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Matthew's "Least Brothers" and Its Application
in the Catholic Church

by

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A paper, Matthew's "Least Brothers" and Its Application in the Catholic Church, submitted to
the Faculty of the School of Theology and Seminary of
Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements
for the Degree of MA of Theology Concentrated on the Scripture

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This paper, *Matthew's "Least Brothers" and Its Application in The Catholic Church*, was written under the direction of _____.

Rev. Charles A. Bobertz, Ph. D

The paper, *Matthew's "Least Brothers" and Its Application in the Catholic Church*, exams who "the least brothers" are in the Gospel of Matthew. It contains four sections: first, the passage Matthew 25:31-46, considered one of a pair of bookends, is associated with another one of the bookends, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), in which Jesus urges his disciples to do good deeds to all people. Second, Matthew 25:31-46 is considered the end of the fifth discourse of the Gospel of Matthew, in which "the brothers" can only refer to all people. Third, the reference of "the least brothers" to all people is in accordance with the Christology of Matthew's Gospel. Fourth, the present Catholic documents regarding social teaching cite Matthew 25:31-46 as a commandment that Jesus asks Christians to do charity for the poor and the oppressed. Therefore, in Matt. 25:31-46 "the least brothers" refers to the poor, the oppressed or all people.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Matthew's "Least Brothers" and Its Application in the Catholic Church

In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus told a parable generally called "the final judgement," in which as a shepherd, the Son of Man, separates "all the nations" into two groups: sheep on his right and goats on his left. The sheep are blessed by the Father and sent into the kingdom prepared for them "from the foundation of the world" because they always served the Son of Man, and the goats are accursed and sent into "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" because they did not serve the Son of Man. Confronting the Son of Man's sentence, the both groups are surprised about when they serviced the Son of Man himself. The question of those who are on the right is when did we see you...and serve you. That of those who are on the left is "when did we see you...and not serve you." They all state that they never saw the Son of Man, but the Son of Man identifies himself with the "least brothers." He says to those who are on the right, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me", and to those who are on the left, "Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me." Obviously, the Son of Man's answers focus on his least brothers, and we also pay close attention to the least

brothers when we read this passage. Who are the Son of Man's least brothers? Some scholars think that the least brothers refer to the disciples of Jesus, the Christian missionaries or the believers of the Matthean community. For instance, David Cortés Fuentes considered that "the least brothers" in Matt. 25: 31-46 refers to the disciples of Jesus or Christians.¹ Also, John R. Donahue, S.J., thought that "the nations" judged in Matt. 25: 31-46 refers to "all people", and "the least of Jesus' brothers" was interpreted as "the suffering Christians or the members of one's ecclesial community" in Christian history (before the 19th century).² If so, what value does the pericope of Matt. 25: 31-46 have for Christian ethics? How does it contribute to Christian ethics and evangelization? If the "least brothers" refers to Jesus' disciples or the members of an ecclesial community, but not to all people, this pericope has less value for Christian ethics. So, Cortés-Fuentes said, "I read the text and concluded my research with frustration, even anger...if anything good I get from this reading is that it is time for us to take charge of ourselves. For our communities to survive, as that of Matthew's

¹ David Cortés-Fuentes, "The Least of These My Brothers: Matthew 25: 31-46." *Apuntes*, 23 no.3 (2003): 107.

Cortés-Fuentes in his article first introduced the composition backgrounds of Matthew's Gospel: The Gospel was written around 80-90 CE, when the Jewish communities and the early Christian communities had a challenge due to the destruction of the Temple (70 CE) so that they had to turn to study and practice Torah without Temple. As a Jewish Christian community, the Matthean community "understood itself to be the heir of God's promises and the authentic interpreter of the Law and the Prophets", and considered that its own mission was to go to the Gentiles. Second, he thought that "the nations" judged in this pericope refers to non-believers or Gentiles, whose destiny depends on how they have treated "the least brothers." Finally, he cited the word "brother" used elsewhere in Matthew, such as 12:46-50 and 28:10, and some earlier interpretation from Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons and Clement of Alexandria to prove his proposition. In short, he did not think that "the least brothers" refers to all people in need, but to the believers and the followers of Christ.

² John R. Donahue, "The 'Parable' of the Sheep and the Goats: A Challenge to Christian Ethics." *Theological Studies* 47 no.1 (1986): 3-4.

church, we need to take care of our own people.”³ Despite all this, he agreed to the usage of this pericope by Hispanic/Latino scholars who extended Christian justice to the boundaries of their own communities, but did not stop it within their churches.⁴ In fact, “the least of Jesus’ brothers” in Matt. 25: 31-46 refers to the poor, the marginal and all people, and theologians often take it as one of the biblical sources for Christian social justice.

Matthew 25:31-46 and the Sermon on the Mount (Chapter 5-7):

Some scholars see that Matt. 25:31-46 is related to the Sermon on the Mount, so they connect the passage Matt. 25:31-46 with the Sermon on the Mount when interpreting Matt. 25:31-46. Sigurd Grindheim compared the attitude of the blessed and the condemned with that in the Sermon on the Mount.⁵ And Mark Allan Powell thought that in the Gospel of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount and the Final Judgement as bookends which holds Five Discourses and which form an *inclusio* structure.⁶

³ Cortés-Fuentes, *The Least of These My Brothers*, 109.

⁴ Ibid. 109.

⁵ Sigurd Grindheim, “Ignorance is Bliss: Attitudinal Aspects of the Judgment according to Works in Matthew 25:31-46.” *Novum Testamentum* Vol.50, no.4 (October 2008): 319-323.

⁶ Alicia Vargas, “Who Ministers to Whom: Matthew 25:31-46 and Prison Ministry.” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* Vol.52, no.2 (Summer 2013): 129. In the section of the article, Matthew 25:31-46: Missionary or Social Justice? Vargas respectively introduced Mark Allan Powell, M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock’s interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46, and Mark Allan Powell in his article, *God With Us: A Pastoral Theology of Matthew’s Gospel*, connected Matt. 25:31-46 to the Sermon on the Mount although he did not think that Matt. 25:31-46 encourages Christians to do good deeds to the needy as the Sermon on the Mount does.

In the Sermon on the Mount, what draws my attention is the identity of the audience. Although I will not discuss who the audience was in Matt. 25:31-46 or who “the nations” refers to, the audience in the Sermon on the Mount can easily be identified. It was the “crowds” --people who followed Jesus (Matt. 4:25; 5:1; 7:28-29). These people voluntarily came from different places, namely, the Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan, according to Matt. 4:25.

Like Matt. 25: 31-46, the Sermon on the Mount, moreover, emphasizes good action. Jesus metaphorically said, “You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house” (Matt. 5:13-15). Although this metaphor does not mention good actions, it is generally understood as an encouragement or calling to do good deeds. And the following verse highlights the reference of the metaphor, namely, doing good deeds. “Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your *good deeds* and glorify your heavenly Father” (5:16). Also, Jesus said, “Many will say to me on that day. ‘Lord, Lord, did

we not prophesy in your name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?’ Then I will declare to them solemnly, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers’” (Matt. 7:22-23). In this passage, Jesus stressed to his followers the importance of doing good deeds to others. That is, Christians should not praise the Lord only on their lips, but through actions. The climax of the teaching of Jesus appears in Matt. 6:43-48. “But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (v. 44). Such a commandment is the highest level of doing good deeds. Jesus said, “For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same” (vv. 46-47)? In this passage, Jesus commands Christians to do good deeds out of love so that they are distinguished from the tax collectors and the pagans. Obviously, the Sermon on the Mount focuses on Christian actions. The formula, “you have heard that...but I say to you,”, further undergirds the importance of good or right actions.

Simultaneously, the Sermon on the Mount makes a connection with eschatology while it emphasizes Christian actions. The phrase, “...it is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot” (5:13), has a similar tone to the phrase, “...Depart from

me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:41). Both phrases deal with the owner’s and the judge’s rage, disappointment and rejection, which refer to the eschatological judgement.⁷ In Matt. 5:13, the expression of the salt thrown away has a distinct partiality towards the eschatology. Moreover, Matt. 7:22-23 is obviously an eschatological expression. The phrase, “on that day”, has special meaning, and interpreted as “on the day of judgment” by the footnotes.⁸ Also, in 7:23, Jesus rejects those who say “Lord, Lord.” In the similar way to Matt. 5:13, 7:23 is an eschatological statement. In short, eschatology is obvious in the Sermon on the Mount.

Now we can see that the Sermon on the Mount and the Final Judgement form bookends not only structurally but also textually. Both stress good actions and make a connection with eschatology. Sigurd Grindheim said, “Like the judgment scene in 25:31-46, the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount stressed that eschatological vindication is the result of right action

⁷ In the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat in Matt. 13:24-30, the farmer asked his workers to tie the weeds “in bundles for burning” at harvest time. Also, in Matt. 13:47-53, fishermen threw away the bad fish after they hauled their fishing nets ashore. Like Matt. 13 and 25:31-46, both Matt. 13:24-30 and 13:47-53 point to eschatological judgement. In the Explanation of the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat in Matt. 13:36-43, Jesus said, “The weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age” (vv.38-39). And after the parable of the fishermen, Jesus said, “Thus it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.” Generally, rejection in Matthew’s Gospel is related to eschatology.

⁸ *The New Testament* (Chinese/English) 1st Edition, (The Archdiocese of San Francisco, May 2009.)

(7:21-27) Not merely action, therefore, but right action is imperative.”⁹ If so, we can interpret “the least of my brothers” with the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus obviously asked Christians to do good or right deeds to all people. Also, we can conclude that “these least brothers” in Matt. 25: 31-46 refer to all people in need.

Matthew 25:31-46 and Matthew 24-25:

As discussed above, Matt. 25:31-46 is one of two bookends. Also, it is a part of the fifth discourses of Matthew’s Gospel. This is recognized by many scripture scholars. According to David Cortés-Fuentes’ view, Matthew’s Gospel contains five discourses, which are the discourse of the Sermon on the Mount (chap.5-7), the discourse of the Missionary Instruction (chap.10), the Parabolic Discourse (chap.13:1-52), the Community Discourse (chap.18) and the Eschatological Discourse (24-25). Each discourse ends with the same formula: “When Jesus finished ...” (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Obviously, Matt. 24-25 is a whole and Matt. 25:31-46 is a concluding section of the fifth discourse, the Eschatological Discourse.¹⁰

As to the genre of the fifth discourse of Matthew’s Gospel, Dan O. Via thought that Matt.

⁹ Grindheim, *Ignorance is Bliss*, 320.

¹⁰ Cortés-Fuentes, *The Least of These My Brothers*, 102.

24-25 --25:31-46 in particular-- is very close to apocalyptic literature, which was defined by John Collins as “a genre of literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another supernatural world.”¹¹ According to John Collins’ definition of apocalyptic literature, Dan O. Via thought that Matt. 24-25 meets with the elements of apocalyptic literature but one. Matt. 24:1-3 is a narrative framework, and Matt. 24-25 is a revelation. Jesus is the one who mediated the revelation, and the disciples represent human recipients. The transcendent reality is the coming of Jesus and judging all the nations. It temporally “envisages eschatological salvation” (24:40-41, 46-47; 25:10, 21, 23, 34), and spatially “involves another supernatural world” (24:29-31; 25:31). The otherworldly being is absent from Matt. 24-25 because for the Synoptic Gospels Jesus, before resurrection, is not an otherworldly being. Given the lack of an otherworldly being, scholars hold different views as to whether Matt. 24-25 is apocalyptic literature. Dan O. Via, however, tended to think that Matt. 24-25 is apocalyptic literature. He considered that Matt.24-25 is in accordance with the

¹¹ Dan O. Via, “Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31-46.” *Harvard Theological Review* 80 no.1 (1987): 80-82.

pattern of apocalyptic literature of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and that the Holy Spirit poured upon Matthew's Jesus (3:16), who spoke as an otherworldly being (18:20).¹²

Moreover, Dan O. Vis was certain that Matt. 25:31-46 is apocalyptic literature. As in Matt. 13:41-43; 16:27-28; 24:29-31, the coming of the Son of Man is a transcendent event, which is an apocalypse in nature. The glory and power of the Son of Man and the angels who will be with him bear out the transcendent character of the event of the coming of the Son of Man, and Matt. 26:64 reinforces it. The present application of the apocalyptic event is that at the present people can encounter the future judge in his brothers and sisters.¹³ Also, John R. Donahue, S. J. agreed with Dan O. Vis, thinking that the present form of Matt. 25: 31-46 is apocalypse. Donahue thought that the pre-Matthean form of Matt. 25:31-46 was "the mission theology of early Jewish Christianity", but Matthew compiled it into "an apocalyptic scene of the judgment of the whole world by Jesus the royal Messiah."¹⁴

Now I return to the theme of the "least brothers." The question we are confronted with

¹² Ibid. 80-81. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza came up with a pattern for apocalyptic literature, which contains five elements: 1.) "an increase in sinful and corrupt behavior and climactic catastrophes marking the last times." 2.) divine intervention, whether by God or by a redeemer figure like the Son of Man." 3.) "a resultant judgment." 4.) "punishment for the wicked." 5.) salvation for the faithful." (Via. *Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31-46*, 81)

¹³ *ibid.* 82.

¹⁴ John R. Donahue, "The 'Parable' of The Sheep and The Goats: A Challenge to Christian Ethics." *Theology Studies* 47, no.1 (1986): 7.

still is, “Who are the least brothers of Jesus in Matt. 25:40?” When reading Matt. 25:40 and Matt. 25:45, we usually associate the two verses with Matt. 10:40, 42, “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me...and whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple -- amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward.” Some scholars consider that Matt. 10:40, 42 are the parallel verses of Matt. 25:40, 45, and pay attention to Matthean use of the word “brother” in the other chapter, such as Matt. 12:49 and 28:10, so they think that the “least brothers of Jesus” refers to the disciples. As to the word “least,” its positive degree “little” appears in Matt. 18:6, 10, 14, where “little ones” refers to the members of the church. Therefore, some scholars interpret “the least brothers of Jesus” as the disciples of Jesus or the members of the church.¹⁵

Such an interpretation of the least brothers of Jesus, however, seems to be farfetched. We are certain that the phrase, “brothers of Jesus” in the Gospel of Matthew refers not only to Jesus’ brothers related by blood but also to his disciples and even to the church members. But strictly speaking, Matthew, never used the phrase, “least brothers,” except for Matt. 25: 40,

¹⁵ Via, *Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31-46*, 92.

which is a combination of “least” and “brother.” So it remains open to question whether we can separate the phrase, “least brothers”, into the words, “least” and “brothers, respectively interpret the two words, and finally get the interpretation of the phrase. Such a methodology is suspect. Moreover, in some early Greek parallel texts of Matt. 25:31-45, the words, “my brother,” are omitted. David Cortés-Fuentes thought “this omission is most likely the result of the influence of the absence of these words in v. 45.”¹⁶ Who added the words, “my brothers,” into v.40? A later editor? We do not know. If the words, “my brothers,” is absent in the original text of Matt. 25:40, interpreting the word, “brother,” is meaningless; if a later editor added the word “brothers” into Matt. 25:40, then Matthew’s Gospel is a limited source, in which to search for what the “brothers” refer to.

Dan O. Via, furthermore, saw the imperfection of interpreting the “brothers” as the disciples of Jesus or church members. He said, “And we would probably say that the least brothers are the disciples for the reasons given in the preceding paragraph. But while this is undoubtedly one level of meaning, the text refuses to stay within these limits.”¹⁷ He began his discussion by contrasting Matt. 10:40-42 with 25:31-46. There are parallels between Matt.

¹⁶ Cortés-Fuentes, *The Least of These My Brothers*, 103.

¹⁷ Via, *Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31-46*, 92.

10:40-42 and Matt. 25:31-46, but those who give “a cup of cold water to one of these little ones” in Matt. 10:40-42 are different from the sheep on the right of the Son of Man. The water-givers know the disciples of Jesus, but the sheep do not know them. And the water-givers give water to “one of these little ones” because he is a disciple, whereas the sheep serve “one of these least brothers of mine” without knowing that he is a disciple. It is impossible that one person has met the disciples of Jesus, and has not known that the ones whom he has met are disciples of Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew, Christ has a close relationship with his disciples, who was sent to proclaim that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons” (Matt. 10:7-8), which Jesus had done. Also, the disciples did something else to manifest their identity, such as proclaiming the Gospel (Matt. 24:14; 26:13), baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19) and teaching what Jesus had commanded them (Matt. 28:20). Obviously, the sheep never met the disciples of Jesus before the judgement. Therefore, the only conclusion is that Jesus’ least brothers whom the sheep served were not the disciples. Dan O. Via said,

Therefore, since the sheep are surprised to learn they had cared for Jesus, they must not have known his disciples/church. Jesus’ disciples are his brothers in Matthew, but we

learn from 25:31-46 that he has brothers who are not disciples. Thus the least brothers cannot be limited to disciples of Jesus, and Gentiles who have shown love to brothers of Jesus who are not disciples cannot be evangelized Gentiles. The reader then learns that the Son of Man is met both inside and outside the church. Where Christ is going to manifest himself cannot be specified in advance.¹⁸

The “least brothers” of Jesus does not refer to the disciples of Jesus. Then, who are the least brothers of Jesus? Vis said, “The upshot seems to be that all people, in or out of the church, are responsible for *all people*, in or out of the church, and to the same standard of caring love (emphasis mine).”¹⁹ As discussed above, the phrase, “least brothers of Jesus” as a whole is not presented in the Gospel of Matthew except 25:40, so we interpret it only through analyzing it. The “least brothers of Jesus” most likely refers to all people.

Now I can conclude this section: Matt. 25:31-46 is an apocalyptic literature, through which God commands all people²⁰ to serve *all people* in need, namely, the least brothers of Jesus.

Christology in Matthew 25:31-46:

Matthew 25: 31-46 presents a hidden Christology, which further supports the fact that

¹⁸ Ibid. 92.

¹⁹ Ibid. 93.

²⁰ This article is not intended to discuss who the phrase “all nations” refers to. Here I cite its common understanding in the Catholic Church, namely, “all people.”

“the least brothers of Jesus” refers to all people in need. Alicia Vargas summarized her essay, *Who Ministers to Whom: Matthew 25:31-46 and Prison Ministry*, and said, “The interpretative conclusion of this essay is of a Christological nature: Jesus is found incarnated in the suffering and in the hope of society’s outcasts in jail.”²¹

Matt. 25:31 is glorious Christology, which designates Jesus as “the Son of Man,” and even a king or judge, who “will sit upon his glorious throne.” Jesus Christ is powerful. Such a Christology is found in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus will redeem people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). He was called a King of the Jews by the Magi, who did him homage (2:2). The Father proclaimed that Jesus is his beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit came upon him (3:16-17). Angels ministered to him (4:11). He was a judge (7:21-23), and he taught people as “one having authority” (7:29). Jesus did miracles, healing the sick (8:1-14; 9:1-8, 18-31; 12:9-14, 22; 20:29-34), exorcising demons (8:28; 9:31-34; 17:14-21). He calmed the storm at sea (8:23-27), and claimed that he had authority of forgiving sins (9:1-8). He fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fishes (14:13-21), and he even walked on the water (14:22-33). He made the fig tree wither (21:18-22). As proclaimed in Matt. 25:31, such a

²¹ Vargas, *Who Ministers to Whom*, 128.

Christology views Jesus as a powerful King.

John R. Donahue, however, thought the glorious Christology was problematic in early Christian communities. He said, “Such a theology, which affirms an engagement with the power and presence of the risen Lord, caused problems in the early church.”²² There were some false prophets who said, “Lord, Lord,” prophesied, drove out demons and did mighty deeds in the name of the Lord, thus Matthew warned against them (Matt. 15-23). It seems that Jesus had the same problem. “For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Messiah,’ and they will deceive many” (Matt. 24:5), Jesus said, adding “many false prophets will arise and deceive many” (Matt. 24:11). In Matt. 24:23-24, Matthew admonished Christians to not listen to the false prophets. Similarly, Paul was confronted with the same problem. In Paul’s time, there were “superapostles,” with whom Paul was in conflict (2Cor. 11:5, 12-15; 12:11).²³ These false prophets and superapostles pretended to be as powerful as Jesus Christ.

Matthew, therefore, implied that authentic church/apostle must server all people and proclaim justice in the midst of others as Jesus did. Donahue said, “This is the precise picture

²² Donahue, *The ‘Parable’ of The Sheep and The Goats*, 19.

²³ *Ibid.* 19-20.

of church life which stamps the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. The community is to be a community in mission which proclaims justice to the nations in the midst of suffering and persecution. The Son of Man hidden in the least of the brethren is also the Servant who will bring God's justice to victory and in whom the nations can hope."²⁴ Jesus was not only a powerful king but also a servant. Matthew's most typical Servant Christology is in 12:17-21, a citation from the first Servant Song of Isaiah 42:1-4. As a lowly servant, Jesus "will proclaim justice to the Gentiles."

The attendant stress of the Servant Christology is the Suffering Christology. Matthew's Jesus is also a suffering Jesus. Baby Jesus escaped from Bethlehem to Egypt with his parents because of the persecution of Herod (Matt. 2:1-15). Also, Jesus was defamed and hated by the Pharisees (9:34; 12:14,24). Jesus' Passion climaxes Matthew's suffering Christology (26-27). While Jesus was only one among the poor in Matt. 8:20, Jesus identified himself with the poor and the oppressed in Matt. 25:40, 45.

Therefore, the Gospel of Matthew presents at least two kinds of Christology, namely, the Glorious Christology and the Servant/Suffering Christology. Similarly, Matthew

²⁴ Ibid. 19.

demonstrated the two kinds of Christology in 25:31-46. In 25:31 Jesus is the Glorious Christ, and in 25:40, 45 Jesus is the Suffering Christ. Donahue said, “The presence of the King/Son of Man who was hidden in the suffering community, yet is the exalted judge of evildoers, represents an integration of major motifs from Matthew’s heritage. Matthew integrates a Christology of Jesus as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (esp. 52:13-53:12) as well as the Suffering Servant of Wis. 2:12-24 and 5:1-23.”²⁵

The Application of Matthew 25:31-46:

The understanding of “the least brothers” greatly determines the interpretation and application of the whole passage of Matt. 25:31-46. The fact that “the least brothers of Jesus” refers to all people in need suggests that we do charity to all people in need. Therefore, some scholars define the passage of Matt. 25:31-46 as pastoral theology (religious aspect) or ethical discourse (moral aspect), or both. John R. Donahue, for example, thought that Matt. 25:31-46 originally was mission theology.²⁶ However, Dan O. Via thought that Matt. 25:31-46 is both pastoral theology and ethical discourse. He said, “This passage reveals the inseparable unity of the commands to love God with one’s whole being (or minister to the

²⁵ Ibid.18.

²⁶ ibid. 7.

Son of Man) --the religious requirement-- and to love the neighbor as one's self (22:34-40) (or minister to the brothers and sisters of the Son of Man) -- the ethical requirement."²⁷ In addition, liberation theologians consider to be a statement regarding social justice, engaging "the Church with massive poverty and social injustice."²⁸

In any case, now the documents of Catholic social teaching often cite Matt. 25:31-46 as Jesus' commandment of doing charity to the poor and the oppressed. In the Encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* , called the first encyclical on Catholic social justice, Pope Leo XIII cited Matt. 25:40 to encourage people to give alms to the poor while advocating that possession of money is still a human right [#19].²⁹ Also, Pope Paul VI cited Matt. 25:35, urging people to establish "universal brotherhood" when discussing the right of emigrants in the Encyclical, *Octogesima Adveniens*, a call to action on the eightieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* [#17].³⁰ Furthermore, in 1991, the one hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* Pope John Paul II issued *Centesimus Annus*, in which he also cited Matt. 25:31-46 to care for the well-being of the brethren [#51], and praised men and women Religious and individual men

²⁷ Via. *Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31-46*, 94.

²⁸ Donahue, *The 'Parable' of The Sheep and The Goats*, 4.

²⁹ David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, (editors), *Catholic Social Thoughts: The Documentary Heritage* [expanded edition]. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 2010): 22.

³⁰ Ibid. p.287.

and women who have done good things to the poor [#57].³¹ Finally, in one of Vatican

Council II's best-known documents, *Gaudium et Spes*, Matt. 25:40 is cited also:

In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of absolutely every person, and of actively helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign laborer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of an unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by recalling the voice of the Lord: 'As long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it for me' (Matt. 25:44) [#27].³²

Other documents of Catholic social justice also cite or quote Matt. 25:31-46, but here it is not necessary to exam them, for it is obvious that Matt. 25:31-46 is frequently cited in Catholic teaching on social justice.

Conclusion:

Matthew 25:31-45 is unique to the Gospel of Matthew, and it is also a complex passage. The phrases "all the nations" and "the least brother" have various interpretations, and each results in a different application of Matt. 25:31-46 in the Catholic Church. Generally, the Catholic church now interprets "the least brother of Jesus" as the poor and the oppressed, and

³¹ Ibid. 512, 515-516.

³² Ibid. 191.

cites it to ask people to do charity to the poor and the oppressed, practicing God's commandment to love. Such an interpretation is in accordance with the four Gospels and even the whole Scripture, in which the poor and the oppressed are always loved. In the New Testament, Jesus takes care of them, and in the Old Testament the prophets often appeal to people to give alms to them.

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