



Robert Gallagher <ragodct@gmail.com>

Loving critics

A Wonderful and Sacred Mystery from A Wonderful and Sacred Mystery

Mon, Mar 4, 2024 at 2:37

<gallagherr@substack.com>

PM

Reply-To: A Wonderful and Sacred Mystery from A Wonderful and Sacred Mystery

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A Wonderful and Sacred Mystery

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Loving critics

Pity the leader caught between unloving critics and uncritical lovers

A WONDERFUL AND SACRED MYSTERY

MAR 4



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When I first read it I was confused.

Piety was “a kind of fondness or love, a recognition of what you owe the land that bred you ... gratitude for the love, forgiveness and understanding one receives.”[i]

I had always thought of piety in more of a modern dictionary way – it was reverence for God or a stance in regard to one’s religious obligations and practices.

But Richard Holloway, one-time Presiding Bishop of Scotland, drew on the broader and deeper meaning of the ancient virtue, seeing piety as a joyful, thankful, and eager giving of self to serve God, family, neighbor, and nation.

A breed of critics without love

I thought how such piety seemed so foreign to our time. It reminded me of a John Gardner speech from long ago. He was concerned about “a breed of critics without love, skilled in demolition but untutored in the arts by which human institutions are nurtured and strengthened and made to flourish.”

Back then Gardner experienced another group of “those who loved their institutions tended to love their rigidities more than their promise, shielding them from life-giving criticism.” I think there’s fewer of them now. It would seem that the loud voices of our age, from the left and the right, are of the group he called “unloving critics.”

✓ Subscribed

The loving critic

God’s invitation to piety comes with the assumption that the love of the stranger and even our enemies begins with the love of those close at hand. So for a moment let me offer you three things for your reflection: an epistle, a prayer, and a papal encyclical. All of which suggest another stance. What Gardner called the “loving critic.”

- Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (1 John 4:20)
- I love all men, in and for your sake, though not as much as I ought or as I desire. I pray your mercy upon all men, yet there are many whom I hold more dear Since your love has impressed them upon my heart with a closer and more intimate love, so that I desire their love more eagerly – I would pray more ardently for these. (“Prayer for Friends”, *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm*, Penguin Classics)
- “Here once more we exhort our sons to take an active part in public life, and to work together for the benefit of the whole human race, as well as for their own political communities. It is vitally necessary for them to endeavor, in the light of Christian faith and with love as their guide, to ensure that every institution whether economic, social, cultural or political, be such as not to obstruct but rather to facilitate man’s self betterment, both in the natural and in the supernatural order. And yet, if they are to imbue civilization with right ideals and Christian principles, it is not enough for our sons to be illumined by the heavenly light of faith and to be fired with enthusiasm for a cause; they must involve themselves in the work of these institutions, and strive to influence them

effectively from within.” (Pacem in Terris, Pope John XXIII, April 11, 1963)

From John Gardner’s address

The stance we take in relationship to our parish church is one factor that will determine whether your pastoral oversight will be useful and faithful.

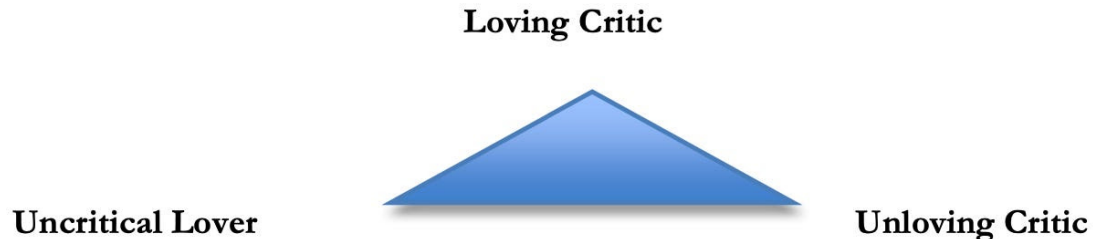
In *Finding God in All Things: Contemplation, Intercession, and Intervention* Sister Michelle and I wrote, “

“This is about your attitude and bearing, your demeanor regarding first, the parish, and second, the work of parish development. A stance isn’t a feeling. It’s a position we take. In this discussion about stance, we’ll begin by using [John Gardner’s address in 1968](#) on institutional change. He spoke about how society needed people who would be loving critics of the institutions in which they worked and about the choices we have in how we engage our institutions. We have applied that line of thought to the parish church. You may want to use it to reflect on your stance toward your parish. In his address, Gardner offered a fictional account of how scholars in the twenty-third century would look upon our age. They pointed out that twentieth century institutions were caught in savage crossfire between uncritical lovers and unloving critics. On the one side, those who loved their institutions tended to love their rigidities more than their promise, shielding them from life-giving criticism. On the other side, there arose a breed of critics without love, skilled in demolition but untutored in the arts by which human institutions are nurtured and strengthened and made to flourish. Between the two, the institutions perished. The twenty-third century scholars understood that where human institutions were concerned, love without criticism brings stagnation, and criticism without love brings destruction. And they emphasized that the swifter the pace of change, the more lovingly men had to care for and criticize their institutions to keep them intact through the turbulent passages. In short, men must be discriminating appraisers of their society, knowing coolly and precisely what it is about the society that thwarts or limits them and therefore needs modification. And so must they be discriminating protectors of their institutions, preserving those features that nourish and strengthen them and make them more free. To fit themselves for

such tasks, they must be sufficiently serious to study their institutions, sufficiently dedicated to become expert in the art of modifying them.”

Where would you place yourself?

We make use of this image as a way of exploring the three stances.



Where would you place yourself within that triangle? I think that for most of my life I've been someplace on the line between Loving Critic and Unloving Critic. Even though I was very much of the 60s and aligned myself with fairly radical groups on the left, I had other influences that drew me back to the loving critic stance. I was born toward the end of the Silent Generation (1928-45) and share much of that cohort's views. Participation in Scouting played a role. But the stance took a more solid form in the years between my 18th and 27th birthdays as I experienced Army ROTC, the Marine Corps, electoral political activity, CORE's effort to register voters and protect voting rights, and understanding myself to be a Christian and going to seminary. Possibly the most significant factor was the process of developing a degree of competence in institutional change methods. The inclination toward a Loving Critic stance was there but it was the training in organization development and my work with an industrial mission that were the determinative forces. The inclination needed actual competence. Willingness need ability. Incarnation was necessary.

What are the forces that have shaped you? What has changed over time? What do you make of it all as you look back? What competencies have you developed that allow you to be an effective Loving Critic, to love the brothers and sisters that are in life with you, to “pray more ardently” for your friends, and strive to effectively influence the institutions you are part of?

This abides,

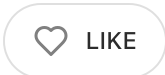
Robert

[i] Richard Holloway, *Seven to Flee, Seven to Follow*, 1986

[ii] John W. Gardner, 1912–2002, US secretary of health, education, and welfare (1965–1968), head of the National Urban Coalition. Founded and served as chair of Common Cause, (1970–1977), Professor of public service at Stanford University (1989 to 1996) When younger he taught psychology at Connecticut and Mt. Holyoke colleges and served as an intelligence officer with the US Marine Corps in World War II, he joined the Carnegie Corp. of New York in 1946, becoming its vice president in 1949 and its president in 1955. The address was made at Cornell University, June 1, 1968.

The icon is of Francis Perkins. It hangs in the parish Sister Michelle and I attend. Just to the left of “our pew.” [For more information.](#)

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