

## **Theme: Rediscovering and Reshaping` the notion of “neighbor” in a context of ecological and socio political challenges<sup>1</sup>**

The idea behind the notion of “neighbor” is that we are originally relational beings with mutual responsibility of care. According to Bruce J. Malina, speaking from a biblical context, a first step in understanding what neighbor might mean is to understand the social system from which the word has its meanings.<sup>2</sup> In that sense, he recommends that we imagine three concentric social rings:

the center ring includes people obliged by mutual generalized reciprocity, one’s local, everyday neighbors. The next ring includes people obliged by balanced obligations, tit for tat, here referring to the house of Israel. A third ring, left unbounded on the outside, consisted of people to whom one is not bound at all.<sup>3</sup>

This approach, though more sociological, represents a hinge on which our enquiry may rely. As a foundational and fundamental symbol of Christian moral obligation, the notion needs to be rediscovered and reshaped to better frame our involvement in the contemporary challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> The leitmotiv of this paper follows in footsteps of two important documents published by Pope Francis on a current situation of our humanity: *The message for the celebration of the world Day of Peace*, in January 1, 2014, and the Encyclical *Laudato Si*, few months ago. In the first document, the Pope emphasizes the necessity of fraternity among human beings as a foundation and pathway to peace. “[W]ithout fraternity, he says, it is impossible to build a just society and a solid and lasting peace.”(n.1) As an essential human quality, fraternity “draws us to fellowship with others and enables us to see them not as enemies or rivals, but as brothers and sisters to be accepted and embraced”(ibidem). These relations are deeper and stronger than those with neighbors, “Globalization (...) makes us neighbours, but does not make us brothers. The many situations of inequality, poverty and injustice, are signs not only of a profound lack of fraternity, but also of the absence of a culture of solidarity”, he declares (cf. n.1). The second document urges us to live in a friendly way with the whole creation for the sake of our humanity. We will come back to it in the third part of our reflection. Both documents are accessible on line.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce J. Malina, “Neighbor”, *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*. Accessed October 22, 2015, [www.philosophy-religion.org/thought/pdfs/Neighbor.pdf](http://www.philosophy-religion.org/thought/pdfs/Neighbor.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

It is a truism to say that our world is crossing one of the most critical periods of its evolution: Global warming, migration and refugee crises, terrorism, recrudescence of borderlands's tensions, xenophobia, etc, all contribute to a complex situation. According to Naina Bajekal, commenting on the U.N.'s report on migration crisis, "an estimated 1 in every 122 people on earth now displaced (...), there are currently more people fleeing violence or persecution than at any other time since World War II."<sup>4</sup> Besides that, the "response of some nations summoned comparisons with the darkest events of World War II."<sup>5</sup> For instance, Hungary enclosed asylum seekers in razor wire; Slovakia issued anti-Muslim decrees.<sup>6</sup> In the specific context of the United States, there are racial and gender issues, gun violence, and other unique issues to take into account. All of those critical situations reflect what we may call "crisis of neighborhood" and "crisis of neighborliness."<sup>7</sup> This is a call for a brand new relational system. My standpoint is that we need to return to God's initial project. A twofold question stands behind my reflection. The first, the etiological, "do we need a neighbor?" and the second, the more traditional, "who is my neighbor?"

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<sup>4</sup> She is quoted in *Time*, September 28, 2015, "Great 20<sup>th</sup> century migrations,"12.

<sup>5</sup> Massimo Calabresi, "A Wave of the world's displaced crashes on Europe's shores," in *Time*, September 21, 2015, 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> I make a distinction here between "neighborhood" and "neighborliness". In my understanding, the former refers to any physical vicinity/proximity, such as two houses or countries separated by a border; where as the latter highlights the relational dimension of human beings, plus a reciprocal moral obligation (for instance, a violation of human dignity is a manifestation of a "crisis of neighborliness"). In a situation of neighborhood, we need to develop a sense of neighborliness, that is mutual respect and consideration.

In this paper, I propose, based on the Book of Genesis, a specific definition of neighbor: *a helper desired by God to fulfill a human person's existential anxiety*. I will proceed in three steps. First, I aim to point out the meaning of “neighbor” in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Second, I will highlight “neighbor” as a God’s response to humanity’s transcendental loneliness. Third, I will point to the necessity of reshaping the meaning of “Neighbor” in our critical context in the light of God’s initial project.

### **I-Neighbor: a Judeo-Christian notio**

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the notion of neighbor is primarily related to the religious experience of God’s chosen people, Israel. It is one of the places where the breakdown and continuity between the Old and the New Covenants appears conspicuously. Though the notion covers a large range of meanings,<sup>8</sup> all related to their

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<sup>8</sup> By the same token, according to Michael B. Compton, a “‘neighbor’ may simply be *another person* (Gen.11:3), *friend* (or *co-conspirator*, 2Sam. 13:3), an *apparent rival* (1 Sam. 28:17), *lover* (Jer. 3:1), or *spouse* (v.20).” Following the same author, “in many instances, the word [neighbor] acquires the specific meaning ‘fellow Israelite’ or ‘member of the covenant’ (Jer. 31:34).” ( cf. Michael B. Compton, “neighbor,” in Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, Edited by David Noel Freedman. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000, 958.

context, however, to make it short, we can identify two “representative” passages in the Bible: Lev.19 :18,<sup>9</sup> for the OT, and Lk 10: 29,<sup>10</sup> for the NT.

What we learn from this biblical background is that the meaning of neighbor is determined by the bonds within the community of covenant. In the Old Covenant, as Malina points out, “a neighbor is a member of the Israelite ingroup,”<sup>11</sup> that is, “an exclusive circle of people with a common purpose, interests, or attitudes, especially one that produces feelings of camaraderie, exclusivity, community, and solidarity.”<sup>12</sup> In that sense, for all Israel, foreigners were outgroup; for Galileans, the people of Judea and Perea as well as Samaria were outgroup.”<sup>13</sup> In such a context, the goal of the rule to love one’s neighbor was to maintain societal harmony and prevent conflict among the

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<sup>9</sup> “ Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”(Translation, *Holy Bible*. New International Version, 1999). The choice of Lv. 19:18 as “representative” of the OT is justified by the fact that, as many scholars point out, most of appearances of the word “neighbor” in the rest of the Bible are quotations of that passage.

<sup>10</sup> “And who is my neighbor?” On that question, Malina notices : “The difficulty in antiquity was to consider people beyond the outermost rim of the ingroup as anything other than enemy, as a different species, as not belonging to the ethnocentric human race constituted of self and one’s neighbors. The question of “who is my neighbor” was therefore one of significance, especially for the scribal class. Villagers knew who their neighbors were. The scribal class asked the theoretical question of how far the boundaries of neighborhood extended (..)”(cf. Bruce J. Malina, “Neighbor,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*). In this Parable of the Good Samaritan, a neighbor is presented as someone who shows mercy. Jesus introduces a “call” to be a neighbor (This insight may resound deeply in what we will suggest later in our comment on Gen. 2:18). According to Michael B. Compton, [a]lthough Jesus seems to apply the word ‘neighbor’ to any and all, other NT passages suggest that ‘neighbor’ is restricted, or perhaps applies primarily, to fellow Christians(Rom. 15:2; Eph. 4:25; Jas. 2:8).”(cf. M. B. Compton, “neighbor,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 958.)

<sup>11</sup> Bruce J. Malina, “Neighbor,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

ingroup;<sup>14</sup> which means that, neighbors and conflict were a sort of contradiction (cf. Matt. 5:43-44).<sup>15</sup> In the New Covenant, “Jesus extends the meaning of the notion beyond the bounds of the community of the covenant,<sup>16</sup> to focus on the practice of Mercy.

It appears from what precedes that the meaning of neighbor is more sociological and religious, framed by the idea of boundaries, “in” and “out”. This may open the gate to some discrimination.<sup>17</sup> That is why we suggest a metaphysical and theological meaning. Hence, the question “who is my neighbor?” should be preceded by another one, “why do I need a neighbor?”

## **II-Neighbor as God’s response to Man’s transcendental loneliness**

Why does God desire a “neighbor” for the first human being ? To try to give an answer to this question, there is no better source than the book of Genesis. As biblical scholars point out, the book of Genesis is concerned with origins, of the world, of human

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem

<sup>17</sup> By way of extending this idea, we notice that social discriminations operate in the same way: people are included or excluded from the circle because of their race, sex, sexual orientation, etc.

beings, of Israel in its ancestors.<sup>18</sup> Our focus here is on Gn 2:18. According to Michael B. Compton, “[t]he word usually translated ‘neighbor’ in the OT (Heb. *re a*) is from the verb *r’h*, ‘to associate with.’<sup>19</sup> He concludes, “the word therefore describes a relationship, although the nature of this relationship varies with the context.”<sup>20</sup>

This comment accurately matches the idea behind Gn. 2: 18, which represents what I identify as the “birthplace” of “neighborhood”. In that passage, we read, “Yahweh God said, ‘It is not good for Man to be alone; I will give him a helper who will be like him.’”<sup>21</sup> This divine observation has given birth to varied interpretations. The most traditional relates God’s word to the origin of marriage. Our interest here is in understanding why a human person “has to be with”. The first reason is to maintain the realm of “goodness” in the divine act of creating. In fact, in God’s process of creation, a human person’s loneliness is the only place where God notices that what is does not fit

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<sup>18</sup> See for example the analysis made par R. J. Clifford, “Commentary on Genesis”, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Edited by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990, p.10.) Following his explanations, the section Gn 1-11 is “a single story, an unusually sustained ‘philosophical’ and ‘theological’ explanation of the human race—its relation to God, its institutions (marriage, languages, ethnic and national divisions, metal working, animal husbandry, etc.), its flaws, its destiny—and of God and God’s justice and abiding fidelity to the race.”

<sup>19</sup> Michael B. Compton, “neighbor”, in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 958.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> I use CEB (Christian Community Bible) translation, 1988. According to R. J. Clifford, “Traditional Eng “helpmate” is a corruption of the archaic “helpmeet”= “meet or fitting helper.” (R. J. Clifford, “Commentary on Genesis”, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Edited by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990, p.10.) E. A. Speiser translates the v.18 by “an aid fit for him”, and explains, “[t]he traditional ‘help meet for him’ is adequate, but subject to confusion, as may be seen from our ‘helpmate,’ which is based on this very passage. The Heb. complement means literally “alongside him,” i.e., “corresponding to him.” (E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis. Introduction, Translation, and Notes by the author*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964, p.17).

the divine plan of goodness in the creation. God has been qualifying everything as good at his sight. What is not good for the sake of a creature is not pleasant at its Creator as well. So human's person way of existing should necessary "be with" in order to fit God's plan of goodness in creation.

The second reason is that to be is not the essence of human beings. To use Thomas Aquinas's insight, only God is, as he introduced himself to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"(Exod.3:14). In order to worthily "participate" in God's essence, the human person must be "associated with." Here is the bulk of our inquiry. For Thomas Aquinas, "It was necessary for woman to be made, as the Scripture says, as a *helper* to man; not, indeed, as a helpmate in other works, as some say, since man can be more efficiently helped by another man in other works; but as a helper in the work of generation."<sup>22</sup> It seems to me not accurate to reduce the role of the woman, the second human person, to the work of procreation. Since God's main issue is about human beings transcendental loneliness, "It is not good...to be alone." What about if the woman can not procreate, is barren? Sarah was she not a "helper" for Abraham? So it is important to keep the stake on "to be" rather than focusing on generation, though sexuality plays a significant role in human beings existence. But it doesn't express the whole being. The man can not sustain his existence by being alone. Even God, whose essence is to be, is a community (Trinity).

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<sup>22</sup> St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. Vol. I, Q. 92. Art. 1. First Complete American Edition in three volumes. Litterally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947, 466.

To sum up, God desires a neighbor for the first human being as a helper to sustain his/her participation in divine essence, and to maintain the dynamic of goodness on his creation. His/her presence is made significant in the realm of being, and not just in any particular human issues. This brand new way of understanding the notion of “neighbor” paves our way to accurately face our challenges.

### **III-Reshaping the notion of Neighbor in a context of ecological and socio-political challenges**

The publication of the Encyclical *Laudato Si*, by Pope Francis, has opened our eyes on the state of emergency in which we are, and the necessity to react accurately and immediately. Additionally, there has been a threatening recrudescence of violence in the world. It seems like our civilization is in conflict with God. In conditions like these, we need to make up and develop a theology of emergency. Basically, the two points I am about to raise deal with that concern.

First, we need to rediscover God as our neighbor. Not primarily as a needy, someone who needs our aid, as presented in Matthew’s Gospel (chapter 25); but precisely as a helper, that is, a presence willing to sustain our being. We have rediscovered thanks to the book of Genesis that the *raison d’être* of a neighbor is to be a helper for human existential anxiety. God is associated with us so that we may recover the divine desire of goodness on creation. The accentuation of violence in the world is a negation of this divine goal. To make this proposal significant and efficient, there is a need of conversion in a way we relate to Scripture. With the influence of scientific and technologic



discoveries, we tend to be “mind-focus” when we deal with Scripture, trying to give rational explanations to everything. To make our use of Scripture more significant and meaningful in this time of crisis, which is a time for meaning seeking, it is important to develop a “foundationalist” attitude, and avoid a relativism or fundamentalism. A relativist thinks that there are no indispensable truths to guide our lives; all is about human knowledge or wisdom. A fundamentalist believes that there is only one voice in the interpretation of God’s Word, that all must accept. Conversely, a foundationalist is interested in the impact of God’s Word in his/her own life and the lives of his/her contemporaries. He/she believes that God is always at work in the world. Where as a fundamentalist says, “what is true is what is written”, or a relativist that “the truth is in my mind”; a foundationalist firmly believes that he/she studies as the Word of God is revealed and it is true.” At the same time, he/she does not exclude other possibility of truth.

The second point is that we need to extend the moral obligation regarding the relationship with a neighbor to the whole creation. This may increase our awareness and sense of responsibility vis-à-vis Nature. In that sense, as Pope Francis points out in his Encyclical, St Francis of Assisi should be a model to follow for he developed a deep respect toward the whole creation, “for to him each and every creature was as sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists”<sup>23</sup>, comments the Pope. As Rowan William points out, commenting on *Laudato Si*, “[t]he material world tells us that to be human is to be in dialogue with what is other: what is

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<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 24 mai, 2016

physically other, what is humanly other in the solid three-dimensionality of other persons, ultimately what is divinely other.”<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the way pets have been considered and treated « humanly » in our global culture should be admitted as a considerable source of inspiration in the way we relate to animals, our “neighbors in creatureness”. However, the trend of some of our contemporaries to take more care of animals than human should be denounced as wrong.

### **Conclusion:**

The notion of neighbor is all about human relationality. Its theological and metaphysical meaning reminds us that our essence is not “just to be”, but “to be with”. A neighbor is originally willed by God as a helper to sustain human existence and the divine plan of goodness on the creation. This way of understanding may keep us away from social prejudice, such as sexism, racism, or xenophobia. Besides that, to increase our awareness and responsibility toward the rest of creation, the commandment to love one’s neighbor should be extended to the whole creation, and not just to human beings. Therefore, in a context of socio political crisis and ecological challenges, neighbor should be perceived in different levels of human relationality: transcendental (God), horizontal (fellow-human person), sub-horizontal (animal, plants, natural resources...), cosmic (sun, star, the new planets, etc).

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<sup>24</sup> Rowan Williams, “Embracing Our Limits. The Lessons of *Laudato Si’* “, in *Commonweal. A review of Religion, Politics and Culture*. October 9, 2015, p. 13.