

# Scaling the Walls of Injustice

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**ABSTRACT:** There are many obstacles to the right relationships which must exist wherever people gather and interconnect if justice is to prevail. One such barrier pertains to the naming of evil or a lesser good as a good to be achieved. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola speak of “evil presented under the guise of good.” Another such obstacle is the closure of one’s mind in a self-referential way. There is little or no humble openness to search for the truth of what is good for people and for the earth. A third wall is the breakdown of genuine dialogue. A tribal mentality views others as the enemy with nothing significant to offer. As a Church and as individual members we are challenged to overcome and remove any barrier by building right relationships. With God we can break through any barrier; with God we can scale any wall (Ps.18:30).

**KEYWORDS:** obstacles, guise, perspective, dialogue, relationships, gospel

*“With my God I can scale any wall.”* —Ps. 18:30

**F**or this essay I have been asked to reflect on my engagement in the social ministry of the Church during my years as a Bishop, and in particular when I was Chair of the Domestic Policy Committee for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. I found this to be a daunting task given the multiplicity of issues engaged during my tenure as chair and role as bishop and the very short period of time to prepare. I quickly decided not to opine on all the great issues of justice (or let me say injustice) we face, let alone to analyze the specific causes or circumstances underlying the dehumanization of society and the terrible suffering of poverty, hunger, and homelessness experienced by millions around the world. Rather I would

like to identify what I consider three obstacles which hinder our ability as individuals and as a society to build necessary just relationships.

From a biblical perspective the human condition can be described as “just” when people are in a right relationship with God, with others, with themselves, and with the earth. We are talking about right relationships which build a just society for the individual, for the family, and for community, including organizational structures and institutions. It rests on the principle that if justice is to prevail, right relationships must exist wherever people gather and interconnect. While there is an endless array of obstacles or walls that hinder just relationships I will look at only three of them. From my experience they have much to say as to why there is a dearth of just relationships. Although I am not offering solutions to removing these barriers I hope their identification will help in understanding what stands in the way of the lamb and the lion lying down together in peace.

The first of these hindrances is based on an axiom which comes from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. “Evil is presented under the guise of good.”<sup>1</sup> No one wants to admit to doing evil, let alone a lesser good. So what is presented must always be done in a way that looks like good is being accomplished. There is usually just enough perceived good to get away with the cover-up. Presenting evil under the guise of good has become a preoccupation of the powerful interests of self-aggrandizement, especially in the quest for inordinate amounts of wealth, possessions and power. Acquisition of wealth or power is seen as a positive often with little or no concern as to who gets hurt or defeated in the process. In the secular way of thinking the presented good is the radicalized individual autonomy of being accountable to no one but oneself. The recent exposé of widespread sexual harassment has brought out of the darkness of cover-up those in powerful positions who forced themselves upon others while often appearing to be paragons of virtuous leadership, professed examples of political correctness, or at least decent in their fields of endeavor. The so-called unlimited rights of the individual has covered over the common good of society and actually diminished the rights of others.

For years direct abortion has been presented as a good in protecting the reproductive rights of women. It is not a human being, it is said, who is being destroyed. It is simply human tissue. The protection of “reproductive rights” is presented as a good but covers over the taking of innocent unborn life. Another great evil we face today is the danger of nuclear annihilation. While no one would deny that a nuclear disaster would be a horrendous evil that could be perpetrated upon humanity, there are those who nonchalantly play the game of

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<sup>1</sup>Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1951), paragraphs 328–336.

brinkmanship, ridicule by name calling, and who think they are accomplishing some kind of good in trying to scare off a nuclear war. Technological expertise of nuclear deterrence has become the good which hides the awful destruction of human life such as was experienced in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The necessity of calm, careful, respectful, studious, and strong diplomacy becomes greatly diminished if not invisible under the guise of expanding nuclear capability.

Evil presented under the guise of good can be based on ignorance, lack of prudential judgment or culpability from a failure to study the issues and take wise counsel. The good at stake is always the fuller humanization and dignity of the human person coupled with the well-being of our planet earth. One does not exist without the other. Denial of climate change and deregulation of laws protecting clean air and water presents itself as a good covering up the evil of the earth continuing to heat up due to manmade causes.

Balancing the budget can be presented as a good while it covers over the neglect of the poor and vulnerable, does not provide children with adequate health insurance protection, and unnecessarily expands military expenses. Sometimes the evil covered is the thinking that the poor are poor through their own fault, therefore the good should be everyone pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps. Securing the nation's boundaries can be a good until it becomes a cover for mistreating the immigrant and sending people home who have lived peaceably here in the United States for years. It becomes an even more an insidious portrayal of evil by breaking up families under the guise of observing the law of the land. Spending billions for a wall covers up the waste of money that could be used for endless needs in education, health, homelessness, drug addiction, and children going hungry.

Maybe "evil" is too strong a word, but in many cases that is exactly what we are talking about. Granted that in other cases it may be more benign or correct to speak of a "lesser good" covering over a "greater good." Nevertheless, placing a good spin on what is not right or good destroys just relationships by manipulating or distorting the truth. Just relationships are built on truth.

Another obstacle can be understood from the Thomist principle: *Quidquid recipitur recipitur ad modum recipientis*. "Whatever is received is received in the manner of the recipient."<sup>2</sup> In other words people see things from their own perspective. I am not saying this is a bad thing but only that it can be an obstacle depending on how open one is in one's thinking and in the pursuit of the truth. In our parishes, when a homily is preached on the Church's social teaching it is not uncommon for people to give it an initial and sometimes

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<sup>2</sup>Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1981), 1a, q.75, a.5; 3a, q.5. Note: Probably from Aristotle's 'De Anima.'

solely political interpretation rather than to receive it as church teaching which offers perspective and insight into our political persuasions. This is one reason why many priests shy away from preaching on social issues. Often I have received complaint letters that the Church should stay out of politics. Such thinking betrays a lack of understanding that the gospel offers light into every dimension of life. God cannot be removed from any dimension of our human existence including the world of politics. It does not mean that the Church has the political answers or that she should be a political player. Indeed she should not be, but the Church can offer a light to be considered in decision making—the light of the gospel. A. G. Sulzberger, the publisher for the *New York Times*, wrote on January 1, 2018, that, “Our society is again being reshaped by political, technological and environmental forces that demand deep scrutiny and careful explanation.”<sup>3</sup> The Church can be an important guiding voice in these dramatically changing times. In fact, she must bring the voice of the gospel to this changing society. I like to think of aligning every aspect of our human condition—our thinking, our actions, our words—to be in accord with the will of God. Again this does not mean the Church has the answers, but rather that we need to be humble enough to honestly search for answers in the light of the gospel.

Political platforms, budgets, and policies need to be examined by Christians in terms of alignment with the gospel. The Church’s social teachings are the great criteria for such examination. These teachings do not provide solutions to the social problems but rather bear witness to the values of the kingdom of God as they are applied in the real world. The Kingdom of God is one of justice, peace, and mercy. Church teaching based on scripture and tradition offers moral principles for guidance and prudential judgment. Most fundamentally, all political issues must be examined in terms of promoting the dignity of the human person, safeguarding the common good, and caring for the poor and vulnerable. In a humble approach to the great issues of our time—in particular I am thinking about nuclear war, the environment, and the human degradation people are experiencing through violence and the cruel disregard for human life—seeking the will of God requires thorough study, prayer in discernment, extensive consultation, self-examination, and careful decision making.

Perhaps for many of us one of our biggest blinders has been to the sin of racism. Too often we have not seen its ugly dimensions or we have not been willing to take a serious look into our thinking and to listen to what others have experienced. We must listen to the word of God in our hearts and then come to decisive action. It is also important to remember that in the political

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<sup>3</sup>A. G. Sulzberger, “A Note from our Publisher,” *New York Times*, January 1, 2018.

world exercising prudential restraint does not mean weakness or inaction. The Christian can certainly be engaged in the political art of compromise in pursuit of the common good. But the Christian must be guided by an informed conscience that helps to promote the good in a complex world of complicated decision making. I have always revered what the famous American spiritual leader Rabbi Abraham Isaac Heschel (d.1972) said many years ago: “God is of no importance unless He is of supreme importance.”<sup>4</sup> No matter how imperfect the situation, we ask God for the wisdom to maneuver through the issue at hand. Wisdom can transform our mode of receiving if we are open in our consciences to the voice of God. Just relationships can be prevented by minds locked into their own subjective positions or by minds carried away with hypocrisy as St. Paul pointed out to Cephas and Barnabas in the Letter to the Galatians.<sup>5</sup> The question is whether or not one can detach oneself from one’s own ideas when these ideas appear to be in conflict with the will of God. When people are unwilling to change their minds (undergo conversion) barriers are thrown up against justice. When there is a greatness of soul or what Pope Benedict called a gratuitousness of generosity just relationships can flourish.<sup>6</sup>

The third obstacle is the breakdown of dialogue. The pundits keep reminding us that our society has become tribal to the extent that what one tribe holds is right, others will hold as wrong. So bad has it become that the other tribes are the enemy and have nothing significant to offer. One tribe wants the monopoly on what is to be done. Aristotle’s definition of “politics” as the “art of the possible” has deteriorated into the banality of the impossible. The other cannot be trusted and must be sidelined. Dialogue ceases because there is no basis in mutual trust and so people simply do not listen to one another. There is no openness to a deepening of perspective on an issue with a view to some concurrence for the greater good. Without an agreement to search for a transcendental good there is really no room for dialogue but only for one’s own limited, self-enclosed and self-referential point of view.

I would offer Pope Francis’ three points on dialogue delivered to the Papal Curia this past Christmas as containing analogous merit in the “art of politics” for the secular, political world.<sup>7</sup> One does not have to be a Christian to be grounded in these fundamental lines of approach, but rather a person of good will. First of all, Pope Francis pointed out that there is “the duty to respect

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<sup>4</sup>Abraham Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 92.

<sup>5</sup>Galatians 2:11–14.

<sup>6</sup>Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, #6.

<sup>7</sup>Pope Francis, “Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia: Address of His Holiness Pope Francis,” Thursday, December 21, 2017. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/december/documents/papa-francesco\\_20171221\\_curia-romana.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/december/documents/papa-francesco_20171221_curia-romana.html).

one's own identity and that of others." For Francis, true dialogue cannot rest on an ambiguity that is willing to sacrifice some good to please the other in dialogue. Without this kind of honest respect I would assess the dialogue (or diplomacy) to be a dangerous game of seeking to manipulate the other. Secondly, dialogue requires "the courage to accept differences." For Francis, those who are culturally or religiously different (and may I add politically) should not be seen as enemies. Dialogue requires that those in dialogue seek out the good in each in order to create the good for all. I would venture to say that this component in political dialogue has severely broken down. Thirdly, for Francis, dialogue requires sincerity of intentions. I do understand that those who enter into political dialogue do have goals in mind but these goals cannot be allowed to close off what Francis says must be a path to truth. For Francis dialogue is a patient undertaking to transform competition into cooperation. This may be the toughest component since political power which wants to defeat and humiliate the other cannot be a basis for genuine dialogue. Dialogue requires careful, intensive listening, and a sincerity that goes well beyond delivering speeches and making demands. Dialogue is a demanding enterprise requiring constant adjustment. Pursuing justice that will lead to peace demands a firm purpose, strong conviction, strength of character, wisdom, but above all an honest but humble search for the truth of the good to be achieved which is more than self-interest.

Naming an evil or lesser good as the greater good to be achieved, closing one's mind in a self-referential way, and dishonesty in dialogue are all barriers to building just relationships. On the other hand, the pursuit of genuine good, a humble openness to search for the truth of the good, and genuine dialogue can create a human interconnectedness that builds right relationships with God, with self, with society, and with the earth. As a Church and as individual members we are challenged to overcome any barrier and to remove any obstacle in securing justice by right relationships. With God we can break through any barrier; with God we can scale any wall (Ps.18:30).

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