J. D. Vance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the parable of the Good Samaritan

The vice president’s mangling of the Christian *ordo amoris* is just a smokescreen for the largest deportation operation in American history.

by Mac Loftin
February 19, 2025

Century illustration

In a very seventeenth-century-coded turn of events, the pope circulated a letter among the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops rebuking (though without naming) the vice president over his misguided use of the theological concept of *ordo amoris*, the "order of loves." J. D. Vance, in a Fox News interview in January, described an "old school … very Christian concept" that "you love your family, and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country, and then, after that, you can focus [on] and prioritize the rest of the world." This ostensibly Christian ordering of loves contrasts with "the far left," who "hate the citizens of their own country and care more about people outside their own borders."

In his letter, Pope Francis attacked the idea that Christian love is "a concentric expansion of interests that little by little extends to other persons and groups." Instead, for Francis, Christian theology describes the human subject as constituted by its "relationship with all, especially with the poorest … without exception."

I think Francis is right, but it's worth pointing out that all of this chatter about the *ordo amoris* is a smokescreen. Vance was not speaking in that Fox News interview as a faithful Catholic wrestling with how to navigate competing moral obligations. He was speaking as the second-in-command of an administration that swept to power promising to enact "the largest deportation operation in American history."

To accelerate the already brutal US deportation machine, the Trump-Vance administration has begun denying federal grants to Christian charities that assist refugees, like Catholic Charities and Lutheran Family Services, accusing them of "fraud" and "money laundering." The administration also rolled back a Department of Homeland Security policy of not snatching people from places that make for bad PR, like schools, hospitals, and churches. If you wanted to soften American Christians up to the idea of the state shuttering Christian charities and sending jackbooted enforcers to drag worshippers out of churches and into offshore concentration camps, you might start by saying welcoming the stranger is actually a modern deviation from the venerable Christian tradition of loving one's fellow citizens before others.

As ill-informed and odious as Vance's blathering about the *ordo amoris* is, it's a symptom of a poison coursing through American Christianity: the temptation to believe that God demands we prioritize Americans over everyone else. (Even, for

Vance, over his fellow Catholics. Recall this past summer when he spread revolting lies about Haitian immigrants—themselves overwhelmingly Catholic—eating people's pets and spreading infectious diseases.) We have to take this poison seriously. Francis gives a suggestion for where to begin, ending his rebuke of Vance by insisting the true order of loves can only be discovered by "meditating constantly on the parable of the 'Good Samaritan.'"

For my money, the best commentary on the parable of the Good Samaritan was published by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1937. It appears in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, written while Bonhoeffer was running an underground seminary targeted by the Nazis for its pacifism and resistance to the state's racist policies. Bonhoeffer presciently describes just the kind of noxious sophistry Vance and his allies deploy in their use of the *ordo amoris*. His call to care for the despised and excluded remains just as urgent today.

In Bonhoeffer's telling, the main point of the passage in Luke where the parable appears is not in fact the parable itself, but the question that occasions it: "And who is my neighbor?"

The only reason we would ask the question, Bonhoeffer says, is because we want to shrink our circle of responsibility, to know who we have to love so we can know who we don't have to love. To ask "Who is my neighbor?" is really to ask "Who *isn't* my neighbor? Who do I not need to be concerned about? Whose suffering can I ignore?" In Bonhoeffer's words, the question itself is already "rebellion against God's commandment." God commands us to love others, and in asking *which* others we have to love we are seeking permission *not* to love some others. "The whole story of the Good Samaritan," he writes, "is Jesus' singular rejection and destruction of this question as satanic."

Is it possible to answer the question? Is my neighbor, Bonhoeffer asks, "my biological brother, my compatriot, my brother in the church, or my enemy?" But seeking clarification takes us down the wrong road. "The neighbor" is not some category of person into which some fall and others don't—as if, confronted by the suffering and need of another person, I should first sit down and figure out whether this person is in fact my neighbor. Instead of being a category of person, "the neighbor" is for Bonhoeffer a description of the other's moral claim on me. Thus, he says, there is only one possible answer to the question: "You yourself are the neighbor."

You are the neighbor.

Bonhoeffer wrote these lines in the mid 1930s, before Kristallnacht and mass deportations but after the Nazis had stripped Jews of their citizenship rights. German Jews existed in a precarious position relative to German Christians: nearby, but no longer fellow citizens; living and working somewhat as they had before, but increasingly targeted and scapegoated by the state. A Christian in Germany in 1937 might be tempted, when thinking about the now noncitizens living in their town, hearing lurid rumors about them spreading disease and attacking citizens and plotting against the state, to ask, “And who is my neighbor?” This was the temptation Bonhoeffer wanted his seminarians to resist with uncompromising strength. “There is literally no time left to ask about someone else’s qualification,” he wrote. “I must act and must obey; I must be a neighbor to the other person.”

The coming months will see the Trump-Vance administration’s promise of “Mass Deportations Now!” made real. Images of ICE raids will no doubt be disturbing: children taken from schools, sick people taken from hospitals, worshippers taken from churches, workers taken from job sites, families taken from homes; people shackled together and loaded onto military planes bound for extrajudicial black sites and border camps. Some Christian voices will cook up spurious theological reasons for why you shouldn’t be disturbed. Your loves aren’t ordered rightly, they will say; we must prioritize members of our own community before the rest of the world. (And given the new administration’s promise to end birthright citizenship, “our community” is going to get smaller.) Is someone who doesn’t even speak my language, or who doesn’t have the right documentation, or who lives halfway around the world, or whose country is in conflict with one of my country’s allies—is someone like that truly my neighbor? Who is my neighbor?

Bonhoeffer was right. There is literally no time left for questions like this. We must act and must obey. *We* are the neighbors.