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KINSHIP AS A POLITICAL ACT Responding to Political Exclusion through Communities of Solidaristic Kinship

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Status Quaestionis and Aim of the Dissertation

The question motivating this dissertation is, ‘in a heterogenous society such as the contemporary western world, can a consensus be reached about moral claims regarding vulnerable persons which would otherwise result in their exclusion from the *polis*?’ I attempt to answer this question in the affirmative through the threefold aims of this dissertation: First, by proposing a retrieval of a thicker notion of kinship; second, by exploring whether such a notion might be capable of countering the political exclusion of vulnerable populations; and, third, by proposing how this can be done.

I base my understanding of kinship on the work of contemporary anthropologists who agree that kinship is the “same entity in

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different subjects,"¹ that this "entity" is but a "system of symbols" that is conventionally agreed upon by that particular culture,² and that its function is "diffuse and enduring solidarity"³ among those who share this "entity."

I observe that, over time, the term "kinship" was understood in a very reductionist sense, and I take frail elderly persons as an example of a vulnerable population that has fallen victim to this poor understanding of kinship. I argue that re-establishing kinship with frail elderly persons—specifically through communities of solidaristic kinship—can also help cultivate in the agent the civic virtues which in turn counter the vices that might be responsible for the political exclusion of vulnerable populations.

Situating the Dissertation in Current Theological Ethical Thought

The reasoning underpinning this work lies at the intersection between three lines of thought. First, this dissertation addresses bioethical questions from a perspective that is "specifically theological, and at once attentive to the global,"⁴ as opposed to one that is more philosophical and concerned with the local. It engages "social justice and virtues," and acknowledges what Pope Benedict XVI in *Caritas in veritate*, calls the "'strong links between life ethics and social ethics,'" echoing both *Humanae vitae* and *Evangelium vitae*.⁵

Second, in light of this approach, and due to the heterogeneity of society and the complexity of contemporary moral issues that are constantly evolving, I acknowledge that we are unable to simply pull out ready-made, one-size-fits-all answers. Therefore, I agree with Christian ethicists who call for a turn to kinship⁶ that might help us plot out a Christian ethic to address such complex issues in a more comprehensive manner.

Third, my aim in this dissertation is not merely the inclusion of vulnerable populations back into society. Rather, my interest is in the formation of the moral agent as subject, which is a relatively recent

¹ Marshall Sahlins, "What Kinship Is (Part One)," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17, 1 (2011) 10.

²David Murray Schneider, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984, 111.

³David Murray Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968, 50.

⁴Andrea Vicini, SJ, "Bioethics: Basic Questions and Extraordinary Developments," *Theological Studies* 73, 1 (2012) 170.

⁵Vicini, "Bioethics: Basic Questions and Extraordinary Developments," 170.

⁶See Kristin E. Heyer, *Kinship across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012, 4 (emphasis added).

development in moral theology.⁷ It involves shifting attention to the character of the agent, out of which actions emanate and which in turn shape the agent herself.

This dissertation, therefore, seeks to respond to the political exclusion of vulnerable populations by shaping the moral character of the agent through solidaristic kinship with frail elderly persons. In the words of the Scottish-born Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, virtue ethics is “*éducation sentimentale*,”⁸ for it is not enough for the agents to know what is right or wrong, but they also need to learn *what* is right and *desire* to do it.

Development of the Argument

Among the victims of the thin description of kinship I have already referred to above are frail elderly persons because although they are genetically related to their younger relatives, in Western contemporary society, they are often victims of political exclusion by their own family and by society in general. The same can be said of other vulnerable populations. The concept of *homo sacer* proposed by critical theorist Giorgio Agamben is helpful in enabling us to identify those populations that are at risk of being eliminated from society and therefore also killed with impunity.⁹

The thinning of the notion of kinship in Western culture is a relatively recent development. In fact, in the Catholic tradition, spanning from biblical literature to Early Christian writings and from Augustine to Julian of Norwich, spiritual kinship always had a strong solidaristic component especially with the disenfranchised. This explains why spiritual kinship often demanded dissociating from what is considered to be one’s “natural” kin in order to forge new kinship relations.

The understanding of the dynamics of exclusion that frail elderly persons experience can be enhanced by studying the exclusion of lepers from Antiquity through late medieval times. Two main kinds of exclusion dynamics can be observed. The first kind of exclusion is personal or individual. For the first millennium or so, lepers were

⁷See James F. Keenan, SJ, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences*, New York: A&C Black, 2010, 35–36.

⁸Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (with prologue), Bloomsbury Revelations Series, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 175.

⁹See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, ed. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, trans. Daniel Hellen-Roazen, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, 111.

feared and asked to stay away from public places. However, this ban was seldom enforced, and whoever wanted to avoid encountering lepers had to do so out of their own initiative. Therefore, kinship with lepers was breached because they were considered to be “Other” even if they actually formed part of their kin. Writings by Gregory of Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa in their orations on the lepers provide ample material on this kind of exclusion.¹⁰

The second kind of exclusion of lepers, I hypothesize, comes into effect in the year 1265. The reason for this clear-cut watershed moment is that it was the year when Pope Clement IV decreed that all lepers without exception be taken and kept in leprosaria, to receive the needed care and to safeguard the health of the rest of society.¹¹ I call this second kind of exclusion institutional or systematic exclusion, because now exclusion is enforced by the church, bolstered by judicial trials against those suspected of having leprosy, and eventually by the discipline of medicine which continued to improve its methods. Eventually, economic issues and power dynamics continued to breach kinship with lepers and caused their further exclusion. This overview of these two kinds of exclusion of lepers throughout the first 1500 years provides a lens to study exclusion of the frail elderly in contemporary Western society.

Analogously, frail elderly men and women are subjected to the same two kinds of exclusion. While the vices that lead to personal exclusion include anthropodenial and an aversion to human limitations,¹² the vices responsible for the institutionalized exclusion of the frail elderly include greed and individualism, both fostered by neo-liberalism. When challenged to practice kinship relations with the Other, vices that cause the dominant society to dominate over the minority, stand out starkly. These vices result in the political exclusion of the Other.

To promote the inclusion of the frail elderly, I propose, first, the practice of *solidaristic kinship* as a response to personal exclusion, because this practice re-educates the emotions through habits. Second, to address institutionalized exclusion, I recommend *structures of kinship*, such as solidarity and fraternity, because they promote kinship within society.

¹⁰See Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹¹See Timothy S. Miller and John W. Nesbitt, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014, 149.

¹²See for example Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004, 89.

I propose solidaristic kinship by first deconstructing both biological kinship (which is passive, static, and exclusive) and spiritual kinship (which since modern times has started to be understood more and more in a merely nominal sense). Solidaristic kinship, in contrast, consists of three components: sharing of affliction, coupled with the awareness of one's vulnerability, and responding in solidarity. The latter kind of kinship is active, dynamic and elective. Solidaristic kinship, I insist, is a MacIntyrean practice, and therefore cultivates specific virtues in the moral agents when they engage in sub-practices of kinship on a habitual basis. *Misericordia*, which Aquinas defines as "heartfelt sympathy for another's distress, impelling us to succor him [or her] if we can"¹³ is one of the virtues engendered by solidaristic kinship.

Apart from personal initiatives of solidaristic kinship, kinship also has more structural manifestations in what I call structures of kinship. These are usually contextualized manifestations of kinship in the *polis*, such as *fraternité* in France and *ubuntu* in Africa. These structures are important because they support and sustain initiatives of solidaristic kinship. These structures rely on solidarity and its counterpart subsidiarity, while the common good acts as a heuristic device to ensure that one group does not flourish at the expense of another.

Finally, practices of solidaristic kinship and structures of kinship together characterize *communities of solidaristic kinship* with frail elderly persons.¹⁴ By engaging in such communities, moral agents cultivate the civic virtues needed to contribute to shaping a society that promotes the political inclusion of its vulnerable members. I conclude, therefore, that the virtues cultivated by engaging in communities of solidaristic kinship engender in the agent the civic virtues which in turn have the capacity of effectively addressing political exclusion.

Implications of the Study

The study shows that scrutinizing for injustices suffered by persons who are not "white, young-adult males" is a useful hermeneutical tool, effective in uncovering the vices that need to be overcome, but that go unnoticed because they have been accepted as part of one's culture.

¹³ST, IIa-IIae, q.30, a.1, *respondeo*.

¹⁴I have in mind communities such as Sant'Egidio, among others. See also Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1999.

Moreover, because of historical reasons, moral theology still tends to be overly concerned with action theory. By focusing on solidaristic kinship as a practice that cultivates civic virtues, this dissertation contributes to shift the emphasis from the action and its object, to the subject as agent.

Finally, the dissertation recognizes that the action of an individual, or lack thereof, does not only affect one's moral culpability. Rather, more agency is granted to the subject by affirming that she can influence social structures by engaging in communities of solidaristic kinship.

Therefore, merely passing moral judgments or indulging solely in parenetic rhetoric has limited effect on the faithful. This work shows that it would be much more effective if these moral exhortations were replaced, or at least complemented, by practical initiatives where people are encouraged to engage in the practice of solidaristic kinship, since in subjects and in society such a practice is more likely to cultivate virtuous character and dynamics.

Solidaristic kinship, therefore, is a political act in which we must engage with urgency. When lived with frail elderly women and men, and supported by communities, agents grow in the civic virtues contributing to a society that is more just and less complacent to the exclusion of vulnerable women and men among us.