Articles

Health Responsibility

Initial Musings on Aquinas' Charity and Antibiotic Resistance

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Abstract This article presents an expository study of the views of St. Thomas Aquinas regarding the virtue of charity and the increasing problem of antibiotic resistance in the contemporary world. I explore how the virtue of charity in Aquinas may help shed light on the formulation of possible ways to address this problem. The paper argues that Aquinas' charity forms the individual, out of love, to be responsible for their own and others' health, in ways that are especially relevant to antibiotics. To accomplish this, I first deal with his conception of the virtue of charity and the place of the common good within it. Then I briefly outline the background to the problem of antibiotic resistance and its consequences. Finally, I discuss how Aquinas' idea of charity could be helpful to the formation of human beings as this relates to employing antibiotics responsibly, given that our use of them not only impacts on ourselves but also on others.

Keywords antibiotics; charity; common good; drug use; health responsibility

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In this article, I will explore how the virtue of charity in Aquinas may help shed light on the formulation of possible ways to address the problem of antibiotic resistance, arguing that Aquinas' virtue of charity forms the individual to be responsible for their own and others' health out of love and the prioritization of the common good. We live in a world full of medical wonders: over the last century, we have seen many medical innovations that help us live better and more healthily today. One of those wonders or—I should say—developments is the use of antibiotics. The latter, on a layman's understanding, are "compounds that target bacteria and, thus, are intended to treat and prevent bacterial infections" (Patel et al. 2023). This means that they are medicines made up of chemical compounds that treat sickness or illnesses caused by bacteria. An important point to be noted here is that bacteria are microorganisms that continue to adapt to different environments. They are "metabolically active . . . multiply at rapid rates . . . and adapt to changing environments, [making them] a major cause of disease and important in every field of medicine" (Baron 1996). Because of the capacity of bacteria to adapt, antibiotics were developed. In particular, the mechanism of antibiotics consists in their functioning to destroy "the bacterial cell by either preventing cell reproduction or changing a necessary cellular function or process within the cell" (Patel et al. 2023). With the bacterial cell that enables the bacteria to adapt destroyed, bacteria cannot grow and reproduce anymore.

The emergence of antibiotics has brought them into the public sphere and into our daily lives. They have become essential to the latter: an element without which most of us would be unable to live well, given the benefits they bring. One of these is the fact that they can prevent or treat bacterial infections and illnesses of the sort that may potentially affect patients who

> are receiving chemotherapy treatments; who have chronic diseases such as diabetes, end-stage renal disease, or rheumatoid arthritis; or who have had complex surgeries such as organ transplants, joint replacements, or cardiac surgery. (Ventola 2015, 278)

This means that they not only serve as treatments for existing illnesses, but also function preventatively by hampering bacterial growth of the sort that may result in illnesses affecting vulnerable patients. This brings us to another benefit of antibiotics: their use in preventative medicine. They are used as a prophylaxis or agent to prevent bacterial emergence and multiplication in contexts where surgical operations are being conducted (Weledji et al. 2017). Penicillin, the first antibiotic, was used mainly for

treatment and prophylaxis. Furthermore, antibiotics raise our chances of survival: their employment in places that have high mortality rates has the potential to increase the survival of individuals prone to sickness (Flasche and Atkins 2018).

As beneficial as antibiotics are to us today, their misuse, and the lack of new developments in antibiotic medicine, has resulted in what academic researchers call the Antibiotic Resistance Crisis. The latter can be characterized as an increase of threatening bacterial infections due to the rapid surfacing of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, this being a result of the overuse and misuse of antibiotics themselves (Ventola 2015). Because of the capacity of bacteria to adapt, and the misuse of—and lack of new developments in respect of—antibiotics, bacteria can adapt to the supposed benefits of antibiotics and overcome them. This brings with it a plethora of problems, one of which is the unconstrained adaptation of bacteria.

That situation furnishes the point of entry for the research to be presented here. While not being a medical professional, or someone who has studied the sciences, I aim to put forward a possible layman's solution to the Antibiotic Resistance Crisis—one separate from medicine, and issuing instead from a moral perspective. In my view, this crisis only began because of the misuse and abuse of antibiotics. Considering this, my paper will explore what we can do, as humans, to prevent the furtherance of this crisis in the light of St. Thomas Aquinas' virtue of charity. Its central thought is that through the latter's virtue of charity, we can be responsible humans when it comes to our own and others' health. Through the virtue of charity, the individual may be formed to be responsible for their own and other's health out of love and the prioritization of the common good.

To accomplish this, I shall first deal with St. Thomas Aquinas' conception of the virtue of charity and the place of the common good within it. Then I shall briefly outline the background to the problem of antibiotic resistance, along with its consequences. Finally, I shall discuss how Aquinas' idea of charity could be helpful to the formation of human beings as this relates to employing antibiotics responsibly, given that our use of them not only impacts on ourselves but also on others.

So let us first deal with St. Thomas Aquinas' idea of the virtue of charity and the place of the common good within it. Aquinas would understand charity or *caritas* as an infused virtue in the soul, since it makes the person possessing it, and their works, good (Aquinas, *De Virtutibus*, art. 2, resp.). It is a virtue precisely because it makes the person love, and act for, the good—in that the person loves the good to which they aspire. He or she longs to possess that highest good, which is pursued for its own sake, and then

share it with others—a case of beatific vision. Since it makes the person aspire to the highest good (which is what beatific vision involves), charity is a virtue, and the highest among them. St. Thomas Aquinas says that charity makes man love [sic] "God for His own sake, and loves fellow-men who are capable of attaining beatitude as it loves itself; charity resists every hindrance both in itself and in others" (Aquinas, *De Virtutibus*, art. 2, resp.). Here one can see that *caritas* also makes man overcome obstacles to loving: they become courageous enough to love others and share their goodness despite the challenges that they may face.

Since love involves some sort of communication or outpouring of one's goodness, it is intimately linked to friendship. Caritas is the friendship between man and God, since there is mutual love (which is a requirement for friendship) between them (Aquinas, Summa Theologica, q. 24, art. 2, resp.). Friendship, in St. Thomas Aquinas' thought, is the willing of the good of the other. It is a person's desire for another person's good, and the former's effort to bring that good about in their friend (Wadell 2014, 377). In this scheme, the friendship of man with God is a love-relationship of man with God. God loves man as His created creature and wills his good, and man loves God in return by living according to His ways and committing to work for His plans in our world (Wadell 2014, 377). However, the love man has for God is not on the same footing as that of God for man. There are two reasons for this: first, man is not on the same level of existence as God. God is Divine, and man is—it has to be admitted—human. Second, the virtue of charity itself is caused by "the infusion of the Holy Ghost, Who is the love of the Father and the Son, and the participation of Whom in us is created charity" (Aquinas, Summa Theologica, q. 24, art. 2, resp.). This means that the virtue of charity is a gift or grace from God that is given to us. Our acts of charity, which may stem from "a pure heart, and a good conscience, and an unfeigned faith," are acts that "dispose man [sic] to receive the infusion of charity" or the grace of God that makes us love God and our neighbor wholly (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 24, art. 2, resp. to obj.). In all of this, St. Thomas Aquinas argued that friendship is based on virtue. The virtue in this case—which is charity—is, however, one that comes from God and not solely from our own efforts (Ney 2006, 5).

Now, as St. Thomas Aquinas understood it, the kind of friendship that is necessitated by charity is one that obtains between God and man because God, the one to be seen in the beatific vision, is man's source of happiness (in that the beatific vision is the highest good that man longs for, which means that God is man's ultimate source of happiness) (*Summa Theologica*, q. 26, art. 2, resp.). God takes precedence in man's act of loving,

yet the proper love for God does not end there: it is shared by loving others, since the happiness we receive from God is shared. In other words, the story of love does not end there. In fact, man's proper love of God recognizes others as subjects to be loved, which stems from man's affection for the Divine. The happiness we receive from God is also received by others in their love for God, and since happiness is a good that is shared as it pours out from the Divine, we love our neighbors as well:

> Therefore God ought to be loved chiefly and before all out of charity: for He is loved as the cause of happiness, whereas our neighbor is loved as receiving together with us a share of happiness from Him. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 26, art. 2, resp.)

From this, we can infer that loving God requires us to also love others. Our relationship with God, though primary relative to other relationships, does not make us turn our faces away from others. It is quite the opposite, since our love for God extends to us loving others in that all people belong to Him (Ney 2006, 4). It makes us reach out, face them directly, and extend ourselves to them by being charitable and loving them.

In the *Summa Theologiae*, particularly in the treatise of St. Thomas Aquinas on the order of charity, we go back to the point we have mentioned earlier: that man must love his neighbors by virtue of their being subjects of love due to our fellowship with them in their partaking of God's good. Our relationship with others, taken as a relation of human persons under God, is our fellowship with others, and this fellowship is the reason for our act of love towards them (*Summa Theologica*, q. 26, art. 4, resp.). This fellowship, which becomes the basis for loving, is a mandate for us to love our neighbors as an expression of our love for God. Particularly in St. Thomas Aquinas' thought, man's perfect love of God consists in our "love of [our] neighbor [since it] includes love of God, while love of God [alone] does not include love of our neighbor" (*Summa Theologica*, q. 27, art. 8, resp.). Man loves God and his creation, and does everything he can to have a good relationship with him, in the same way as God loves man and provides for his good (*Summa Theologica*, q. 27, art. 8, resp.).

Note here how one can love God by loving His creation. This means that everyone is mandated to love one's neighbors, since they are bearers of God's image and dignity (*Summa Theologica*, q. 27, art. 8, resp.). Not only that, but loving one's neighbor is an instance of charity being true to itself: it is seeking something outside of the self (*Summa Theologica*, q. 25, art. 1, resp.). It is going out of the self to seek the good, particularly the common

good, in that this takes priority over self-interest. True charity, then, in loving one's neighbor, is to put the common good above all else, even above individual preferences: "the common good is always more lovable to the individual than his private good, even as the good of the whole is more lovable to the part, than the latter's own partial good" (*Summa Theologica*, q. 26, art. 4, resp. to obj.). To love one's neighbors is to love and prefer the common good, because the good of the whole and of others is prioritized over the self.

To love others is to express our love for God more profoundly and completely. It is an expression of how deep our love for God is, since loving God in charity must make us see that our neighbors also partake in the happiness God gives to us. In other words,

> to love our neighbors for God's sake is to love them as beings like ourselves who are prized by God and precious to God and who, like ourselves, are capable of loving and enjoying God. (Wadell 2014, 381)

With this, we see our neighbors as human beings like us who deserve our love: they are other selves or humans who live with us in this world as partakers of God's goodness. God is in them just as He is with us, since they, too, are creatures of Him and, in loving them, we express our love for God (Costa 2024, 84). Because of that, it would only be right and just to prioritize the good of all or the common good instead of one's own interests. In prioritizing the common good, one loves one's neighbors, as the common good is preferable to one's own good. It makes the lover achieve the ultimate good by realizing the common good, and this is only possible if loving God and one's neighbors is placed first, ahead of one's own interests (Costa 2024, 85).

We shall now discuss, albeit briefly and from a layman's perspective, antibiotic resistance and its consequences. The contemporary world faces this problem because bacteria that were treated by antibiotics are adapting to the effects of antibiotics, making them immune or resistant to the latter. The problem stems from antibiotic misuse, overuse, and lack of development, resulting in the emergence of drug-resistant bacteria (Habboush and Guzman 2023). Aside from that, agricultural overuse, inappropriate prescribing, and lack of regulation of antibiotics have all contributed to this development (Ventola 2015). Now, as was mentioned in the earlier part of this work, bacteria have an adaptive capacity: they can adapt based on the conditions they are in. This is because they are metabolically active microorganisms that rapidly multiply and are able to adapt to survive

(Baron 1996). What this in turn means is that when exposed to the antibiotics of today, and given that these antibiotics are misused, bacteria can overcome the supposed beneficial effects of antibiotics. They can become drug-resistant and harder to eliminate.

In contemporary terms, there are already cases where bacteria are proving resistant: hence the Antibiotic Resistance Crisis we are facing today. For example, there is an increase in drug-resistant fungal infections, and a surge in drug resistance amongst patients suffering from HIV, tuberculosis, malaria and tropical diseases such as leprosy (World Health Organization 2023). Furthermore, "*Staphylococcus aureus*, urinary tract infections caused by *E. coli*, and *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, a common intestinal bacterium, also showed elevated resistance levels against critical antibiotics" (World Health Organization 2023). Moreover, the emergence of this kind of bacteria led to "1.27 million global deaths in 2019 and contributed to 4.95 million deaths" (Habboush and Guzman 2023).

Additionally, across all the regions of the globe, the Antibiotic Resistance Crisis (hereinafter referred to as just "the crisis") currently affects everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status. It does so because bacteria are transmitted through what are pretty much normal everyday activities such as handshaking, working out, preparing and eating food, traveling, or having contact with pets or other animals (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2024). The crisis, furthermore, is "exacerbated by poverty and inequality, and low- and middle-income countries are most affected" (World Health Organization 2023). It also puts many of the developments and innovations of modern medicine at risk. For instance, it renders infections harder to treat, and makes other medical procedures and treatments, such as surgery, cesarean sections, and cancer chemotherapy, much riskier (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2024). In the absence of a proper approach to using antibiotics, bacteria will continue to adapt and become ever more drug-resistant, making treatment of and recovery from illnesses more difficult in years to come.

Despite being invented for the sake of their beneficial uses and effects, we have seen that antibiotics themselves can do little today to ameliorate the Antibiotic Resistance Crisis. Supposedly a help and a friend instead of a foe, they have become harmful due to our misuse and abuse of them. It all hinges on us: how we use antibiotics will dictate the future development of the crisis. If we continue to be irresponsible in our approach, then we will be left with an increasingly harmful scenario. However, if we use them responsibly, I think we can alleviate the crisis a little—in that the latter is complex in itself. Given those considerations, we shall now discuss how

St. Thomas Aquinas' idea of charity relates to the antibiotic crisis. I shall argue that, for Aquinas, charity forms the individual out of love to be responsible for their and others' health, and that this is nowhere more relevant than where our use of antibiotics is concerned. This argument stems from charity's being a virtue, which means that it has effects on man and his or her soul.

St. Thomas Aquinas stipulated that charity, as a virtue, exerts effects on the soul. The more that a person obeys God's commands and cultivates the virtue of *caritas* through acts of charity, the more he or she becomes like God and grows closer to Him in such a way that grace enters the scene. As he put it:

> The human mind's movement to the fruition of the Divine good is the proper act of charity, whereby all the acts of the other virtues are ordained to this end, since all the other virtues are commanded by charity. Hence, the merit of life everlasting pertains first to charity, and secondly, to the other virtues, inasmuch as their acts are commanded by charity. So, likewise, is it manifest that what we do out of love we do most willingly. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 114, art. 4, resp.)

Now, grace assists the soul in attaining beatific vision or direct vision of God (Dauphinais and Levering 2002, 127). In simple terms, it assists the soul in attaining eternal life in heaven. And how does it do this? By elevating the intellect to achieve beatific vision, where this is done based on the degree of love that a person possesses, in that we are all judged by the way we have loved (Dauphinais and Levering 2002, 127). This means that the more a person loves God and others, the more he or she will know and see God. Beatific vision, then, is attained by the one who has loved God and his or her neighbors well.

One of the acts intrinsic to charity is joy. Feeling this in the presence of a friend's well-being is the effect of charity on the soul. If, however, a person's friend lacks something—and much more if it is his or her well-being—the person becomes sorrowful, and the sadness felt is a "sorrow [that] arises from love, either through the absence of the thing loved, or because the loved object to which we wish well, is deprived of its good or afflicted with some evil" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 28, art. 1, resp.). I would like to point out that there are two ideas here that we have to focus on. First, we also suffer because of our neighbor's suffering. This is because of our love for them, which makes us experience their sufferings as if they were our own (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 30, art. 1, resp.). Referring back to mercy and *caritas*, one

must love one's neighbor by practicing charity: that is, by caring for them as their situation demands. St. Thomas Aquinas is not convinced that wishing and praying for the well-being of one's neighbor is already love: we must relieve the suffering of others and "give to the needy out of our compassion and for God's sake" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 32, art. 1, resp.). In other words, true love goes beyond well-wishing. That is why, for him, real charity is manifested through actions, and "Aquinas divides these acts into three categories: (1) acts of beneficence, (2) almsgiving, and (3) fraternal correction" (Floyd 2009). In particular, mercy belongs to the second category. Compassion and mercy here become connected, since mercy compels the person to have compassion for those who are suffering and be compassionate to them by alleviating their sorrow (Floyd 2009).

Now, where charity as a virtue is concerned, St. Thomas Aquinas would highlight three acts that fall under this category: beneficence, almsdeeds and fraternal correction. They are performed as acts of love, since we must love our neighbors:

> The reason for loving is indicated in the word 'neighbor,' because the reason why we ought to love others out of charity is because they are nigh to us, both as to the natural image of God, and as to the capacity for glory. (Aquinas, Summa Theologica, q. 44, art. 7, resp.)

With that, our acts of beneficence, almsdeeds and fraternal correction must be done to our neighbors out of our love for them. Beneficence is, prima facie, doing good to someone. The good done may consist in any good charitable act,

> because the act of love includes goodwill whereby a man wishes his friend well. . . . Now the will carries into effect, if possible, the things it wills, so that, consequently, the result of an act of love is that a man is beneficent to his friend. Therefore, beneficence in its general acceptation is an act of friendship or charity. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 31, art. 1, resp.)

Following this characterization, we can state that any good act done out of charity, as long as it is intended and really is for our neighbor's good, is an act of beneficence. On top of that, beneficence concerns all. We must do good to all regardless of their status:

> Since the love of charity extends to all, beneficence also should extend to all, but accordingly as time and place require: because all acts of virtue must be

> modified with a view to their due circumstances. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 31, art. 2, resp.)

Connecting this to the Antibiotic Resistance Crisis, our act of using antibiotics responsibly out of concern for others and the world and their good may be considered an act of beneficence. Since antibiotic resistance is a global challenge, all are called to be cautious and proper in using antibiotics, as one's use affects the health of others (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2024). The health of others, like ours, is also our responsibility. Additionally, our prayers for those who do suffer because of the crisis, and for the development of antibiotics, may be considered acts of beneficence, in that "there is, however, a good that we can do to all, if not to each individual, at least to all in general, as when we pray for all, for unbelievers as well as for the faithful" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 31, art. 2, resp. to obj. 1). Moreover, fraternal correction, as an act of charity and justice that remedies the hurtful actions of others that are "detrimental to the common good," may take the form of informing and educating others about the proper way of using antibiotics (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 33, art. 1, resp.). Courses of action such as getting to know the symptoms of antibiotic resistance, asking questions, learning the right ways to use antibiotics, and educating others—above all patients already taking them—about the side effects they may come to experience, are all ways of preventing the proliferation of the crisis (National Foundation for Infectious Diseases 2023). All are called to attend to medical experts, deferring to both medical advice and moral considerations, to use antibiotics properly, to educate those who may be lacking in knowledge in this area, and to pray for those who are sick—especially patients using antibiotics.

We have been exploring here how the virtue of charity may be able to provide solutions to the Antibiotic Resistance Crisis. We first dealt with the virtue of charity as understood by St. Thomas Aquinas, and the place of the common good within it. Moving on from that, we turned to the reality of the crisis today, and its effects. After this, we explored how the virtue of charity, as a virtue that has effects on the soul, may be able to help in alleviating the further proliferation of this crisis. The real challenge now is to be a force for good in this tragic world: it is to apply what has been learned in one's life by using antibiotics properly as an act of charity.

Given that the research presented here is preliminary in its scope and nature, further studies of the issue might be expected to revolve around the following topics connected with the crisis: the political common good in St. Thomas Aquinas' thought, a broadened focus on the societal common good, a detailed exposition and inclusion of some other sources

and questions pertaining to charity, such as *De Virtutibus* and *De Caritate*, the person's cultivation of charity, the issue of *Ordo Amoris* in human moral acting, and non-Christian or non-Thomistic views on charity and how it might contribute to possible solutions to the crisis.

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