

Soulcraft and Social Action

Preliminary Reflections on Christian Flourishing in Eschatological Perspective

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Abstract: This article sketches a particular vision of what it means for a religious community to flourish that is predicated upon an interpretation of the Christian narrative influenced by Augustine of Hippo. Within this vision, it argues, flourishing is inherently communal but ultimately eschatological as the attainment of perfect community awaits the kingdom of God. This orientation renders the Christian community a critic of all historical accomplishments, which remain marked by domination and injustice. Simultaneously, however, it should impel the Christian community to nurture the goods of this world by creating communities of soulcraft that cultivate Christ-like virtues and undertaking social action that advances justice for the oppressed and marginalized.

Keywords: Flourishing, Eschatology, Virtue Ethics, Moral character, Justice

What does it mean for a religious community to flourish? When we ask this question, we find ourselves confronted with a number of others that follow in its train. Among the most immediate and significant are: What is meant by “flourishing,” and who is defining the term? To the extent that flourishing refers to something like the full development, prosperity, or thriving of an entity (Oxford English Dictionary 2025), invoking the term “flourishing” invites, implies, or perhaps even imposes further specification. After all, depending on who is doing the defining, flourishing might be specified as a matter of very different attainments. For instance, one thinker might suggest that a flourishing religious community is one that attains or assures material security. Another could operate under the notion that what marks a religious community as flourishing is that it promotes positive psychological emotions and a subjective sense of well-being for its members. A third might interpret flourishing

as a matter of producing citizens who contribute to the advancement of their society. The list could go on.

Regardless of how one specifies it, the act of describing these or other states as “flourishing,” conjures, even if unintentionally, a vision with axiological and narrational dimensions—that is, a vision about what is valuable and what ends religious communities and their members should seek. To invoke the term “flourishing” suggests that the states in question in some way represent a positive attainment for which some set of people strive or ought to strive in the course of their life stories.

And yet that description is simultaneously embedded in a matrix of assumptions about human beings, their purpose, and their place in the world that other communities—or even the communities in question—do not necessarily share. Even if we start with what might seem to be the most widely shared metrics of flourishing, such as standard of living or length of life, we could easily find religious communities who do not see these as inherently constitutive of flourishing. For example, members of monastic communities willingly foreswear everyday conveniences and even hazard the risk of untimely death in order to seek what they regard as higher spiritual goods.

The observations to this point are not intended to deny any specific visions of flourishing, but only to show their contingency. I consider these observations worthwhile nonetheless because my aim in this essay is to trace the contours of one particular vision of what makes for a flourishing religious community. That vision, which is predicated upon an interpretation of the Christian narrative that draws heavily from Augustine of Hippo, interprets flourishing as inherently communal yet ultimately eschatological. Put differently, true flourishing manifests itself in a community of peace and justice, the fullest expression of which is found at the end of time. At the same time, however, lesser forms of flourishing are now possible and taking shape in the lives of communities that form persons in the virtues of the Christian faith and seek justice for the oppressed and marginalized.

Christian Flourishing as Essentially Communal and Ultimately Eschatological

Within the arc of the Christian narrative, the community of those who devote themselves to following Jesus is not established for its own sake; rather, it exists to promote the flourishing of humanity as a whole. Accordingly, to apprehend what it means for the Christian community to flourish, we must situate our understanding within a larger conception of human flourishing. And the flourishing of humanity is an essentially communal and ultimately eschatological reality.

Many biblical passages suggest that human flourishing consists in human beings living in a peaceful and just community with one another and with God. While we can find related themes in the creation story recounted in Genesis 1:1–2:4a, the communal character of human flourishing is especially clear in the account that begins in 2:4b. Unlike the earlier version, in which God creates male and female simultaneously, in this version God creates Adam first. Then God observes, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18) and proceeds to create animals and birds as possible partners.¹ When none is found to be well-suited, God creates Eve, the first woman. God’s dedication to finding a partner for Adam suggests that the communal bonds that unite human beings are crucial to achieving the good of humanity and enabling them to care for the good of God’s creation more broadly.² At the same time, human beings were also intended to share in communion with God, in whose image they were created (Genesis 1:27).

While the original human community depicted in Genesis consists of only two people, its scope soon expands exponentially. By Genesis 12:2–3, God promises to make Abram, who is soon renamed Abraham, into “a great nation” and further vows that “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” As the story of Abraham’s descendants unfolds through his grandson Jacob, who later receives the name Israel, God gives them the Torah so that they might be “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). This description indicates both that Israel should be a community bound by the covenant of God’s Law and that it should mediate blessings to the world. That charge provides an ongoing, animating force throughout the Hebrew scriptures. The blessings that Israel mediates include making known God’s “saving power among all nations” (Psalm 67:2). And it also includes promoting peace and justice, such as we witness in the psalmist’s anticipation of a righteous king who will possess God’s justice and “defend the cause of the poor of the people” so that “righteousness [may] flourish and peace abound” and “all nations be blessed” (Psalm 72:1–7, 19). Israel’s role as a holy nation that teaches about God’s ways and that works for peace and justice points forward to the establishment of an ultimate human flourishing in which “justice [will] roll down like waters” (Amos 5:24) and the nations shall “beat their swords into plowshares,

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

² Indeed, if space allowed, I would prefer to broaden my claim to maintain that the Christian community exists to promote the flourishing of creation as a whole. One sees suggestions of this, for instance, in the fact that in Genesis 2:7 God forms Adam from the “dust of the ground,” which in Hebrew is *adamah*, an etymological connection that suggests the link between humanity’s fate and that of non-human creation. For a nice treatment of such themes, see Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God* (2001, 158–71). See also Presian Burroughs, *Creation’s Slavery and Liberation* (2022).

and their spears into pruning hooks" (Isaiah 2:4; cf. Micah 4:3) as God "command[s] peace to the nations" (Zechariah 9:10).

Turning to the New Testament, we find in the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming, "repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17; cf. Mark 1:14). He then calls together a community of disciples devoted to preaching and embodying the reality of God's kingdom through a life defined by prayer, praise, service, and love of all people—including their enemies and persecutors (Matthew 5:44). And Jesus concludes his earthly ministry by enjoining his followers to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20). At least some of Jesus' earliest disciples believed that obeying his teachings called them into a radical form of communal life in which "everything they owned was held in common" and they "distributed to each as any had need" so that "[t]here was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:32–35). Whatever its form, the Christian community, which is "grafted in" to the tree of Israel (Romans 11:17ff), inherits Israel's mission to promote the flourishing of all humankind. Accordingly, the Christian community should not seek only the good of its own members but the "the good of all" (Galatians 6:10). In doing so it foreshadows the coming of the kingdom of God in which peace and justice will thrive under the reign of God, whose "judgments are just and true" (Revelation 19:2). Ultimately, the peaceful communion among human beings and between humans and God will be perfected as "the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples" (Revelation 21:3). Then the "nations will walk by [the] light" of the glory of God (Revelation 21:24).

At nearly every point of the divine economy we find a central focus upon the community that human beings are to share with one another and with God, which is realized by the establishment of justice and peace. This recurrent emphasis further resonates with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which teaches that harmonious communion is essential to God's very being. As John of Damascus puts it, the three persons of the Trinity share a "community and unity" such that "each one of them is related as closely to the other as to itself . . . in no wise confused but cleaving together" (John of Damascus 1899, I.8, 567). Created in the image of the Trinitarian God, human beings similarly find fulfillment not in isolation but communion. The prominence of community as a theme in Christianity's scriptures and its theological tradition underscores the essentially communal nature of human flourishing.

Simultaneously, however, if "flourishing" names its fullest development, then the ultimate manifestation of human flourishing lies not in history but in the eschatological fulfillment of the kingdom of God. To be sure, on this side of the

eschaton there are glimpses and meaningful manifestations of the kinds of community that God intends for human beings. While these foreshadow the eschatological perfection of God's kingdom, it is not until the end of time that this community will achieve its fullest realization.

The fullness of that eschatological culmination exceeds historical achievements in a variety of ways, including in its extent as it reaches out to the ends of the earth, gathering "all nations" (e.g., Psalm 67:2; Isaiah, 25:7; Jeremiah 3:17; Revelation 15:4), and in its duration as it promises to endure forever (e.g., Psalm 145:13; Daniel 7:14; Revelation 11:15 and 22:5). And yet perhaps the most striking difference that separates the just and peaceful kingdom of God from our present, historical existence is the quality of character that distinguishes its citizens. The communion of God's kingdom is not merely structural but characterological. Citizens of the kingdom of God live harmoniously in peace and justice not because they are overawed by some Leviathan or participate in a well-engineered social system but because they are themselves perfected in virtue. One finds this suggested in a variety of ways. For instance, Jeremiah foretells of God writing the divine law on human hearts (Jeremiah 31:33) while Ezekiel depicts God promising to give "a new heart" and "a new spirit" (Ezekiel 36:26). According to Jesus, in the kingdom of God "the righteous will shine like the sun" (Matthew 13:43). And the Apostle Paul maintains that "the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). In the kingdom of God those who have been cultivating the "fruit of the spirit" (Galatians 5:22)—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—are fully "conformed to the image of God's son" (Romans 8:29). Ultimately, as we find expressed in 2 Peter 3:13, the eschaton brings "a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness is at home."³ The establishment of that righteousness shapes both the social relations between members of God's eschatological kingdom and their very souls.

Although innumerable Christian thinkers have offered interpretations that correspond with the general contours of this account, few have done so with greater insight or influence than Augustine. His influence can unquestionably be detected in the account I have articulated to this point. Still, a brief but explicit overview of

³ It is useful to note that while English usage often recognizes a subtle but important distinction between "justice" and "righteousness," Koine Greek does not. Hence, in this paragraph each of the biblical quotations that refer to the "the righteous" (Greek: *dikaioi*) or "righteousness" (Greek: *dikaiosis*) could equally be translated to refer to "the just" or to "justice." For instance, we could translate Paul's teaching in Romans 14 to assert that the kingdom of God is not about food and drink but "*justice* and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

his vision illuminates key dynamics of humanity's draw to community and the eschatological character of our flourishing.

According to Augustine, "there is nothing so social by nature as" human beings since God created them to share in communion with God and one another and in such a way that they should "preserve unity among their whole multitude" (Augustine 1998, XII.28, 539). And yet, the human attraction to community is not incorruptible. As Augustine interprets the story of the Fall from Genesis 3, the serpent deceived Eve into defying God and eating the forbidden fruit. But then Adam joined in her transgression out of a misguided desire for communion because he "did not wish to be separated from his only companion" (Augustine 1998, XIV.11, 606). In the original couple we find the origins of two contrasting communities, which Augustine labels the "earthly city" and the "heavenly city" or the "city of God." At their core, these cities are distinguished "by two loves: that is, the earthly by love of self extending even to contempt of God, and the heavenly by love of God extending to contempt of self" (Augustine 1998, XIV.28, 632).

Because it is so steadfastly devoted to God, the heavenly city is never fully at home in this world. Instead, its members are "awaiting a heavenly fatherland" and "know that they are pilgrims even in their own habitations" (Augustine 1998, I.15, 26). During their sojourn, citizens of the heavenly city find themselves troubled not only by the quarrelsomeness of the earthly city but by their own sin and vice. Even though human beings might wish "to be made perfect" so that "there should be no vice in us," Augustine maintains that "[w]e cannot manage to achieve this in our present life" (Augustine 1998, XIX.4, 921). Instead, we only attain such moral perfection—and, consequently, the fulfillment of just and peaceful communion with God and others—in the eschatologically realized city of God. Then human beings will possess perfect virtue, and "[t]he reward of virtue will be God Himself, Who gives virtue." Endued with such virtues, the members of the city of God will relate harmoniously to one another and will have a freedom "that will consist in not being able to sin" (Augustine 1998, XXII.30, 1179). Only then will they possess true blessedness, which consists in "the enjoyment without interruption . . . of God; and the certain knowledge . . . that [they] will remain in the same enjoyment forever" (Augustine 1998, XI.13, 466).

Human beings thus find their ultimate flourishing in community with one another and with God. But the fullest expression of that flourishing is something that awaits the eschatological consummation in which God remakes human beings to attain a perfection that lies beyond our grasp in this world.

The Kingdom of God and the Critical Consciousness of the Christian Community

Convoked to serve the flourishing of humanity, the Christian community should orient itself toward the eschatological future in which peace and justice will reign and human beings will live in communion with one another and with God. This eschatological orientation should exercise a dialectical influence on how we understand what it means for the Christian community to flourish on this side of the eschaton. On the one hand, it should chasten human pretensions regarding the excellence of our historical achievements. On the other, even as that orientation reminds us that all earthly accomplishments will fall short of the flourishing of the kingdom of God, it should spur the Christian community to pursue and promote ever fuller forms of flourishing in this world.

History abounds with the pretensions of those who believe that their favored communion has achieved true flourishing—or very soon will!—by establishing peace and justice. In the ancient world, Horace celebrated the *Pax Romana* inaugurated by Augustus Caesar, declaring that he had established justice by “put[ting] a bridle on license” and that “[w]ith Caesar in charge of affairs, peace will not be driven out” (Horace 2004, IV.15, 259–61). In our contemporary world, honors are declaimed for the *Pax Americana* that has purportedly secured “liberty and justice for all” (“U.S.C. Title 4” 2018) and inaugurated a new “golden age” (Trump 2025). In the years before and between, human beings have time and again celebrated their nation, empire, kingdom, class, culture, congregation, or even corporation as realizations of the greatest heights humanity can attain.

Christianity’s eschatological vision of flourishing should chasten such pretensions as it shines a refulgent light that exposes the inevitable limitations of all historical accomplishments. The forms of peace achieved in this world can be exceptionally valuable; we might even join Augustine in maintaining that “in the sphere of earthly and mortal affairs . . . it is not possible to find anything better” (Augustine 1998, XIX.11, 933). And yet, no matter how valuable they are, such earthly forms of peace necessarily fall short of the perfect peace of the kingdom of God not only quantitatively in extent and duration but qualitatively. That is, not only are they inferior because their peace is provincial and finite whereas the kingdom of God’s is universal and everlasting. They are inferior also because they are unavoidably interwoven with humanity’s predisposition towards domination. As Augustine observes, even as humans might desire to have peace with others, what they generally mean by “peace” is that others should be “living according to their will” (Augustine 1998, XIX.12. 935). The sinful bent to domination that infects earthly peace also indicts earthly forms of justice. In Romans 3 the Apostle Paul

declares, “There is no one who is just, not even one” (Romans 3:10, author’s translation). Rather than seeking the ways of God, “[a]ll have turned aside”; consequently, “no one . . . shows kindness” and we are instead “swift to shed blood” (Romans 3:12–13, 15). Augustine traces the social implications of this when he observes that “if there is no justice in such a man, then it is beyond doubt that there is no justice in a collection of men consisting of persons of this kind” (Augustine 1998, XIX.21. 952). Rather than giving to each what is due, the earthly arrangements humans hail as “just” routinely serve the interests of the powerful at the expense of the oppressed. Raked in the light of the kingdom of God, we see that in this world the human tendency to seek our own interests at the expense of others inevitably compromises our attempts at communion and inhibits human flourishing.

Perhaps counterintuitively, if the Christian community is to flourish to the greatest extent possible in this world, it must foster the prophetic, critical consciousness that subverts the pretense that true human flourishing has already arrived. Such pretensions function to obscure the violence, injustice, and oppression embedded in every earthly form of communion. Believing that Jesus came “to bring good news to the poor,” “proclaim release to the captives,” and “let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18) and that God calls us to “seek justice,” “rescue the oppressed,” and care for the vulnerable (Isaiah 1:17), Christians cannot turn a blind eye to such realities. Rather, to borrow from Jon Sobrino, we must seek to “follow the cause of Jesus, to live as new men and women and to conform this world to the heart of God” (Sobrino 1993, 18). Or as M. Shawn Copeland puts it, disciples of Jesus should “act in solidarity with all those who suffer social oppression and join them in the struggle for life and justice” (Copeland 2018, xxv). In order to live into that calling and to witness to the coming of God’s eschatological kingdom “not [made] by human hands” (Daniel 2:34), the Christian community must always in some degree stand as critics of every historical form of communion.

And yet, even as it chastens such pretensions, this orientation towards the kingdom of God should spur the Christian community to act in ways that nurture the more limited forms of flourishing that are possible in this world. The vision of the kingdom of God does not only indiscriminately indict the achievements of history. It also provides resources by which we can discriminate between them.⁴ The peace, justice, and virtue that distinguish the flourishing of the kingdom of God direct attention to key facets of the regimes of this world and stand as criteria by

⁴ For more on this point, see Bradley Burroughs, *Christianity, Politics, and the Predicament of Evil* (2019, 101–103).

which we can determine which, if any, is more excellent—that is, which is more peaceful, more just, and more virtuous.

Thus, while Christians must be critics, they should never become cynics. Cynics find no redeeming qualities in earthly accomplishments. Instead, they believe that sin and selfishness so deeply mar this world that it can yield nothing of value. In a world that the Christian faith has traditionally described as “fallen,” even the most cursory observation will always reveal more than a trace of evil present in any human venture. This reality gives the cynic an appearance of possessing hard-bitten insight. And yet cynicism is both erroneous and anesthetizing because it can only ever perceive faults. In that cyclopean focus, it overlooks key moral differences that exist within the world. As Reinhold Niebuhr once put it, when one takes the standpoint of the cynic “all the distinctions which seem momentous from the ‘earthly’ level are dwarfed into insignificance” (Niebuhr 1968, 131). But the cynic ultimately paints with too broad of a brush, effacing the redemptive possibilities that exist in this world, possibilities that God can and does use to advance God’s purposes. Even now in creation we can find the “first fruits” of the ultimate flourishing of the kingdom of God (Romans 8:23); the cynic, however, preemptively supposes that such fruits are inherently rotten.

In contrast to the unrefined approach of the cynic, Christians require the ability to discern subtle distinctions. In ancient Greek one who possessed this ability was called a *kritikos*, which is the source of the English words “critic” and “criticism.” Although those words can carry negative connotations, suggesting an obsession with fault-finding, the true critic sees more than mere faults. To be sure, true critics will be unafraid to identify deficiencies and spotlight shortcomings. But they are also able to discern and celebrate strengths. They can recognize achievements and signs of nascent flourishing. They can rejoice in improvements. They can perceive possibilities. And, perhaps most of all, they are willing to join in the work needed to turn those possibilities into realities. The Christian community should be critics in this complex sense of the term. Accordingly, both collectively and individually, its members should continually ask: How might our lives in this world come closer to approximating the flourishing that God intends, resisting evil and instead nurturing the goods of peace, justice, and virtue? And how can we contribute to turning those possibilities into realities?

In Pursuit of Fuller Forms of Flourishing: Soulcraft and Social Action on this Side of the Eschaton

Surveying this world in the light of the kingdom of God reveals two crucial areas where the Christian community should seek to promote fuller forms of the flourishing. The first is in embodying a regime of soulcraft that helps to cultivate the virtue of its members, and the second is in undertaking social action to promote greater peace and justice. These two are not entirely separable. Nevertheless, for heuristic purposes we will treat them individually before exploring their relationship.⁵

As noted above, the most striking difference between our present existence and the eschatological kingdom of God is the quality of its citizens' character. In the visions of the prophets, the members of God's kingdom will have the divine law written on their heart. In this world, however, we find that "the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth" (Genesis 8:21). The human predicament, then, is defined not only by the lack of virtue but by the possession of vice.

And yet, central to the Christian message is the conviction that a crucial way in which God is at work in the world is by calling together and graciously empowering a community dedicated to a regime of soulcraft capable of helping human beings to loosen the grip of vice and instead grow in virtue. The name that Christians have given to this community is "church." Enlivened by grace, the church is to hold members accountable when they transgress (Matthew 18:15–17), exhort one another so that they are not "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13), and work together to "put away . . . all bitterness and wrath and anger . . . together with all malice" (Ephesians 4:31). Beyond merely seeking to help one another restrain their sinful tendencies, the members of the church are called to "provoke one another to love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24), clothe themselves with "the new self, which is being renewed . . . according to the image of its creator" (Colossians 3:10), and "build up each other" (1 Thessalonians 5:11). The ultimate goal of such soulcraft is that its members might "grow up in every way . . . into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15), who, in the term coined by Origen, represents the *autobasilea*—the human embodiment of the kingdom of God (Origen 2018, XIV.7, 165). Still, followers of Jesus Christ are conformed to him not just as individuals but as a community. As Paul and other New Testament authors describe it, Jesus' followers are to become members of

⁵ For a fuller account, see Burroughs, *Christianity, Politics, and the Predicament of Evil* (2019, 181–223).

the “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Romans 12:4–5; Colossians 1:18, and 2:19; see also Ephesians 1:22–23 and 4:12–16).

Accordingly, for the Christian community to flourish in this world it must dedicate itself to helping its members cultivate Christ-like virtues. To exhaustively catalogue the specific virtues exemplified by Christ would require more space than we can devote here. Nevertheless, we might note at least two that are especially prominent. The first of these is justice. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares that those who “hunger and thirst for justice” are blessed (Matthew 5:6, author’s translation). And throughout his life he exhibited such a steadfast devotion to justice that his followers would employ it as an epithet, referring to him as *dikaios*, meaning the “Just One” or the “Righteous One” (Acts 3:14, 7:52, and 22:14; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 2:1; see also Matthew 27:19; Luke 23:47). A second key virtue is love, which New Testament authors consistently identify as the defining characteristic that underlies Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. For instance, the Gospel of John tells us that Jesus “loved [his own] to the end” (John 13:1). Paul declares that in Jesus “God proves his love for us” (Romans 5:8). And the author of 1 John maintains, “By this we know love, because he laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16). Moreover, Jesus himself teaches his disciples that the two greatest commandments are to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37–40). Hence, if the Christian community is to flourish during its earthly pilgrimage, it must help its members to grow in justice and love so that they might be congruous member of the body of Christ.

Lest we be seduced by an overly idealized vision of the church and the efficacy of its regime of soulcraft, we should note at least two crucial warnings. First, one should by no means conclude that such soulcraft is easy, effortless, or automatic. It is not without reason that biblical authors likened the life of faith to a grueling race (1 Corinthians 9:24; Philippians 2:16; Galatians 2:2; Hebrews 12:1–2) or to intense physical training (1 Corinthians 9:25–27; 1 Timothy 4:7–8). In a similar vein, during the fourth century Ambrose of Milan suggested that the church should be a “gymnasium for the soul” (Ambrose of Milan 1975, 543). Growing in virtue requires human beings to exert themselves in the proper ways and towards the proper ends. At the same time, even as it requires human effort, the church’s regime of soulcraft fundamentally depends upon divine grace.⁶ It is through grace that God establishes the church and sends the gift of the Holy Spirit, breaks the chains of our sinful inclinations, and helps mere humans to grow in Christ-like virtues. Whatever virtue

⁶ For a related discussion, see Burroughs, *Christianity, Politics, and the Predicament of Evil*, (140–49).

they attain, neither the church nor its member should make the mistake of believing these are their own accomplishments.

A second warning: even as we acknowledge the primacy of grace, we should remember that in this world both members of the church and the church itself remain subject to sin as well as to other limitations of the human condition. As Augustine notes, the highest righteousness humans attain on this side of the eschaton “consists only in the remission of sin rather than in the perfection of virtue” (Augustine 1998, XIX.27, 962). Even with the aid of grace, we inevitably sin. This applies to individuals, who invariably fall short of righteousness. And it also applies to institutions, such as the church, which is sinful in more than an incidental sense. Accordingly, the church stands always under the judgment of the ideal represented by the kingdom of God and must remain a subject of Christianity’s critical consciousness. In addition to sin, human life in this world also remains subject to the limitations of finitude and tragedy. As finite creatures, we are limited in knowledge—at best “we see in a mirror, dimly” and “know only in part” (1 Corinthians 13:12)—and also in power—for we cannot achieve even all the things that we might will (e.g., Isaiah 40:30; 2 Corinthians 4:7). Moreover, we find ourselves in a world that remains tragic in key respects and where, as Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us, there frequently exists a “contradiction between various equal values of our devotion” (Niebuhr 1967, 29). Consequently, even those who have grown in virtue are apt to find themselves confronting thorny situations of moral uncertainty. No regime of soulcraft can ever entirely liberate us from sin, finitude, or tragedy. This is yet another way in which even our highest attainments in this world fall short of the flourishing of the kingdom of God.

Because the kingdom of God towards which the church orients itself in hope is distinguished not only by the virtue of its citizens’ souls but the peace and justice that characterizes their social relations, for the Christian community to flourish even in this time between the times, it must devote itself not only to soulcraft but to social action. Even though all attainments in this world will fall short of the perfect peace and justice of the kingdom of God, the Christian community should nevertheless seek to nurture forms of relationship that approximate it to the greatest degree possible. As Paul puts it in Romans 14, because “the kingdom of God is . . . justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,” Christians should “pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding” (Romans 14:17, 19, author’s translation). Accordingly, they should act as “peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9; see also James 3:17) and “[p]ursue peace with everyone” (Hebrews 12:14; see also 1 Peter 3:11) as they follow Jesus, who is “to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79). At the same time, in its social action the Christian community should also promote justice,

most of all by caring for the marginalized and vulnerable. Biblical authors repeatedly characterize the fulfillment of God's purposes as a feast in which God provides especially for those neglected or abused in this world (Psalm 22:26–31; Isaiah 25:6–9; Matthew 22:1–14; Luke 14:15–24; see also Isaiah 55:1–3). And in his most vivid depiction of the final judgment, Jesus suggests that those who inherit God's kingdom will be the “just ones” who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the foreigner, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited the imprisoned (Matthew 25:31–48, author's translation). Such passages undergird what Latin American liberation theologians have called “the preferential option for the poor” (see, for instance, Gutiérrez 1988, xxv–xxvi) and furthermore underscore how social action that promotes justice is crucial to embodying the Christian calling to serve the flourishing of humanity.

Such social action should unquestionably manifest itself in the personal relationships of individual Christians as they seek to nurture peace and manifest justice in their relations with others. But the vision of the kingdom of God and the nature of the virtues of justice and love will consistently draw the Christian community and its members beyond the personal level. A critical assessment of the world reveals that it is not just individuals but social structures—governments, economic systems, corporations, social classes, racial groups, and more—that perpetrate and perpetuate enmity and injustice. As Gustavo Gutiérrez observes, we find sin not only in individuals but in “oppressive structures, in the exploitation of humans by humans, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes” (Gutiérrez 1988, 103). In working to approximate the peace and justice of the kingdom of God, then, the church and its members will frequently find themselves drawn to engage with such structures, seeking to reform them so that the world might be more peaceful, just, and loving.⁷

Although we have treated them separately to this point, soulcraft and social action are in fact deeply interdependent in the life and flourishing of the Christian community. Effective social action in this world relies upon key virtues to motivate, sustain, and guide it. Virtues such as love and justice spur us to act in ways that advance the good of others and help us in discerning the most faithful and effective means to do so. At the same time, social action that seeks to extend the ambit of peace and justice nurtures virtues within the church and its members. In such social action, we confront the fact that that we are, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “tied in a single garment of destiny” with others (King 1992, 85), and we cannot fully

⁷ Among others, the Puebla documents point towards a similar view of the relationship between personal relationships of care and structural reformation. See CELAM, *Documento conclusivo de Puebla* (2025, § 327).

flourish while others abjectly languish. Lamentably, in this fallen world some of our brothers and sisters do languish. Indeed, Jesus reminds his disciples, “you always have the poor with you” (Matthew 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8). Nevertheless, the Christian community should take this not as a counsel of despair but as a recognition of the continuing importance of cultivating the virtues of justice and love and energetically putting them into action on behalf of our sisters and brothers.

Even as one stresses the significance of the Christian community’s dedication to soulcraft and social action, this by no means entails that its members will be the only ones who possess such virtues or who are dedicated to such a reformation of social life. Christians will often find others who are no less animated by the virtues of love and justice and who are equally dedicated to promoting the flourishing of humanity. Such realities remind us of the sovereignty of the God who declares “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious” (Exodus 33:19). The extent of God’s grace is not constrained by human boundaries, confessions, or practices. Christians, therefore, must remain alert to the ways in which God’s gracious activity exceeds the church’s own efforts, appearing in surprising places and in the lives of those whose commitments differ. Even as they thank God for the appearance of grace in such places, Christians might nonetheless affirm the vital role played by the community of faith that testifies to the flourishing future God promises and to the sacrifices God has made to achieve it in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

On Not Concluding

For the Christian community, flourishing is a multifaceted concept. Contrary to interpretations that construe it in terms of material security, positive psychological emotions, contributions to the parochial goals of a particular society, or similar immanent attainments, the Christian community orients itself towards an eschatological vision of flourishing. Commissioned to promote the flourishing of all humankind, the Christian community should seek the good not only of its own members but of all people. And the ultimate good of humanity is essentially communal, characterized by a perfect communion of human beings with one another and with God that is rooted in the virtue of its members’ souls. Because such perfection cannot be attained in history but instead awaits the eschatological kingdom of God, the Christian community should maintain a critical stance towards all historical achievements. On the one hand, this critical consciousness will refuse to accept the finality of any earthly accomplishment. None can be regarded as final since all will inevitably bear marks of domination and oppression. On the other

hand, this critical consciousness will refuse to cynically forsake the things of history. It will instead spur Christians to take action to improve, refine, reform, and even celebrate historical practices, institutions, and arrangements that more fully approximate the peace and justice of the kingdom of God.

Most of all, the Christian community should devote itself to the tasks of soulcraft and social action. In its regime of soulcraft, the church should focus on cultivating Christ-like virtues, especially justice and love. Through prayer, praise, proclamation, service, teaching, mutual accountability, and more, the church and its member should work to develop virtues that make them fitting members of the body of Christ. At the same time, they should take social action in ways that seek to create a world that is more peaceful and just, more reflective of the kingdom of God.

Through it all, Christians must keep ever before us the recognition that human beings will never attain the kingdom of God in this world. This recognition entails that the church's entire enterprise—from its most granular practices of soulcraft to its most sweeping efforts to effect social change—remains always under the judgment of the kingdom of God. Christians must be willing to devote themselves passionately to cultivating the goods of this world to the greatest extent possible and even to celebrate such accomplishments. But then Christians must in turn be willing to acknowledge forthrightly the many ways that even those very goods inevitably fall short of the kingdom of God. As Reinhold Niebuhr once observed, "It is a good thing to seek for the Kingdom of God on earth; but it is very dubious to claim to have found it" (Niebuhr 1996, 178). In addition to being dubious, it is also dangerous. For if it is thought that humanity has attained the highest good possible or stands on the verge of doing so, no price would seem too high to protect it or to purchase it. Such efforts to preemptively conclude history tempt us to sacralize violence, justify domination, and idolize unjust earthly orders. Against such temptations, Christians are called to orient themselves to the constitution of the coming kingdom that is not made with human hands. The ultimate victory belongs not to us but to God. During our earthly sojourn, ours instead is the difficult but indispensable work of curbing vice, cultivating virtue, and nurturing the goods of this world by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8). And in this world that work never concludes.

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