well, perhaps through neglecting the cultivation of faithfulness through prayer, and, second, there are acts that are incompatible with membership of a community sustained and defined by love.⁹ Those acts which cut at the root of human community thereby cut at the roots of our community in *caritas*. It would seem, for example, that there could be no human community based on friendship in which the killing of the innocent was treated with indifference; and hence such an action is a rejection of solidarity with each other, and thus a departure from the shared divine life that is the gift of the Spirit.

For Aristotle and Aquinas, the position of the individual to a community or even society is one that begins with the latter. To be a human being is to be a part of a larger whole. It is not just that human beings

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa, IIae, 23, 1.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa, IIae, 27, 8.

join groupings, as people join tennis clubs or political parties. There is a community to which we belong simply by virtue of being human. It is not one that we join, one that we constitute. It is a community that constitutes us. If, to continue the example above, we act with indifference to the killing of innocent people, then there is reason to examine the roots of this indifference in the communities to which we belong; not only the human community, but the other groupings where we learn and practice our skills in being human. To align with political arrangements that implicitly train us to ignore *philia* and, in the case of Christianity, *caritas* is to risk missing what human life is for: its purpose and goal beyond the satisfying of personal preferences. It is to risk forfeiting love for some lesser good, like getting rich or maintaining something called “an individual right to bear arms.”

Assault Weapons and Human Well-being

What might be the relationship between addressing the question, what is human life for, and the kind of violence perpetrated with assault weapons? Obviously, the first response is that these weapons form a threat to human life. We might call this the “common sense” answer. Assault weapons, regardless of *why* people buy them, are built to do one thing: fire bullets in rapid succession at a chosen target.¹⁰ Again, it matters little at this point what the target is; the idea here is that an assault weapon has only one purpose, unlike, say, a knife, which can cut a piece of fruit, release a highly taut and dangerous fishing line, or penetrate a human body and cause injury or death. Assault weapons are not that complicated an instrument.

There is another way of addressing the human purpose question that connects to the place of *philia* and *caritas* discussed in the previous section. It elaborates the “common sense” response through attention to the kinds of human activities that are considered beneficial to the ordering of a community or society by friendship and love.

¹⁰ According to Tom Diaz, the design of militarized, civilian semiautomatic weapons makes them ideal for rapidly laying down a wide field of fire. Such weapons typically include (1) high capacity magazines (capable of holding from twenty to more than one hundred rounds of ammunition) and (2) devices that make it easier to simply point (as opposed to carefully aim) the gun while rapidly pulling the trigger. See Tom Diaz, “The American Gun Industry: Designing and Marketing Increasingly Lethal Weapons,” in *Suing the Gun Industry: A Battle at the Crossroads of Gun Control and Mass Torts*, ed. Timothy Lytton (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 98.

These activities form part of an understanding of how we might determine whether particular human practices are, by nature, corroding to the enterprise of living together.

Imagine a game of soccer. In soccer, as in most sports, there are two different kinds of limitation on the players: they should play the game well and they should not cheat.¹¹ The first is concerned with dispositions (skills), the second with particular acts and rules. Learning how to play well is analogous to acquiring the skills for living well. Cheating is not playing the game badly: rather, it is not playing it at all. It is attempting to be adjudged a winner by an action that is not part of the game but pretends to be, and is analogous to the fragmented state of the human condition that the church refers to as sin.

From the perspective of a religious imagination, what defines the human game is *caritas*, the friendship that God shares with us and enables us to share with each other. When we consider how to play the human game well, we encounter the need for rules or limits. To break such rules is not a matter of playing the game poorly but of stepping outside the field of play. To remedy this situation you do not need to learn to play better, to acquire further skill; you need to hope for forgiveness and a gratuitous invitation to return. Of course, whether in the game of soccer or of life, being thoroughly familiar with such laws does not help you to play well—indeed, it is quite compatible with not playing the game at all.

To play the game well we need not rule books but training. We may at first make use of training manuals or teachers, but we do not acquire the skill we need by reading the books or listening to the teachers. We do so by practicing in accordance with their teaching. Practicing has a twofold effect: you acquire an insight into the demands of the situation you are in and, simultaneously, become more attracted to dealing with it in the best way. As you get better at playing, you become more enthusiastic about the game.

This analogy of playing the “human game” and learning to play is connected with the kind of training one receives. To live the life of love (*caritas*) comes through divine enabling by the initiative of God. God shares God’s life with us, and we, receiving this gift, act out of this gift through such things as prayer and generosity, as well as by means of *philia* through which we practice just action and temperance with

¹¹ See McCabe, *The Good Life*, 87–88.

and for each other. The love we have been given shapes our whole life to be a sharing in divine friendship.

This might appear to be too vague to be helpful in practical matters like gun ownership; however, considering human life as a purposeful growth in friendship and love—a game, of sorts, that can be played well or poorly—is to open *all* human thought and action to the criterion of at least *philia*, if not also *caritas*. The question then becomes, are assault weapons part of the definition of living humanly well?

The short answer is: no. The sale and use of assault weapons does not fit within a description of skills necessary to human solidarity. Yes, they might be part of a hobby that is a legitimate human enterprise, but unlike weaving or pick-up basketball, the shooting of an assault weapon even as “sport” exercises the kind of power associated with death. That is, assault weapons are not ordered toward the well-being of anyone except the one bearing it as a weapon. Yes, it might be an instrument considered to “save lives” through defensive action; however, assault weapons are specifically designed to produce more than fatal force. They are built to guarantee maximum destruction.¹² Even if certain kinds of defense actions can be considered part of an exercise in *philia* and *caritas* (for example, the use of force to disarm or restrict a criminal in order that appropriate justice can be exercised), any instrument or action that by design causes maximum injury cannot be considered playing the game of human life well. In fact, it is an example of not playing the game at all.

What is the case for making the claim that assault guns fall outside living humanly well? To begin with, it is worth noting that a political arrangement that is ordered by friendship and love will not be an expression of all things bright and beautiful. As stated earlier, we live in a fragmented world where unity is precariously formed and requires a great effort. To speak of *philia* and *caritas* as if they are *ideals* is to relegate any attempt to embody such arrangements to the rubbish heap reserved for sentimental nonsense. An attempt to impose

¹² According to Chicago police seeking a ban, “Assault weapons are powerful, accurate at a distance and capable of penetrating bullet-proof vests.” Such weapons are “designed for war.” See “Assault Weapons Ban Debate Starts in Springfield,” *Chicago Tribune*, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-02-28/news/chi-assault-weapons-ban-debate-starts-in-springfield-20130228_1_assault-weapons-chicago-police-gun-laws.

political ideals is the realm of tyranny. This is not what is being suggested in this account.

The reason assault weapons fail to fit within a definition of human well-being is that the use of such weapons is a piece of human activity that destabilizes the kind of human relations necessary for a political arrangement of friendship. Supporters of guns in general often repeat the mantra: humans kill people, guns do not. This is only partly accurate, and not in the way it is generally interpreted to mean. For while it is true that generally guns do not exhibit auto-mobility and choice, as an artifact of human production, the activity of “shooting a gun” can only ever make sense as a description of a human activity.¹³ Why? Because “shooting a gun” is a piece of *meaningful* activity that applies to the entire person. Meaning, as it is used here, is the relation of a part to the structure of which it is essentially a part. When the gun enthusiast pulls the trigger, it is not the case that we speak only of the finger or the muscles of the hand doing the shooting; it is an activity that is described in reference to the whole person completing this one action.

So, when Fred shoots his gun, we say Fred is shooting. We do not say things like Fred’s arm is shooting, or worse, the gun just happens to be firing and we do not know why. “Shooting a gun” could not happen without the weapon (though perhaps a person might be pretending, as in a play or done with one’s fingers), but the action would be completely meaningless if there was nobody doing the shooting. When someone picks up an assault weapon and fires, what is completed is the use of a specific kind of human artifact (that is, one constructed to create maximum injury) is a specific human (and therefore, meaningful) activity.

Guns do not have agency, however, and it is one of the defining characteristics of the human animal that instruments are used in pursuit of specific goals. Guns may not have agency, but they do have a purpose. As a piece of meaningful human activity, firing an assault weapon orders the entire person to the purposes of the weapon itself. When the gun fires, there are not two different things going on (a person holding a gun and a gun completing a task); there is one activity, the shooting of a gun. In this account, it is not the primary concern to figure out what the *motivation* of the action is (such as to hit a paper

¹³ See Charles R. Pinches, *Theology and Action: After Theory in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), esp. chap. 4.

target or to kill a person¹⁴), for the intent is part of describing the action. “Fred is shooting the assault rifle” is both a meaningful sentence and a description of what Fred intends. Fred intends to fire his weapon. Under this description, the goal of *philia* and *caritas* toward human solidarity are inhibited by the competing purpose associated with that of the weapon.

This approach to human action and assault weapons is designed to problematize alternative accounts that separate the instrument from its use. In the account I am providing the instrument and its use is understood as a single description. This is relevant to the discussion of human community and well-being because all human activity is ordered toward some goal, and if the activity of shooting an assault weapon is considered a meaningful human activity, then the question is: what goal does this activity order a person to? And my response is: the use of assault weapons orders a person away from *philia* and *caritas*, which are the means by which a political community can thrive as each member of the community shares in the friendship of others, and in the case of Christian community, in the friendship of God, which is a divine gift.

If we accept the inappropriateness of assault gun use for the establishment of human solidarity, there is still one matter to address. It is the question, what does a community of *caritas* look like, and in what way is it an alternative to a society where gun use is considered an individual right protected by federal law? In addition, what kind of community is needed in the face of rival accounts of human activity that accepts the use of assault weapons as both a legitimate human pastime, and a protected form of human freedom?

The Church—the Community of the Crucified One

An immediate rejoinder to appeals to a community of *philia* and *caritas* is that such an appeal reeks of the worst kind of pious nonsense. What good is an idealized community in a world of drive-by shootings and other violent crimes, a critic may ask? The critic might go on: this is a society of law, where what is needed is more

¹⁴ Both results carry a certain judgment, but, of course, the killing of a person carries more. The point here is that all human activity can be described as a certain kind of activity ordered toward a certain good, without first having to figure out the person's intentions. Such a task comes later in the deliberation. All this is to say with Aquinas: all human actions are moral actions (see Prologue, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II).

enforcement (or other security measures) and not talk of people sharing in a common life.

Fair enough. If the argument here is that human solidarity (*philia*) is wishful thinking, then it really doesn't matter if people own assault rifles or the like, for the means of managing such arrangements falls principally on law enforcement and the courts, and not any other community. However, I am in fact saying that a community of love is the very notion that has a chance of disputing the narrative of violence as a brute fact in need of increased counter measures (many of them, equally as violent). For Christians, the possibility of *caritas* is grounded in a violent act, but one that reorients the necessity of further violence through the creation and maintaining of a particular community of *philia* and *caritas*, the community of the church.

The church is a community that engages the work of reconciliation with an imagination oriented toward forgiveness, repentance, and a profound sense of the world as an abundant gift that is received from God through the ministrations of Christ's body.¹⁵ It is a basic confession of Christians that Christ's body, through whom God is present and active, is a *crucified* body. As the creed states, he was crucified, died, and was buried. Whatever else is said about Jesus' death, his being nailed to a wooden cross is of little dispute, at least among Christians.

There is a certain stark and literal simplicity about the language of the creed just quoted, and it is worth looking at what it means with a clear eye. There are of course endless interpretations of Jesus of Nazareth, and most of them help to shed some light on him. We can, for example, examine the titles used in the New Testament to tease out what it means to refer to Jesus as Son of Man, or Messiah. We can examine what is meant by saying that he came to save the world as redeemer. We might highlight the question of sacrifice, and wonder how Jesus' dying fits within these questions.

¹⁵ Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy*, first edition (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 111. Coles draws this definition from the work of John Howard Yoder. For Coles, Yoder develops an account of the church that challenges the "sectarian" label placed on such work by political liberals. For Yoder, the church combines a confessedly provincial tradition with vulnerable and receptive dialogical practices with others. Coles refers to this as a "theology of traditioning." One striking element to Coles's account of Yoder is Coles's own lack of religious identity with Christianity or any other religious community.

Now all of these views can help shed some light on Jesus, but they all have one feature in common. They all end up as answers to the question: What was the reason for the cross? In light of the various and complicated interpretations that exist, I would like to posit a rather pedestrian account. Jesus died of being human. Now, all humans die, and some die in awful ways, but Jesus was so human he had to be killed.¹⁶

He was and is a human like us in all things but sin. This is not suggesting that Jesus is like one of the “perfect people” who apparently have no identifiable shortcomings. I dare say that such a judgment displays a thin understanding of sin, and an even worse judgment on perfection. As for sin, whatever else it means, it has to do with being less human, and more cold, proud, selfish, cruel, and any other host of inhumane characteristics. We can live without these inhumanities for a short while (perhaps), but for all people these things are part of how we operate day-to-day. Not so for Jesus. To say that Jesus was without sin just means that he was not afraid of being at the disposal of others, that he was, in fact, genuinely warm, free, and loving. To speak this way is only to hint at the relationship between love and humanity and sin and inhumanity. All I want to stress at this point is that Jesus being without sin means he was liberated, free, and spontaneous, really able to love and not afraid of others and what these others bring to the relationship.

Someone like this will be at risk in the world we have and the political arrangements we construe. He is bound to be exploited and then destroyed. Why? In this fragmented world of ours, we cannot afford to live with too much humanity and too much love. A certain level of humanity and love is permissible on the surface down to a relatively shallow level. But beneath that, “there be dragons”; that is, chaos and fear. Even a cursory look at the daily news cycle shows us that in the end the last resort of society is to violence, to the appeal and practice of fear; whether it be the threat of terrorism or the threat of social collapse. Sometimes we carry this fear as a mild form of anxiety, a general fear of the world and other people. At other times, events occur like that in Connecticut which only confirm that our world is dangerous and the only recipe available is increased security by means of force.¹⁷

¹⁶ Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters* (London: Continuum, 2005), 95–96.

¹⁷ For one example in a post-Newton America, see Maureen O’Hagan and Mike Carter, “Run on Guns in Seattle Area: Buyers Fear Limits on Military-style

Another way to say the same thing is this: our world is the kind of world that crucifies.¹⁸ We have made a world in which there is no way of being truly human that does not involve suffering. When we consider Jesus, we see him living a fully human life in obedience to the one he called “Father,” and this marked him for suffering and death. Jesus had no fear of being human because he saw his humanity simply as a gift from “the Father.” His very humanity meant that he put up no barriers, no defenses against those he loved who hated him. He refused to evade the consequences of being human in our inhuman world. In his ministry, he called for a deepening of humanity through the gift of divine love, not as a new theory for human community, but as a form of life, a more human mode of communication we might say. For this he was rejected. The crucifixion shows us that if you love enough, you will in the end be killed.

Jesus posed a threat to the political and religious establishment because he proposed an ordering of human relations that was ordered neither by domination or sentimental appeals to “getting along,” but love. What was particular about Jesus was not that he produced the theory that people might live by love; rather he is the *source* of love. The kind of relationship that he had with the disciples and crowds, and the kind of relationship he enabled them to have with each other, was something quite new—quite, I may add, revolutionary.

If Christ were merely an exemplar, someone we interpreted, if we simply found that his life and death expressed our deepest religious convictions or whatever, then we might at least conceive of finding a better way of expressing ourselves when we are no longer impressed by the cross. What makes Jesus unique is not that he is the best way we have of expressing our meaning, or of praying, but that he is the way God expresses the divine life of friendship and love to us. Here the revolutionary aspect of Christ becomes uncomfortable, for he does not promise a life free of pain and suffering, or even free of struggle and violence. What he offers is himself as the source of love that is the foundation of a truly human community.

The early church seems to have begun as a community of men and women experiencing what they recognized as a sharing in the

Weapons,” *The Seattle Times*, December 19, 2012, http://seattletimes.com/html/localnews/2019939844_guns20m.html.

¹⁸ Herbert McCabe, “A Long Sermon for Holy Week, Part 2, Good Friday: The Mystery of the Cross,” *New Blackfriars* 67, no. 789 (March 1986): 109.

delight of God in the expression of the love that is God: God's delight in God's beloved Son in whom God richly dwells. This was not the result of people dwelling only on the things Jesus said, or even the event of the crucifixion as an historical moment. What the early church experienced was the activity of what would be later understood to be the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the crucified and resurrected Christ, who unified the small fledgling church by means of Christ's body manifest through the reading of scripture, the breaking of bread, and the service to the poor and dispossessed. In other words, the church discovered its identity in the exercise of its vocation to narrate, announce, and dramatize the origin, identity, and destiny of humankind as common life, *koinonia*, communion in God.¹⁹ Such a vocation defines what we mean by our unity as God's people. This unity is not just the unity of a society with common aims, like a university; it is not just the unity of a society with a single recognized ultimate authority, like a state; it is not just the unity of people who think in the same way, like a political party. It involves something like all these things, but the unity of the church is first of all the unity of one life.²⁰ What binds us together is that we live by the same life, the life of Christ.

For the church, the life of Christ that is the unity of love is forever a love born through his obedience to God; an obedience to live a fully human life in a crucifying world. The cross, then, remains the way Christians understand and enter into God's solidarity (*philia*) with us. Because of the cross, whatever our sufferings, whatever betrayals we face, we can say not only that God knows and understands and pities us, but that God knows about it from being our crucified Lord. Because of the cross God is a fellow-sufferer with us. This astounding doctrine often needs careful analysis so that we do not reduce God to simply "one of us, but just bigger." When we avoid such reductions, what we have is a teaching and a form of life that sustains the church as it also challenges other arrangements that rely on domination and fear as their foundation.

Any idealism Christians have about the church is challenged each time we recite the creed: "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried." This is not a triumph in any normal sense of the word. It is not helpful, for instance, to

¹⁹ Herbert McCabe, *Faith Within Reason*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Continuum, 2007), 153.

²⁰ Herbert McCabe, *The New Creation* (London: Continuum, 2010), 25.

stake our claim on a crucified human and then do what we please, as if Christ's wounds are the only wounds that matter. To share in the life of Christ in love (*caritas*) is, in an important sense, to share in his wounded body as well. His wounds mark us; they define the limits of our desire to wound others, and display the suffering that is experienced anytime we act with fear against another human. Our sin is a kind of *woundedness* that Christ's wounds can heal. But we must be prepared to join our life to his if healing is to go "all the way through."

To join our life to Christ—to be, in the language of St. Paul, a member of Christ—carries with it a mode of living in the world that draws on the love and friendship of God. It would be nothing but sentimentality to suggest that being a member of Christ removes all fear, all violence from us. But the cross is not about our perfection, it is about the perfection of God to make all things new. One of these "new things" is a community organized around living with the kind of love that we recognize as sourced in Jesus. As we grow in this love, we learn to be *more* human in how we live with others, and what we consider worthy activity. It is, to return to some previous language, learning to play the game of life well with eyes wide open to the stark reality that such living well is simply different to any account of human life that tolerates human activity that is oriented by such fear that violence, particularly violence that leads to injury and death, becomes the natural outlet.

Now, there is no such thing as "violence as such," there are only people engaged in violent activity. Simply picking up the kind of weapon that is designed to cause maximum injury does not label somebody as violent. As was argued in the previous section, it is the combination of human agency and deadly weapons that provides the ground for an understanding of human life and community that stands in need of transformation. Being ordered toward death, even if it is just the threat of death, displays a loss of humanity and the implicit acceptance of a world where the crucifixion of Jesus is not enough.

Yet, the church declares that the crucifixion is more than sufficient an act of suffering. On the cross, Christ died the death of a truly human being. In him, we learn to live without fear and with reckless love. As the source of human unity, Jesus creates a community whose language and behavior is shaped and formed by living the communion of God (*koinonia*) through the gifts of faith, hope, and love. In being the kind of community that lives this way, the church makes space for all people: for the loved and loveless, the peaceful and even the

violent, to share in the deep mystery of unity that God makes available through Christ's body.

The Church: A Space for Human Well-being

The first thing to say about the role of the church in providing a space for human well-being is that, like Jesus, we are not immune from suffering and death. To live with the reckless love that defined Jesus' life makes the church an equal threat to "powers and principalities" who view such freedom with suspicion. This is not to say that Christians ought to seek out suffering as proof of their allegiance. That is foolishness. There is a difference between wanting to die on a cross, and being killed on a cross. Jesus did the latter.

Second, it serves the church little to bear the name of Christ if the church is coopted by the same order and purpose of other political arrangements that operate with goals that fall short of friendship and love. It can happen; it does happen. Human solidarity is not for the faint of heart. The history of the church is littered with the bodies of those whom the church deemed unworthy or a threat to church hegemony. This is a sign of sin; it is also a reminder that while the goal is not purity, there is something to be said in maintaining integrity to the life of God discovered and experienced in the community gathered in God's name. This is the reason why confession is part of the common life of the church. We have not "arrived"; we are *in via*, on the way.

We now turn to the concept of space, and the role the church plays in providing it for the benefit of all. The previous sections mapped out how the location of people to one another in *philia* and *caritas* defines the form of life distinguished in the confessions and practices of Christians. While Christianity is not solely defined by moral precept, it is part of what it means to share in friendship and love, that all human activity is considered for how it moves toward the growth and flourishing of others, or how it destabilizes human solidarity in favor of some lesser good, like personal security or individual rights. Notice that these are *good* things, worthy of our efforts. The challenge is to fit security and individual rights into an account of *philia* and *caritas* that privileges the efforts to build communities where fear is transformed into trust. And this can only happen when people are in contact with each other in spaces that make this transformation possible.

Being together as members of Christ's body is both a geographical and figural notion. Think of human communication for a moment.

We have countless ways to communicate with another person: e-mail, Facebook, or even the regular old phone. Through these instruments of communication we can exchange information, even share in something deeper like the expression of our desires and longings. Sending a photo can extend these communication tools into the visual. Nevertheless, humans are temporal creatures, embodied souls that communicate fundamentally through our physical bodies. Talking on the phone is fine, but it is not the same depth of communication that takes place as when, say, you share a meal with a friend, or embrace your beloved. These are not simply “extras” to communication; the bodily life of humans is our communication with the world. A handshake, a nod of the head, a word of encouragement: all of these gestures (linguistic or otherwise) are sourced in the flesh and bone of each one of us.

Likewise, to consider how space operates in relation to the church is to explore the way the physical/geographical location is the fundamental way the church communicates friendship. Other forms of communication draw their coherence from being a place in the world. It means that opening the doors to the world means literally “opening the doors” to allow for a full engagement with those seeking to discover *koinonia* and those dismayed by other political arrangements that accept the brute fact of the world’s fragmentation. Opening the doors also means being prepared to suffer. It is worth repeating that a community shaped by the life of Jesus will be a community that is obedient in love even when suffering arrives in the lives of others, or by the hands of others.

Space is also figural. We are social creatures, and when we gather together we inevitably presuppose and reinforce much about the shape, meaning, and purpose of the world that we understand ourselves to inhabit. In the way that our churches have walls that shape how friendship and love is practiced within these walls (how prayer, thanksgiving, confession, even foot washing and eating is done and where it is done), so the church is also contained by values (or virtues) that transcend the power of personal preference. It is in this light that Philip Kenneson refers to the church as a “formative gathering,” a space, that is, where disciples of Jesus Christ learn the skills, convictions, and dispositions that animate their life in the world.²¹

²¹ Philip Kenneson, “Gathering: Worship, Imagination, and Formation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, second edition (Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 61.

It is worth recalling the analogy of playing a sport. There are skills necessary to play the sport well, as there are rules that determine when a particular action is part of the game, or if it is outside the game completely. For the church to be a site of friendship and love, it has to be the kind of place where playing the game of human living and learning to do this well is at heart of what the church is about, and what kinds of activities Christians engage. As the community of the crucified, the language and activity of the church is ordered toward the human solidarity manifest in Jesus and made available through God's gift of divine love. In as practical terms possible, the result of being a particular kind of community shapes the very activities that flow from people growing up into *caritas*.

In that the church is a community of the crucified, the allegiance we share to human solidarity orders our common life away from the advocacy of personal preference when it comes to the ownership and use of these weapons. They simply have no place in the economy of human friendship. These weapons are ordered toward death, even if they target clay pigeons and not human bodies. They are the result of technological advances that are not value-free. Such advances and the industries that plan, make, and sell these weapons are part of an arrangement of marketing and other social activities that put such instruments into the hands of ordinary people. As noted above, guns do not have agency, but they do have a purpose. Combining the agency of the human with the purposefulness of an assault weapon does not lead to two different goals (that is, one for the human, one for the weapon); it defines one goal and one human activity that is ordered away from what the community of the crucified is fundamentally about. For the church, human friendship and our communion with God trump personal preference.

The church is also a body whose activity extends across geographical bounds. As such, the advocacy that grows out of practices of human solidarity, particularly in relation to the blight of mass shootings, is essential to creating a space for people to thrive. Not all people who care about the sale and use of assault weapons will be members of the church. It is likely that people from all kinds of political arrangements will join in common purpose and action to see the sale and use of these weapons ended. Making space through advocacy means providing the fruits of *philia* and *caritas* in service to the growth of human well-being wherever people might be. It means opening doors

to human contact in ways that resemble the humanity of Jesus, who loved recklessly and was not afraid of others and what these others bring to the relationship.

Finally, the church remains a place of confession and mercy. As a particular kind of political arrangement, the church engages the work of reconciliation with an imagination oriented toward forgiveness, repentance, and a profound sense of the world as an abundant gift that is received from God through the ministrations of Christ's body. Making space for friendship and advocacy opens the church to the fragmentation of the world, and the wounds people suffer in such a world. It is important to remember that *caritas* is a divine gift, not a human given. To learn to share in the life of God takes patient attention to the patterns of language and behavior within the church community itself, and within the lives of those who find solace in its walls. As such, harmful rhetoric and inhumane portrayals of those whose struggle for a good life includes such things as assault rifles do not serve the goals that form the foundations of a community of the crucified. We seek mercy and we offer as much. If human well-being is why the church exists as a particular political arrangement, then we ought to strive in every way to secure such a life, even for our enemies.

