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# The Democratic Virtues, Our Common Life and the Common School: Trust in Democracy: Anabaptists, Italian Americans, and Solidarity

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THE DEMOCRATIC VIRTUES, OUR COMMON LIFE AND  
THE COMMON SCHOOL: TRUST IN DEMOCRACY:  
ANABAPTISTS, ITALIAN AMERICANS, AND  
SOLIDARITY

*Thomas L. Shaffer*<sup>†</sup>

Consider two phrases in Professor Marie Failinger's charge to those of us discussing Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*,<sup>1</sup> October 28, 2005, at Hamline University: (i) "How would we construct a real democratic sociality holding each other responsible for ethical life that would warrant trust in democracy? . . . and, (ii) How do the religious traditions help us reflect on this issue?"

My reflection, probably sectarian, refers more to where we come from than to what we choose. The reference here is to three communities, none of which is primarily concerned with "real democratic sociality." But none of them is radically withdrawn; all three of them contribute to the civil community, if only in the way that my late friend and teacher John Howard Yoder meant when he said in our conversations that, for all their separation, the Mennonites of Northern Indiana were as concerned as anybody else with getting the potholes filled.

The three communities I am thinking of are (a) the community of believers formed in the tradition of the Radical Reformation, the Anabaptists; (b) the community of Italian-American immigrants who formed their children in a communal virtue they named *rispetto*—the virtue that trains a person to be a member in a family; and then radiates out—so that *rispetto* is practiced in ethnic community, in civil community, nation, and world; and (c) the community contemplated in modern Roman Catholic social teaching on solidarity, which is, among other things, the virtue that trains members of the community to seek the common good, the good that is *common*.

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1. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton U. Press 2004).

Professor Failinger's charge invites these alternatives to the democratic social order Jeffrey Stout described. From a believer's perspective, the American civil community described by Stout and invoked in Marie's phrase "real democratic sociality," seems to me to be the community Gertrude Stein looked for and did not find in Oakland, California: "There is no there there," she is said to have said.

Stout said the democratic community he had in mind is about "holding one another responsible for . . . the sorts of people we become." A believer will say, I think, that American democracy is not rich enough, nor deep enough, nor warranting enough trust, to be a place that forms its members in a way that will cause them to hold one another responsible for the sorts of people they become, not as much as the Old Order Amish in Lagrange County, Indiana, or among Italian immigrants—people whose moral theology is that we are all in this together. A believer who wants to enter the enterprise Stout describes and Marie invokes would need to begin somewhere else. And even if the place from which she comes meets Stein's "thereness" test, I doubt that it gives her a way to rationally come to trust American democracy. Which is to say that the richer her community is, the less likely it is to foster trust in American democracy—except, perhaps, as to filling potholes.

So that's one issue: whether the grand democratic communal vision suggested by Stout's and Marie's phrases can be built on what we have, now, in America. Whether there is any "there" here.

If not, perhaps the problem is that such a grand democratic communal vision is merely pretentious. It may still be possible to get the potholes full, and then we can look elsewhere for a community where people can hold one another responsible for what is happening to them. That's another issue.

John Howard Yoder, toward the end of his life, and particularly in one of his last books, *For the Nations*,<sup>2</sup> referred his Mennonite sisters and brothers to a couple of phrases in the *Book of the Prophet Jeremiah*:

To all of the exiles whom I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Marry wives and beget sons and daughters . . . Seek the welfare of any city to which I have carried you off, and pray to the Lord for it; on its welfare your welfare will depend.<sup>3</sup>

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2. John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations* (Eerdmans 1997).

3. Jer 29:4-8 (All Biblical citations are taken from the New English Bible.).

My friend Ruth Jost, a Mennonite, a lawyer, and a mother, interpreted that text for me. She said to me, as she went out to work toward making Columbus, Ohio, safe for children: “There *are* some things we *do*.” (I suppose I must have appeared surprised at her civic energy and Ruth felt she had to say something.)

But notice *where* the Ruth Josts of America come to decide on the things they do. It is not done within “real democratic sociality.” The contributions from religion Marie Failinger invokes may sometimes *appear* in the public square, but that is not where they come from. Democratic sociality does not explain what Ruth Jost was doing in Columbus. Nor does it explain statements of American Roman Catholic bishops, in the space of a year, condemning America’s foreign and military policy and its capitalist proclivity. (Of course, origins may be overcome by civic pressure. The public square didn’t deal with, or even need to deal with, the worry naval commanders were said to have about Catholic officers who had been put in charge of nuclear weapons in submarines; but the bishops’ statement on nuclear weapons was not, apparently, stronger than American civil religion.)

Looking ahead a bit, I notice that Italian-Americans have risked and borne what American sociologists call “clannishness,” and have risked libelous identification with organized crime, risks not in service to democratic sociality, but in order to carry the morality of the family—the morality of membership—into business and professional and civic life. They bring that morality from their families to American democracy. It doesn’t come from Colorado Springs.

And, looking ahead to solidarity, it seems to me impossible to locate enough coherent common good in what America is up to warrant *trust* in American democracy, rather than in the other communal traditions that are available to those who seek to form their children in the virtues and point them to the common good. There is just not any there here. I won’t prove that negative, of course; there are people who remain fond both of Oakland and of democratic sociality. I aspire only to show you that there are alternatives.

#### THE ANABAPTISTS

The people who are in my mind’s eye as the first of the three alternative communities I am talking about are those Dorothy Pratt describes in her wonderful book *Shipshewana*,<sup>4</sup> about the Old Order

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4. Dorothy O. Pratt, *Shipshewana* (Quarry Books 2004).

Amish in Northern Indiana. The mentor whose spirit hovers in my mind, and who told my wife Nancy that I always get him wrong, is my friend John Howard Yoder. But my insight into Anabaptist political theology I owe not to Pratt or to Yoder, but to Professor Edward Gaffney, who told me that the Swiss Anabaptists were not into a theological quibble when they were put to death in the sixteenth century for refusing to have their children baptized; what they were refusing for their children was conscription into Christendom, he said. In the memory of that refusal, the Amish and Mennonites of Lagrange County, Indiana, seek to teach us in the mainline about holding one another responsible for the sort of people we are becoming—we American Christians—as we kill people to punish them for crime, or provoke the deaths of thirty thousand civilians in an attempt to bring “real democratic sociality” to Muslims in the Middle East.

Passing by the many distinctions Anabaptists practice—clothing, boundaries (what they call “fences”), shunning, disdain for machinery and public education, pacifism—the ideals of the modern Anabaptist community are ideals in which members actively and advertently hold one another responsible for the sorts of people they are becoming and also, *at the same time*, act as a model community for the broader “society.” Part of their sociality, of their apostolate, to use the Catholic word, is to show their neighbors in America how to live. If that is hard to see and to accept when one is on the outside, it may be because the Anabaptists do not seek political power, or even political influence. As John Yoder said in our conversations, speaking of his community of Indiana Anabaptists, “We can serve the world but we are not called to rule it.”

That’s the community looking outward. Looking inward: In Anabaptist soteriology, it is the community that is saved. And so it is fundamental that the community be separated from and not corrupted by American “democratic sociality.” And it is fundamental for the individual that she maintain her membership in the community as *it* is saved, and she with it. That soteriology is at the heart of peculiar customs and rules and “fences.” It has carried with it a practice of social stability that is remarkably local, is centered in the family, and builds on a tradition of gender-specific tasks and roles that provides, in Pratt’s phrase, “a unique space for everyone.”

Of course this local community exists in a wider civil order and its fences have never kept “the world” entirely at bay. The practical expression of this understanding is the extent to which the local Anabaptist community functions communally within the civil

community Stout and Failing are interested in. Lagrange County thus tends to deal with the Amish taken collectively, rather than with individual members of the Amish congregation. And vice versa: Anabaptist response there has been communal response; Pratt believes its survival is due to this communal cohesion—survival both in maintaining communal integrity and in holding on to its members: “[W]hen they acted collectively they managed to maintain the purity of their faith,” she says. When their young men were conscripted into farm labor and sent to other states, and held there without pay, as an alternative to military service in the world wars, the community provided support for them. When the time comes for a group of families within an Amish congregation to move far away (as they tend to do when they run out of land), they go together; they move as a community, sometimes to Latin America or to Canada. “They would not take American culture with them to new homes,” Pratt says, “but only their Amish ways of life.”

“As long as they are able to maintain their strict boundaries, yet keep their sense of belonging to and of having a place within a community,” she says, “the Amish will not merely endure—they will persist.” As they have, back home in Indiana, for one hundred sixty-five years. They have been and are an alternative to democratic sociality.

#### RISPETTO

*Rispetto* is a virtue, a good habit. The good habit that a person learns, practices, teaches, and remembers from her membership in her family. It is the good habit that trains a person in the skills needed for being a member without losing her dignity. One of the Italian-American lawyers who contributed to Mary Shaffer’s and my book on Italian-American lawyers and their communities told us about it:

I can remember overhearing heated discussions (which in a non-Italian family would have been flat-out arguments) in which certain of my uncles were promoting Franklin D. Roosevelt for sainthood, while others wanted him cast into the fiery depths. One of my uncles was as close to a Marxist as anyone I have ever known, and other members of my family were probably John Birchers. Interestingly, though, none of the political disagreements affected the base of affection that everyone had for one another. The trouble, of course, is recognizing that a friendly discussion between Italians can often appear quite close to open warfare when seen and heard by people of other ethnic backgrounds.

The word "affection" in that account is not incidental. Another of our contributors said, "My family was an emotional support group and therapy center, with few secrets and frequent, open discussions about the range of human feelings, and their expression and resolution." Affection is central, and the affection in *rispetto* widens, so that it operates communally: The sentimental movie *Moonstruck* tells about three generations in an Italian-American family and shows how the sense of family operating in an Italian-American neighborhood reaches out from blood relatives to include the grocer around the corner, business customers, suitors and the rivals of suitors, and even a potential mother-in-law on her deathbed in Sicily. At the end of the story, tensions in temporary abeyance, suitor, rival, grocer, and all three generations of blood relatives toast their stubborn harmony with good red table wine, as they say together: *Viva la famiglia!*

*Rispetto* as a virtue in Aristotelian calculation is the middle way between the mawkish sentimentality that so often betrays the importance of families in popular culture, and the political oppression that uses family feeling to promote oppression, the product of what one species of political conservatives claim to achieve through "focus" and others name "family values." In the middle, *rispetto*, learned in the family, is an Aristotelian way of looking at virtue in political culture. It is, finally, not something a person gets just by being rational; as Michael Novak puts it, it is not what a person chooses but what a person comes home to.<sup>5</sup>

*Rispetto* in Italian-American political culture is the product of a development that began within the late nineteenth century flood of impoverished immigrants from Calabria, Abruzzi, and Sicily and ended during the period after World War II when third generation Italian-Americans started going to college (thanks to the G.I. Bill). Eventually,

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5. This section is drawn from the article by my daughter Mary and me, Thomas L. Shaffer & Mary M. Shaffer, *Character and Community: Rispetto as a Virtue in the Tradition of Italian-American Lawyers*, 64 *Notre Dame L. Rev.* 838 (1989), adapted as part of our book Thomas L. Shaffer & Mary M. Shaffer, *American Lawyers and Their Communities* (U. Notre Dame Press 1991). First-person contributions, not attributed for the most part, were from students, lawyers, and colleagues we shared our teaching lives with. I am aware that a similar moral focus could be attempted for other immigrant groups; one reason we chose Italians is that Mary speaks and writes and teaches Italian and is richly acquainted with many Italians, some in the United States, some in Italy, some in France. What has been important, I think, is that we did our work with a late-immigrant group. Older immigrant groups—the Irish, the Germans, the English and Welsh and Scots from whom our family comes—have, much more than the Italians, lost their immigrant edge, and in our case have seen it replaced with the residues of the western frontier in North America. I can do much more toward explaining myself as I think about being the only male in three generations of my family who is not a cowboy than I can with the fact that four of my great-grandparents came from Ireland and Wales.

from there it became a late arriving part of a community that could be addressed in place and invited to join democratic sociality. The virtue of *rispetto* would (as nearly as I can tell) not necessarily have led to democratic sociality. My reading, rather, is that, as the Italians joined the audience Stout describes in America; and in his own neighborhood, they brought with them the practice of *rispetto*, remembering *rispetto*. They had learned the virtue at home and practiced it and trained themselves in its practice as they encountered other people in their “little Italys” then in their larger and more mixed neighborhoods, then in their towns and then, as places for regrouping, in their broader ethnic and religious communities. (A treatise could be written on where the word *paesano* came from and what it has meant among Italian Americans. (*Paese* means place.))

When Italians in America moved toward the possibility of democratic sociality—much later, by the way, than the late immigrant Irish and Jews had—their early emissaries included Mario Cuomo, Geraldine Ferraro, John Pastore, Antonin Scalia, and Salvatore Cotillo. Always and in each case, as I read their stories, they came into “democratic sociality” with wariness, but also with the preservation of dignity and respect and respect for the family—dimensions of the virtue of *rispetto* their ancestors had practiced over centuries of oppression in Calabria, Abruzzi, Sicily, and in immigrant ghettos in the United States.

The immigrants came here for bread and for work—*pane e lavoro*. Gradually, I suppose, they encountered the presence or the possibility of a community in America that was not all Italian. Gradually they met instruction and argument from the descendants of the Enlightenment we live among—although they resisted civic education and public education rather longer than their counterparts from other mother countries. They resisted, as the Anabaptists did, with immigrant virtues such as *rispetto*, the culture and the pallid public philosophy they found in America. Letters home from the Italian immigrants said Americans lacked skills in manners, bearing, and language. “Dignity has no place in life here,” one letter-writer said. Another said he found America materialistic and revolting, and Americans “colorless, unsalted . . . without culture,” cold and unemotional, “pickled in the sour juices of Puritanism.” “Joy,” another wrote, “is a fruit the Americans eat green—without flavor.” *Senza sapore*.

Half of the immigrants returned to Italy. Mary and I dealt, as we learned and wrote about Italian-Americans, with the descendants of the other half, those who, in our reading, first identified for us the virtue of *rispetto*, the skill for being members. It is an Italian-American thing.

And for present purposes, it points to a negative thing. *Rispetto* shows how the usual communitarian argument in jurisprudence, in social ethics, and in professional ethics is not persuasive when made to a people who do not perceive deeply enough that America is a community that sustains virtues learned in the family: *Rispetto* seems to say that a person has either to hold on to what he learned at home or become the lonely automaton that the Enlightenment tells him he has to be in order to have rights.

It is not that the immigrant virtues resist community; in fact, they build community. But they also show how the presence or possibility of community in America, standing all by itself, is not evident enough to support the argument that we have moral obligations to reach people who do not appear in our domestic lives; nor is it evident enough, standing all by itself, to support the premise or assumption that we are communal creatures who ought to remember or find or revive or create such a community.

At the end of *Democracy and Tradition*, Jeffrey Stout talks about his own neighborhood—a rich mixture of economic and ethnic groups pulling together, for the moment, to resist the expansion of a hospital. “Closest to the hospital lies a mainly Italian neighborhood,” he says,

founded by skilled stone carvers who came here many decades back, when the university that employs me chose to build Gothic buildings that ape the architecture of Oxford and Cambridge . . . . By communitarian standards, I suppose my interlocking neighborhoods are not a community at all. Perhaps the Italian neighborhood, taken by itself, might come close to qualifying . . . .

He doesn't say how that is so for the Italians, or how that has happened among people who know how to build something that does not look like itself. I would like to know more about that. It might describe this second of my alternatives to democratic sociality.

#### SOLIDARITY

The problem I have in describing solidarity as an alternative to liberal democratic sociality is that solidarity, as presented in academic discourse, by popes and professors, is ponderously inaccessible—a discouraging place to work on the happy insight that we're all in this thing together—which is what solidarity means. I am going to try here to notice the central ideas as they appear in Catholic Social Teaching, and then try to notice how much the central ideas get expressed in tensions, some of them pugnacious, many of them relatively concrete, and few of them as ponderous as the theological discussions are.

(Maybe the way to get to solidarity is to blunder right into the middle of the tensions. We Hoosier lawyers tend to do that.)

The central ideas are interdependence and common good: John Paul II wrote that human interdependence is a fact but also

more than the factual situation . . . . Interdependence becomes a moral category when we are aware of it as a system determining relationships in the contemporary world in its economic, cultural, political, and religious elements. The correlative response to interdependence as a moral category is the moral attitude or virtue of solidarity.

The purpose and goal of the virtue of solidarity is the common good—with as much substance and weight put on “common” as the moralist puts on “good”: *common* good. Radically so, as in what the tradition says about Yom Kippur (this by way of reflection on the prayer, “Blessed are you, O God, who have guided us and made us a holy people”):

The Confession is made by the whole Community collectively; and those who have not themselves committed the sins mentioned in the confession regret that they were unable to prevent them from being committed by others.<sup>6</sup>

As Garrison Keillor put it last year, on Yom Kippur the confessions are all in the plural.

Sometimes the commonality reminds me of *rispetto*. Mary’s and my Italian friends might be a bit slow to quote that point from an encyclical by a Polish pope, but Charles Curran, Kenneth Himes, and Thomas Shannon, commenting on John Paul’s encyclical letter *On Social Concern*, (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*), are not. “Solidarity,” they write,

is the attitude of a community in which the common good conditions and initiates participation, and at the same time calls for the constant readiness of each person to accept and to realize one’s share in the community because of membership in the community.

Robert F. Kennedy spoke of each individual act of courage and belief as a tiny ripple of hope, “and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.” He said that in Cape Town in 1966.

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6. *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* 523, n. 27 (J.H. Hertz ed., 2d ed., Soncino 1987). See also *Prayers of Repentance on the Day of Atonement*, in *Praying with the Jewish Tradition* 87-98 (Elias Kopciowski ed., Paula Clifford trans., Eerdmans 1997).

Sometimes the description sounds like mystical psychology, Jung on a foggy day. Matthew Lamb speaks of “a metaphysics of human solidarity” that

needs a cognitional theory or epistemology to advance an understanding of human intelligence as not just a Cartesian thinking ego but as intrinsically acts of understanding and knowing in solidarity with all intelligence. Mind is public and communicative by nature.

Mind. Just one. And we’re all in it together.

And then there are the tensions. To begin in the middle of them, there is John Yoder’s insight that democratic discourse—“democratic sociality” we are calling it—is usually about coercion, and discussion of interdependence is usually about power. So much of it comes down to what the Hoosier philosopher Abe Martin said about principles: “Whenever anybody says to me, it’s not the money; it’s the principle of the thing—it’s the money.”

In his book *To Hear the Word*, published after he died, John preached a bit in that Abe Martin mood to his Anabaptist brothers and sisters—preached about misuse of what the Prophet Jeremiah said about seeking in peace the welfare of the country to which the Lord carried them off. John said he sought to ponder “what ‘trusting God’ would mean in concrete social terms,” that is, in a community that claimed to be concerned for the sorts of people its people were becoming.<sup>7</sup>

It would mean that our calculations of the common good would not begin by privileging our own perspective, and would not be used to assign to ourselves or to our party the authority to impose our vision or our rights on others by authority or by applying greater power. To trust God is then to trust in dialogue and due process, repentance and the common search.

This is a mixture of *rispetto* and solidarity in simple, clear Anabaptist dress.

John wrote earlier, with advertent attention to the social ethics of Protestantism, on what he called “the hermeneutics of peoplehood.” The corrective against the dangers of power and coercion, he taught there, rests on such practices as those that assure everyone in the community has a chance to speak and the duty of everyone in the community to listen.<sup>8</sup> In *To Hear the Word* he made the point in a more sectarian

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7. John Howard Yoder, *To Hear the Word* (Wipf & Stock Publishers 2001).

8. John Howard Yoder, *The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood: A Protestant Perspective on Practical Moral Reasoning*, 10 J. Relig. Ethics 40 (1982).

manner:

There is a deep commonality between the daring to share that is enjoined for the disciples' economic life . . . and the love for enemy that is commended in the realm of conflict . . . . Both risk themselves at the hand of open process of which one is ready to relinquish control . . . . Heralding the kingdom (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10.7) and the commitment in prayer to its coming (6:10) do not replace sober planning with blind faith, nor social analysis with unthinking obedience. They change the calculation of common good. They place realism in a framework of faith and hope.

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Kristin Heyer's recent essay on Catholic social ethics in the United States compares the social ethics of Bryan Hehir with those of my colleague and friend Michael Baxter. Hehir is identified with the Harvard Divinity School and (thereby) with the mainline church. In Heyer's reading Hehir expounds a school of solidarity she calls "the public church"—pluralistic, collaborative, what Baxter calls "Americanist," and concerned (Baxter says) more with citizenship than with discipleship. The Christian witness Hehir teaches and practices is witness to policy makers, especially those who live and work in Washington, D.C.<sup>9</sup>

My colleague Baxter, on the other hand, spends much of his time at the Catholic Worker House he founded, perhaps in violation of gentrified zoning regulations, on West Washington Street, in downtown South Bend. He seeks not a public church but a contrast society—an alternative. Mike is influenced by Dorothy Day and by his Methodist teacher Stanley Hauerwas. He sees himself and his followers as alien, radical, accusatory, and confrontive.

The author of the essay, Kristin Heyer, teaches theology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. She says of Hehir the public-church theologian that he seeks first "to understand the world in all of its complexity . . . in its secularity." He is restless, she says, "about its infirmities and limitations." He feels "driven to lay hands on it, which is what Catholic social ethics calls the world to do." That says about as clearly as she could that she finds Hehir's "public church" to be about power. Yoder would understand.

She says of Baxter that he takes aim at "social networks produced by advanced capitalism, the 'world' of autonomous individualism, mass

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9. Kristin E. Heyer, *Bridging the Divide in Contemporary U.S. Catholic Social Ethics*, 66 *Theological Stud.* 401 (2005).

culture, economic oppression, and the rule of secular power.” (Mike Baxter defines in that way what he means when he says “the world.” The Amish in Lagrange County would understand.) Baxter says that Christian responsibility is not about making this system work, or work better, but rather it is “performing the works of mercy on behalf of the poor, the homeless, and others of the least among us who are Christ in our midst.” Justice, he says, is not to be “applied” to social problems; it is to be “embodied.”

These are Anabaptist insights, but Baxter is not an Anabaptist, stepping aside and building his apostolate quietly—as if he were behind a horse-drawn plow in Lagrange County. Solidarity, to him, is anger at the way things are in America—

a fundamentally unjust and corrupt set of institutions whose primary function is to preserve the interests of the ruling class, by coercive and violent means if necessary, and there will always come a time when it is necessary.

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My friend Failinger’s third question, in her charge to us, was how the religious traditions help us to reflect on “real democratic sociality.” My interest is not—any more than John Yoder’s was, or Mike Baxter’s interest is—in how to make American political and economic dispositions work better. I share Stout’s concern, and, I trust, yours in figuring out whether we are making one another better people, but my hope for democracy in America as a place to do that is thin. I am suggesting that we look somewhere else—to the Amish even, to Italian-Americans, to the fact of our interdependence and the ethical principle that we are all in this thing together.

Reflection on the virtue of solidarity—on not only helping one another out, but looking out for one another and noticing the sorts of persons we are becoming as we look out for one another—presents a forest of tensions. I enjoy exploring them with Heyer and Hehir and Baxter because they are sister and brothers in the church and should behave, finally, as they would after dinner in an Italian house—in the neighborhood café in *Moonstruck* maybe. After a dinner such as that, smiling in the middle of a forest of tensions may be about right.

Matthew Lamb challenges American democratic sociality, probably more than he has in mind to do, when he writes: “Solidarity is more than mutual assistance. As individuals we are indeed limited in our humanity, but as persons we are blessed by our very ability to make up for one another’s insufficiencies.”

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