

STEPS OF THE SAME STAIRCASE: ECONOMICS, SOCIOLOGY, AND THEOLOGY IN THE SERVICE OF LOVE FOR ONE'S NEIGHBOR

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Abstract

This theoretical and reflective essay brings together three disciplinary lenses, economics, sociology, and theology, as complementary keys to a comprehensive understanding of human beings and Christian spirituality. The study begins with the Greek etymology of economy (oikonomia, “household management”), relating it to the biblical concept of stewardship, understood as the responsible management of creation. It then proceeds from the concept of scarcity, which is intrinsic to economic rationality, to social interaction, the foundation of the sociological imagination, and ultimately to transcendence, the distinctive horizon of theological reflection. Drawing on these perspectives, the study analyzes what is termed the spirituality of the cross, understood in its vertical and horizontal dimensions, and discusses the model of prayer taught by Jesus Christ as a practical pedagogy of this spirituality. The essay takes the form of a theoretical and autobiographical reflection that combines biblical and theological foundations, dialogue with contemporary sociology, and accounts of the author’s personal and professional experiences, particularly those associated with the institutional care of children and adolescents. The discussion shows that the material, relational, and spiritual dimensions are not mutually exclusive, but complement one another as steps of the same staircase of meaning, converging in the commandment to love one’s neighbor. It concludes that Christian spirituality, when lived in its fullness, is not confined to the vertical dimension of faith, but is necessarily translated into concrete practices of

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stewardship, care, and solidarity, thereby contributing to interdisciplinary debate among economics, sociology, and theology.

Keywords: Biblical stewardship, Economics and theology, Institutional care, Love for one's neighbor, Spirituality of the cross.

INTRODUCTION

My intellectual and professional journey has been shaped by three complementary lenses: scarcity, interaction, and transcendence. Far from constituting isolated fields, they intertwine to form a comprehensive view of human beings and the world.

As an economist, I begin with scarcity, the concrete reality governing material goods. Faced with limited resources and unlimited wants, every action entails a choice, and every choice carries an opportunity cost. I was trained to calculate these costs, optimize allocations, and devise efficient paths within budgetary constraints. Scarcity teaches me the difficult yet necessary art of prioritization and, as will be discussed below, this same art points back to the etymological root of the word economy itself: the responsible management of the household.

If I stopped at scarcity, however, I would see only rational individuals maximizing utility. This is where the sociologist in me comes in, guided by social interaction. Economic choices do not occur in a vacuum: they are shaped by class, gender, and racial structures, as well as by historically constructed institutions. Through the sociological imagination, I connect personal dilemmas to collective mechanisms and recognize that the value of things lies not only in their price, but also in the meaning attributed to them through human coexistence. Interaction reveals that we are, first and foremost, relational beings, woven into a web fashioned by many hands.

Yet if sociology explains how group life operates and economics explains how resources are organized, my theological reflection asks why. Guided by transcendence, I understand that human beings are not satisfied by what can be measured or socially constructed. There is a longing for ultimate

meaning, a thirst for the infinite that eludes spreadsheets and demographic data. Theology invites us to interpret the Divine as revealed, to bridge the finite and the eternal, and to seek to discern God's will between the lines of history and human action.

For me, these three keys are steps of the same staircase: scarcity places us on the ground of material reality and practical responsibility; interaction raises us to the level of relationships and culture; and transcendence opens us to the boundless horizon of the spirit. From these three perspectives, this essay seeks not only to interpret the world, but also to reflect on how we might help make it more just, more compassionate, and closer to the fullness that gives it meaning, taking as its guiding thread what is termed here the spirituality of the cross.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative, theoretical, and reflective essay that combines four complementary procedures: (i) an etymological and bibliographic review of the concept of economy as household management (*oikonomia*), in dialogue with the biblical notion of stewardship; (ii) a literature review of the symbolism of the cross and the relationship between the individual and society, in dialogue with authors from theology and sociology; (iii) a theological and exegetical reading of selected biblical texts, treated as primary sources for reflection; and (iv) an autobiographical account in which the author draws on personal and professional experiences associated with family life and work at an institutional care facility for children and adolescents, using them as material for analysis in light of the theoretical categories introduced above. This methodological approach is justified by the essay's purpose, which is not to test hypotheses, but to construct an integrated interpretation of economics, sociology, and theology based on lived experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

OIKONOMIA: ECONOMY AS HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT

Students learn in their first introductory economics classes that the word's original definition comes from the Ancient Greek *oikonomia* and literally means “household management” or “management of the home.” Etymologically, the term is formed by combining two Greek words: (a) *oikos*, meaning “house,” “home,” or “family property”; and (b) *nomos*, or the verb *nemo*, meaning “law,” “norm,” “to manage,” or “to distribute.” Originally, therefore, the word did not refer to large national financial systems, but to the art of managing the resources of a household or family. In Ancient Greek, *oikonomia* could also mean “direction,” “governance,” and “organization.”

This same logic of responsible management resonates with biblical theology, which addresses care for the earth and the environment primarily through the concepts of stewardship, responsible management, and respect for divine creation. In Genesis 2:15, the account stating that the human being was placed in the Garden of Eden “to work it and take care of it” is treated as the key verse defining humanity's role as caretaker of the earth. In Genesis 1:28, “dominion” over animals is understood not as exploitation, but as responsible leadership.

The idea that the earth belongs to God further reinforces this stewardship. Psalm 24:1 states that “the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,” while Leviticus 25:23 establishes that the land “must not be sold permanently,” because it belongs to God and human beings are merely foreigners and guests upon it. This consolidates the principle that the earth has an owner and may not be exploited without limits. Such stewardship also entails judgment and consequences: Revelation 11:18 warns of the “time for destroying those who destroy the earth,” while Jeremiah 2:7 laments the defilement of the land and of God's inheritance.

Finally, creation is presented in Scripture as a source of wisdom and as something worthy of respect. In Job 12:7–10, the animals themselves are called upon to testify to the hand of the Lord; in Matthew 6:26, the birds of the air illustrate the care of the heavenly Father; and Proverbs 12:10 affirms

that “the righteous care for the needs of their animals.” Read alongside the economic etymology, this biblical stewardship suggests that responsible management, from household resources to the resources of creation, is essentially the same act: managing what does not wholly belong to us but has been entrusted to our care.

THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE CROSS

The understanding of Christian spirituality adopted here begins with what is termed the spirituality of the cross. The cross is a multilayered yet deeply pedagogical symbol that encompasses two dimensions: the vertical dimension, which points toward God, the source of all spirituality; and the horizontal dimension, which is directed toward one’s neighbor, the flesh-and-blood human being with all their contradictions and limitations (Boff, 2012).

The four Gospels portray Jesus Christ as the foremost example of this spirituality as lived on earth. The apostle Paul followed this example and invited the first Christians to do likewise, taking Paul as their model just as he took Christ as his.

The model of prayer imparted by Jesus, the Lord’s Prayer, encapsulates this practical pedagogy. From the outset, the prayer turns vertically toward God, recognizing Him as its source and hallowing His name. At the same time, it reveals that this Father is our Father, communal rather than merely individual, and thus the horizontal dimension asserts itself in the very first word. The petition for the coming of the Kingdom establishes heaven as the standard and asks that its values be lived here and now, among us. The petition for our daily bread reinforces this same horizontal dimension: bread is to be shared, with one’s neighbor regarded as made in the image and likeness of God. The theme of forgiveness calls for the continual practice of healthy relationships with others, grounded in the recognition of one’s own mistakes and limitations. The warning concerning temptation, in turn, reminds us that evil is real and that divine protection should be sought in order to overcome it.

WHERE IS YOUR BROTHER?

The relationship between the individual and society also features prominently in Genesis 4:9, when God asks Cain where his brother is. This question, which spans sociology and theology, was revisited by Bauman (2008) in a chapter of his work on individualized society.

The message of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God remains a concrete and contemporary challenge. It concerns how we treat one another, but also how the church positions itself within the society in which it is embedded. Perhaps more than other periods, the pandemic was a time of solidarity and of practically demonstrating God's love. Kindness transcends barriers, crosses borders, builds bridges, and brings people together. In the face of the vulnerability and suffering around it, the church has both the challenge and the opportunity to transform theory into action.

In Philippians 4:1–9, Paul addresses the believers in Philippi with affection, asking them to remain steadfast and united. He invites them not to live anxiously, but to present their requests to God through prayer, trusting that divine peace, which surpasses all understanding, will guard their hearts and minds. The apostle concludes by asking them to focus their thoughts on everything that is true, noble, and worthy of praise. Paul's concern for the feelings and thoughts of the church in Philippi is evident: anxiety was already present in that context of crisis, just as it is present today, when there is no certainty as to when or how the difficulties of our time will end. Paul's declaration of love for the church closes with the assurance that the peace of God will be with them, an invitation to complete rest, to Shalom.

This same spirit appears in Matthew 22:36–39, when Jesus, questioned about the greatest commandment in the Law, responds by pointing first to loving God with all one's heart, soul, and mind, and then to a similar commandment: loving one's neighbor as oneself.

From the beginning of His ministry, as narrated in the four Gospels, Jesus profoundly affected the lives of those around Him, both those who followed Him and those who came, or were brought, to Him. This impact directly unsettled religion as an institution bound to law and tradition. During the approximately three and a half years of His ministry, the teachers of the Law, Pharisees, and Sadducees

felt threatened and began to scrutinize and challenge His teachings. It was in this context that the Pharisees approached Him with a question designed to test Him. Jesus responded masterfully, surprising everyone by showing who our neighbor truly is.

LESSONS FROM A LIFE

From childhood, through the example of his parents and grandmother, the author learned at home and in everyday life what it means to care for others. Three accounts stand out among the formative experiences that marked this period.

The first concerns the mobilization of a group of church volunteers, including the author's parents, to build a house for a woman from the congregation. On weekends and public holidays, the men worked on the construction while the women prepared meals for everyone. The author also took part in this experience, which he remembers with great joy because he was able to help build someone's home without expecting anything in return.

The second account concerns the fifteen years the author spent living with his grandmother, during which he witnessed her constant care for anyone who arrived at her home. She welcomed them and, almost invariably before anything else, made sure to offer them food, whether they had come for a brief visit or a longer stay.

The third account comes from the author's adult life and concerns an experience he shared with his wife, a social worker, while working at an institutional care facility for children and adolescents referred by the courts pursuant to the Brazilian Child and Adolescent Statute (Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente—ECA). Two of the many stories they experienced left a lasting impression. The first was that of a girl who, upon turning fifteen, said that it was the first time she had ever had a birthday party, something the institution always made a point of celebrating, however simply. The second was that of a boy who, during an outing to tourist attractions in João Pessoa, Paraíba (PB), pointed out the places where

he had spent part of his childhood asking for food and fleeing violence. His account prompted deep reflection on what might have become of his life had he not received institutional care.

These accounts illustrate how actions within everyone's reach can leave a lasting mark on people's lives and make each person an agent of transformation. There are many ways of contributing toward this end, not only through financial resources, but also through volunteer work, including tutoring, reading workshops, and other activities. Such contributions must always respect the rules governing institutional care facilities in Brazil and require prior contact with the facility's management and the Childhood and Youth Court (*Vara da Infância e Juventude*).

CONCLUSION

The articulation of household management (*oikonomia*), interaction, and transcendence reveals that economics, sociology, and theology are not competing bodies of knowledge, but complementary steps on the same staircase of meaning. Biblical stewardship, including care for the earth, animals, and the resources entrusted to us, and the spirituality of the cross, in its vertical and horizontal dimensions, encapsulate this journey. They point to God as the ultimate source while simultaneously directing us toward our neighbors and creation as the concrete locus where love is lived out. The autobiographical accounts presented, the collective construction of a house, a grandmother's everyday care, and the experience of institutional care, demonstrate that this spirituality is not exhausted by the vertical dimension of faith. Rather, it is necessarily translated into concrete practices of responsible management, care, and solidarity. Loving one's neighbor as oneself therefore remains both a constant challenge and a reciprocal process, rewarding both those who receive and those who give, and a lesson learned above all through action.

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