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Charitable Instruction: Towards a Catholic-Thomistic Response to Misinformation

Wesley Kim D. Soguilon¹

ABSTRACT

One of the problems the Philippines faces is the plague of misinformation, and this paper provides the groundwork for a possible Catholic-Thomistic response. In this work, the researcher attempts to answer the question of why Catholics need to solve this problem and what they can do to solve it. The paper resolves this question by arguing that it is the obligation of Catholics to share the truth through charitable instruction. The work then suggests that training programs dealing with misinformation and appropriate social media usage should be given at the parochial and grassroots levels. It also advocates for the utilization of Catholic schools by teaching students how to use social media properly and how to charitably instruct others to be wise on online platforms. Furthermore, the work reminds Catholics that they urge the state to uphold the common good by enacting programs that support charitable instruction in the context of social media usage in the country, whether by revamping the educational system or by boosting the country's fact-checking capabilities. To arrive at this, the work discusses the following: the Catholic social teachings on the Christian call to instruct the ignorant vis-à-vis St. Thomas Aquinas' views on

¹ **Wesley Kim D. Soguilon** is a graduate of the University of Santo Tomas Faculty of Philosophy, Manila, Philippines. Currently, he is a visiting lecturer at the College of Philosophy of Santo Niño Seminary of the Diocese of Kalibo and a teacher under the Formation and Social Science Departments of Wadeford School in Kalibo, Aklan, Philippines.

it and the societal common good in Catholic doctrine. From there, the researcher extrapolates a possible response to misinformation that Catholics may adopt. Practical recommendations are then given toward the end of the paper.

Keywords: *misinformation, common good, instruction of the ignorant, work of mercy, charity*

1. Introduction

One of the most troublesome burdens present in Philippine society is misinformation.² Most Filipinos have been, or are being, deceived by inaccurate information that they found on social media platforms. For example, a study by Filipino students at the University of Indonesia found out that during the pandemic, misinformation was shared mostly by people who, while being more uncritical of social media posts, belong to the older generations on internet platforms, since no information literacy courses or programs were offered to them before.³ This shows that there may be a correlation between the age of the social media user and their level of critical thinking when dealing with posts on those platforms. Another study shows that the social media platforms themselves peddle misinformation due to their incorrectly suggestive search engine that would promote videos that contain misinformation. For instance, regarding TikTok, a study found that about 20 percent of the search results that it provides contain

² Since the very concept and scope of misinformation is extensive and complex, I would like to focus my discussion on misinformation on social media and how this may form a bias on the citizen. The basis that I have for this contention is that Filipinos are the foremost users of social media and that platforms that they use contain widespread misinformation. This is pertinent since, in the latter part of the paper, I shall reflect on the thoughts of Aquinas and the call for Christians to teach and instruct the ignorant out of, and with, charity for the common good.

³ Joseph Rem Dela Cruz et al., “Surfing the Waves of Infodemics: Building a Cohesive Philippine Framework Against Misinformation,” *Journal of Asian Medical Students’ Association* 9, no. 1 (2020): 26–38, <https://doi.org/10.52629/jamsa.v9i1.251>, 30.

misinformation.⁴ This leads to a high probability of misinformation being shared with the user. Another report found that the 2022 Philippine national and local elections were highly influenced by misinformation.⁵ This is brought about by the trust of the Filipino people in social media platforms rather than mainstream media, troll farms that operate in the country's cyberspace, and the politicians themselves utilizing social media to spread misinformation against their rivals. Another reason why such is the case is because of bad actors that deliberately share misinformation. There are advertisement and public relations strategists who calculatingly build misinformation campaigns for political clients.⁶ Furthermore, some key opinion leaders often express views on a range of subjects that fall outside their academic expertise.⁷

The tendency to use social media platforms to gain information on complex, important, and sensitive topics rather than reliable websites on the internet leads to the formation of incorrect beliefs and biases and the inappropriate sharing of information with others. A case in point would be its threat to health research and scientific developments since people would not believe the factual outcomes of these due to misinformation.⁸ The formation of biases and beliefs based on misinformation is not limited to what the person sees on social media; it also includes misinformation that is shared by the person to others by means of those platforms or through personal communication such as, but not limited to, casual conversations or teaching it in a classroom. The widespread use of social media among Filipinos, due to its accessibility, has made it easier for misinformation to

⁴ Jack Brewster et al., "Beware the 'New Google:' TikTok's Search Engine Pumps Toxic Misinformation to Its Young Users," NewsGuard, September 14, 2022, <https://www.newsguardtech.com/misinformation-monitor/september-2022/>.

⁵ Japhet Quitzon, "Social Media Misinformation and the 2022 Philippine Elections," Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 22, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/social-media-misinformation-and-2022-philippine-elections>.

⁶ Jonathan Corpus Ong and Jason Vincent A Cabañes, "Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines," *University of Massachusetts Amherst*, 2018, 1–74, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.7275/2cq4-5396>, 31.

⁷ Ong and Cabañes, 34.

⁸ Jayson Aucensillo, "Misinformation Threatens Health Researches, Developments," Philippine Information Agency, December 13, 2022, <https://pia.gov.ph/news/2022/12/13/misinformation-threatens-health-researches-developments>.

spread—such as fake news related to COVID-19 in the Philippines, as well as religious and political misinformation in Indonesia, which has significantly polarized public opinion on these issues.⁹ As one can see, misinformation proliferation is influenced by a number of factors such as, but not limited to, one's bias, perceived authority of the sharer or source (by the social media user), and the visual aesthetics of the misinformation that would make it seemingly factual.¹⁰

The Philippines has a huge problem of misinformation that destroys the common good by sowing division and error. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the Philippines is the topmost social media user in the world. According to Kemp, the country “was home to 90.8 million social media user identities in January 2025, equating to 78.0 percent of the total population.”¹¹

The Church teaches that all Catholics are called to contribute to the building of the common good. As a predominantly Catholic country¹² faced with this problem, why do Filipino Catholics need to solve it, and what can they do to solve it? I will attempt to answer this question in this paper by providing a Catholic-Thomistic response or framework that addresses this problem. I shall first discuss the meaning of misinformation as defined in this paper. After that, I shall discuss the Catholic social teachings on the Christian call to instruct the ignorant vis-à-vis St. Thomas Aquinas' views on it. Following that, I shall examine the notion of societal common good in Catholic doctrine. Building on this, I shall extrapolate a response to misinformation that Catholics may adopt, which I call “charitable instruction.” Finally, I will offer practical recommendations grounded in this principle.

⁹ Sheila V Siar, “Fake News, Its Dangers, and How We Can Fight It,” *Philippine Institute for Development Studies*, 2021, no. 6 (August 2021): 1–10, 3.

¹⁰ Andy Nestor Ryan Pazon, “Socioscientific Perspectives on ‘Fake News’ in the Era of Social Media among Generation Z Filipinos,” *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 1, no. 2 (2018): 1–14, 8.

¹¹ Simon Kemp, “Digital 2025: The Philippines,” DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, February 25, 2025, accessed March 8, 2025, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-philippines>.

¹² Nearly four fifths of the Philippine population are Catholics. Of the 108,667,043 household population in 2020, 85,645,362 persons reported that they are Roman Catholic. See Dennis Mapa, “Religious Affiliation in the Philippines (2020 Census of Population and Housing),” Philippine Statistics Authority, February 22, 2023, accessed March 8, 2025, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/religious-affiliation-philippines-2020-census-population-and-housing>.

In this work, misinformation refers to wrong information that intends to deceive people.¹³ This means that the term “misinformation” refers to incorrect information aimed at misleading people so they would form incorrect biases that may be shared. The people who share misinformation, however, do not intend to do it and deceive others.¹⁴ Misinformed people, note, are victims: they do not know that they were misinformed, nor do they know that what they were sharing was wrong. This is in contrast with “disinformation”, wherein false, or even manipulated, information is intently shared to deceive people or get them to follow a particular agenda.¹⁵ Because of their predicament, they must be taught and instructed on what is right. That is where the call of the Christian “to instruct the ignorant” finds relevance. The American Psychological Association characterizes the term “misinformation” as: how people get the facts wrong and how this may be shared unintentionally with others.¹⁶

2. Catholic Social Teachings on Instructing the Ignorant

I will discuss Catholic social teachings regarding the instruction of the ignorant as a spiritual work of mercy focusing on St. Thomas Aquinas’ views. The Catholic Church teaches that instructing the ignorant is a charitable work of mercy that addresses the spiritual needs of others.¹⁷ It is the social doctrine of the Church, emphasizing the important role of Christians

¹³ Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus, “Misinformation,” in *Cambridge Dictionary*, 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/misinformation>.

¹⁴ College of Staten Island Library, “Misinformation and Disinformation: Thinking Critically about Information Sources,” College of Staten Island, January 23, 2023, <https://library.csi.cuny.edu/misinformation>.

¹⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], “Types of Misinformation and Disinformation” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), accessed March 8, 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Factsheet-4.pdf>.

¹⁶ American Psychological Association, “Misinformation and Disinformation,” American Psychological Association, January 2023, <https://www.apa.org/topics/journalism-facts/misinformation-disinformation#>.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2011), sec. 2447, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/>.

in caring for the whole human person. The call to instruct the ignorant stems from the Catholic social doctrine that begins with the person and teachings of Jesus in the Bible.¹⁸ Jesus proclaimed the coming of God's Kingdom and the salvation of people from sin.¹⁹ This means that the suffering that people are experiencing due to sin is temporary, and that the role of Jesus, handed down to the Church and her faithful, is to alleviate this suffering through working for their relief. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) calls this the "preferential love" of the Church to the oppressed, a love that aims to liberate people from their misery through works of charity and develop them to their fullest potential.²⁰ The liberation and development of the person do not concern a single aspect of him or her. True development requires the whole person to heed God's call.²¹ The Christian is called to contribute to the true development of the person by doing corporal and spiritual works of mercy, and instructing the ignorant is a part of the latter.

Aside from contextualizing her social teachings to what Christ had preached and done in the Gospels, the Church also situates them within the framework of the Ten Commandments. This is evident in the CCC, where many of her social teachings are presented in the section that expounds on the Ten Commandments of God. For instance, the definition and characteristics of the social doctrines of the Church are greatly illustrated in the segment that deals with the seventh commandment.²² Since the social teachings of the Church are situated in the discussion of the Ten Commandments, it would necessarily follow that the discussion on the spiritual works of mercy would also be contextualized in the same manner. The Church's discussion of ignorance relates to her explication of the duty of each person to seek the truth, adhere to it, and inculcate it in one's conscience so that one's life, actions, speech, and thoughts may be aligned to it.²³ This is the case since Christians are mandated to live in the truth by acting and speaking truthfully after the pattern of Christ, the Truth. An individual is called

¹⁸ David J O'Brien and Thomas A Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought: Encyclicals and Documents from Pope Leo XIII to Pope Francis*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2016), 1.

¹⁹ O'Brien and Shannon.

²⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2448.

²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2461.

²² Libreria Editrice Vaticana, *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Makati: St Pauls, 2005), 509.

²³ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 521.

to bear witness to the truth at all costs in any activity in their life. He is required to respect the truth and impart it to others through means of successful communication in the spirit of charity.²⁴ Included in that mission is to impart the truth through teaching and instruction that would contribute to the common good, a point which will be explicated in the later part of this paper.

3. St. Thomas Aquinas on Charity and the Instruction of the Ignorant

St. Thomas Aquinas would have a different orientation with regard to the call of instructing the ignorant. If the social teachings of the Catholic Church were to instruct the Christian faithful to actively witness to the truth and share it with others as a spiritual work of mercy (i.e., the instruction of the ignorant), Aquinas would situate this in the context of sin and culpability. Thus, for Aquinas, ignorance is a privation of knowledge (i.e., a lack of knowledge) that is supposed to be possessed by a subject who has the ability and obligation to know and comprehend such.²⁵ There are two elements here that must be explored: the ability and obligation of the subject to know. Aquinas recognizes that not all human beings can know everything that there is. One would say that those who fail to know that which they cannot know by reason of a defect in their ability, or that the subject matter is not in their purview, do not commit a sin, precisely because the knowledge that they cannot know is not obligated for them to know.²⁶ Again, stress is emphasized here in Aquinas' contextualization of the discussion of instructing the ignorant with sin. One must remember that for a sin to happen, insofar as Catholic teaching is concerned, it must be a grave matter done with full consent and knowledge. Since the knowledge needed for the act to be qualified as a sin is not present and cannot be such, it would follow that the act would not be a sin. However, if a person could know and is obliged to do so, but does not exert an effort to know, it would result in a sin since the person did not fulfill their obligation and became negligent

²⁴ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 524.

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, "Whether Ignorance Is a Sin?," ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, *Summa Theologiae: The causes of sin*, in particular (Prima Secundae Partis, Q. 76), 2017, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2076.htm>.

²⁶ Aquinas, "Whether Ignorance Is a Sin?"

about it.²⁷ Here, Aquinas heavily emphasizes that not doing one's responsibility results in negligence, which is a sin.

Furthermore, he would qualify this initial discussion by stating that, while ignorance may excuse a person from sin, it may also not excuse the person from it altogether. The reason for this is that there are people who deliberately choose to be ignorant so that they would be able to sin more (since they do not know, as if, that what they are doing is sin) and that there are those who, because of other preoccupations, neglect to know that which they should know.²⁸ For Aquinas, evading one's responsibilities is considered a sin, as it amounts to a failure in duty and moral irresponsibility. Now, what does this have to do with the issue of misinformation? Online users have the responsibility to share accurate information. In other words online users have the responsibility to verify in advance whether the information they intend to share is correct and useful. It is assumed that since the user has the capacity to know more about that which he or she will share because of the information that can be found on the internet, those who share a particular item on their social media platform know best about that which he or she shared. Ignorance, here, does not become an excuse for a person to share misinformation on social media. It does not remove culpability from the person who shared that misinformation; rather, it imputes it since the person became negligent of their responsibility. That is why those accounts that constantly share physically and mentally harmful misinformation are removed from the platform since it was made clear to the user that one must think first before sharing anything. But what about those who unintentionally shared misinformation? Here fact-checkers have the role of ensuring that the information being shared is accurate as well as informing the person who shared proven misinformation to remove it from their account.²⁹ The issue arises when the person deliberately ignores fact-checkers and keeps on sharing misinformation due to ingrained mental bias.

²⁷ Aquinas, "Whether Ignorance Is a Sin?"

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, "Whether Ignorance Excuses from Sin Altogether?," ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, *Summa Theologiae: The causes of sin, in particular (Prima Secundae Partis, Q. 76)*, 2017, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2076.htm>.

²⁹ See Wright State University, "Use Fact-Checking Sites," Research Guides: Media Literacy and Fact-Checking, January 29, 2025, accessed March 8, 2025, <https://guides.libraries.wright.edu/c.php?g=1019856&p=7399944>.

Based on the discussion regarding Aquinas and ignorance, I argue that the person who became negligent of their responsibility on social media platforms by virtue of their sharing of misinformation committed a sin because of their thoughtlessness and negligence. Specifically, Aquinas would state that a human would commit a mortal sin of negligence if that which his will remised (because of the lack of solicitude of his reason) is necessary for his salvation, while a venial sin if that which was remised is not necessary for salvation.³⁰ Since matters that are usually neglected on social media by sharing misinformation are typically not relevant to one's salvation, I posit that the negligence committed by a person in this particular setting is a venial sin. However, if that which was shared is misleading enough so that others would stray from the path of salvation (i.e., that which was shared is heretical), the person may have committed a mortal sin. This is connected to thoughtlessness, which Aquinas would classify as sin under imprudence. For the purposes of this discussion, we do not need to include imprudence but only thoughtlessness. Aquinas would state that thoughtlessness is a sin because a person fails to rightly judge and consider a truth about something because of their negligence of those things wherein this right judgment rests.³¹ The root of this argumentation is that thought, as an act of the intellect wherein it would consider the truth about something that was presented, concerns judgment inasmuch as right thought is needed to form a right judgment.³² Thoughtlessness becomes a sin because of the lack of right judgment of the person, which may lead to other ill consequences. Here, Aquinas is emphasizing that, for one to be prudent and to avoid sin, one must have the right judgment about something, backed up by the right thought about it. Going back, the sharing of misinformation becomes a sin because of the person's failure to rightly judge whether it is true or otherwise and if it is worth sharing or not, brought by their negligence of those things that are needed for a right judgment (namely, proper research and knowledge of the subject matter). This would lead to a

³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, "Whether Negligence Can Be a Mortal Sin?," ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, *Summa Theologiae: Negligence* (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 54), 2017, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3054.htm#article2>.

³¹ Thomas Aquinas, "Whether Thoughtlessness Is a Special Sin Included in Prudence?," ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, *Summa Theologiae: Imprudence* (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 53), 2017, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3053.htm>.

³² Aquinas, "Whether Thoughtlessness Is a Special Sin Included in Prudence?"

thoughtless, careless, and imprudent sharing of those things, which may confuse and mislead other people. However, since this is not in my purview, I could not classify if this were a mortal or venial sin.

It is in this context that Aquinas would situate his discussion on the instruction of the ignorant. To better understand the thoughts of Aquinas, we must first explore his view on charity (since mercy and almsdeeds are specific acts of charity), followed by a survey of his thoughts on mercy and then almsdeeds. Aquinas would situate his discussion on charity, or *Caritas*, in the broader context of the virtues. Primarily, he would understand charity as an infused virtue in the soul, since it makes the person possessing it, and their works, good.³³ It is a virtue precisely because it makes the person love and act for the good since the person loves the good for which they aspire. They long to possess that highest good, pursued for its own sake, and then share it with others: beatific vision. Since it makes the person aspire for the highest good (i.e., beatific vision), charity is a virtue and the highest among them. St. Thomas Aquinas says that charity makes humans 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.”³⁴ One can see here that *Caritas* makes humans also overcome obstacles to loving; the individual becomes courageous enough to love others and share their goodness despite the challenges that they might 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 humans and God since there is mutual love (which is a requirement for friendship) between them. Humans love God and God’s creation and do everything they can to have a good relationship with God, in the same way as God loves humans and provides for their good.³⁵ Notice here how one can love God by loving God’s creation. This means that everyone is mandated to love their neighbor since they are bearers of God’s image

³³ Thomas Aquinas, “Whether Charity Is a Virtue?,” trans. Lottie H. Kendzierski, *Quaestiones Disputatae: De Virtutibus*, accessed April 29, 2023, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/QDdeVirtutibus2.htm#2>.

³⁴ Aquinas, “Whether Charity Is a Virtue?”

³⁵ Thomas Aquinas, “Is Charity Friendship?,” ed. Kevin Knight, *Summa Theologiae: Charity, Considered in Itself (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 23)*, 2017, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3023.htm#article1>.

and dignity.³⁶ Loving God and others, St. Thomas Aquinas stipulates, has effects on the soul; one of those effects is mercy. Mercy is “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.”³⁷ Here is an idea that we must focus on: we also suffer because of our neighbor’s suffering. This is because of our love for them, which makes us suffer their sufferings as if they were our own.³⁸ Going back to mercy and *Caritas*, one has to love one’s neighbor by practicing charity, that is, by caring for them as how their situation demands. St. Thomas Aquinas is not convinced that wishing and praying for the well-being of one’s neighbor is already love.³⁹ It must go beyond that. 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.”⁴⁰ Particularly, mercy belongs to the second category. Thus, we can say that mercy compels the person to have compassion for those who are suffering and be compassionate to them by alleviating their sorrow.⁴¹

Aquinas moves from these discussions on charity and mercy to almsdeeds, stating that these are acts motivated by mercy since these very acts are done out of compassion and the sake of God to address the needs of another.⁴² For almsgiving to happen, there has to be a merciful

³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, “Whether There Should Have Been Given Two Precepts of Charity?,” ed. Kevin Knight, *Summa Theologiae: The Precepts of Charity* (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 44), 2017, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3044.htm#article2>.

³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, “Is Joy an Effect of Charity?,” ed. Kevin Knight, *Summa Theologiae: Joy* (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 28), 2017, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3028.htm>.

³⁸ Thomas Aquinas, “Whether Evil Is Properly the Motive of Mercy?,” ed. Kevin Knight, *Summa Theologiae: Mercy* (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 30), 2017, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3030.htm>.

³⁹ Thomas Aquinas, “Whether Almsgiving Is a Matter of Precept?,” ed. Kevin Knight, *Summa Theologiae: Almsdeeds* (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 32), 2017, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3032.htm#article5>.

⁴⁰ Shawn Floyd, “Aquinas and the Obligations of Mercy,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37, no. 3 (2009): pp. 449-471, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9795.2009.00394.x>, 458.

⁴¹ Floyd, “Aquinas and the Obligations of Mercy,” 469.

⁴² Thomas Aquinas, “Whether Almsgiving Is an Act of Charity?,” ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, *Summa Theologiae*:

disposition on the part of the person. This is important since mercy gives way for almsdeeds to happen, the former becoming the latter's motivation.⁴³ Aquinas classifies almsdeeds into two classifications based on the needs of the human person: one addressing their bodily needs (i.e., the corporal works of mercy), while the other addressing their non-bodily needs (i.e., the spiritual works of mercy).⁴⁴ One of the spiritual works of mercy is the instruction of the ignorant, wherein a deficiency in the speculative intellect of the person is supplied through instruction.⁴⁵ Now, what is that deficiency that has to be supplied through instruction? Aquinas would answer that it is the lack of knowledge about those things which one ought to know.⁴⁶ Here, we can see that Aquinas would still situate his discussion on the knowledge of truth since it is needed for one's salvation: we must remember that the spiritual works of mercy are aimed toward the non-bodily needs of the person. Spiritual acts of mercy are aimed at supporting and instructing the human person in their emotional and religious aspects.⁴⁷ In other words, the instruction of the ignorant concerns the non-bodily need of the person with regards to salvific truth, knowledge, and wisdom. The lack of things (i.e., privation) pertinent (and supposedly there) to the individual's salvation, journey to truth, knowledge, and wisdom, is ought to be supplied by that who will do the work of mercy out of compassion and love.

These acts of mercy are, furthermore, compulsory to the individual in Aquinas's account. The basis for this is that almsgiving is a matter of precept; Sacred Scriptures clearly commands love of neighbor, and this love must be expressed through action. For Aquinas, it is better to be a doer of good than merely a well-wisher—love must respond to the actual needs

Almsdeeds (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 32), 2017, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3032.htm>.

⁴³ Floyd, "Aquinas and the Obligations of Mercy," 458.

⁴⁴ Thomas Aquinas, "Whether the Different Kinds of Almsdeeds Are Suitably Enumerated?," ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, *Summa Theologiae: Almsdeeds (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 32)*, 2017, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3032.htm>.

⁴⁵ Aquinas, "Whether the Different Kinds of Almsdeeds Are Suitably Enumerated?"

⁴⁶ Aquinas, "Whether the Different Kinds of Almsdeeds Are Suitably Enumerated?"

⁴⁷ Floyd, "Aquinas and the Obligations of Mercy," 458.

of others through deeds, as action holds greater value than words.⁴⁸ This means that, as a precept, there is an obligation for the individual to respond to the valid needs of their neighbor by practicing charity (in the ways outlined in the different kinds of almsdeeds).⁴⁹ Two important elements must be highlighted here: first, there has to be a valid need on the part of the one who is in need.⁵⁰ Aquinas recognizes the reality that one cannot help everyone who is in need since humans are limited and that he is not a superhero who can do every possible thing that may allay the suffering of all people.⁵¹ As a result, Aquinas qualifies this precept of helping others by specifying that it applies to those who are truly in need—individuals who, if not assisted, are at risk of not receiving help. These are people in urgent need, whom an individual encountering them, with the ability to help, must assist at that moment.⁵² The second important element is the obligation of the individual to respond by practicing charity. While there is an obligation to the individual, Aquinas recognizes the need for the individual to first possess that which he or she can share with others in the spirit of charity. For him, the individual must fulfill this obligation by sharing their surplus—what is unnecessary to them and their dependents—with those in need.⁵³ In other words, one must sustain oneself and their constituents first before going out to help others. Here, one can see that the axiom “one cannot give what one does not have” holds true. One must first possess those things that would enable them to help others.

It is clear now that Aquinas would see the instruction of the ignorant, both as a work of mercy and practice of charity, as obligatory for the individual. Here, I would like to call this spiritual work of mercy a “charitable instruction” to the individual. When one is to instruct the ignorant or those who lack the necessary knowledge on things, one must do it charitably since the instruction of the ignorant is primarily an expression of charity.

⁴⁸ Thomas Aquinas, “Whether Almsgiving Is a Matter of Precept?,” ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, *Summa Theologiae: Almsdeeds (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 32)*, 2017, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3032.htm#article5>.

⁴⁹ Floyd, “Aquinas and the Obligations of Mercy,” 458.

⁵⁰ Since what he was talking of is a precept about the virtues, Aquinas would argue that almsdeeds should be governed by right reason, insofar as it is demanded by it. This is the case since the practice of almsdeeds is a necessary condition for the attainment and development of virtue.

⁵¹ Aquinas, “Whether Almsgiving Is a Matter of Precept?”

⁵² Aquinas, “Whether Almsgiving Is a Matter of Precept?”

⁵³ Aquinas, “Whether Almsgiving Is a Matter of Precept?”

While this spiritual work of mercy is closely intertwined with the need for salvation, it may also refer to the instruction given to individuals who lack the necessary knowledge in some areas, most especially in their attainment of the truth.

Here, the Catholic Church expanded the spiritual work of mercy from the usual salvific context, where it is situated, to the concrete needs of society in promoting the truth to the people. The Catholic Church would instruct her faithful to promote the truth as a part of their obligation to live in the truth as part of their witnessing to God, who is the Truth.⁵⁴ The obligation to live in the truth stems from the anthropological understanding of the Church. The Catholic Church teaches that humans tend toward the truth as a part of their nature and that they are obliged to honor and bear witness to it after their attainment of it.⁵⁵ Humans are called to be witnesses of the truth by being observers of the Gospel and transmitting the teachings of the faith through words and actions.⁵⁶ Now, what does truth mean insofar as the Catholic teachings are concerned? It is one's uprightness and sincerity in their actions and speeches, coupled with showing oneself as truthful in terms of their acts and words and in avoiding duplicity and hypocrisy.⁵⁷ Now, every Catholic is expected to have an attitude of respect for the truth. One's respect for the truth, as an expression of charity, should influence the Catholic's response to the communication of the truth to others.⁵⁸ This includes the modern means of communication, especially social media. When communicating the truth or information on these means, it must be directed toward serving the common good. This means that the information communicated should be both true and just, contributing positively to the well-being of society.⁵⁹ Notice that the Catholic Church teaches that respect for the truth, coupled with charity and consideration of the common good, should be present in the field of imparting information through whatever means.⁶⁰ To better understand this, we must briefly tackle how the common good is understood in the context of Catholic social teachings.

⁵⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2464.

⁵⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2467.

⁵⁶ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 522.

⁵⁷ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2468.

⁵⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2489.

⁵⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2494.

⁶⁰ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec. 524.

4. The Common Good in Catholic Social Teaching

In *prima facie*, the Church would base her idea of the common good on natural law.⁶¹ This means that her understanding and application of the concept of the common good would be contextualized on her comprehension of the nature of reality and humans. For the Church, humans beings are inherently social, which is why the common good concerns all people. It is defined as a “sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily.”⁶² The common good, then, should be a true good for all, a good that harbors the whole development of society and humans. Now, the reason why reality and humans are the centers of the Church’s discussion on the common good is that they are the loci in which this principle would be applied. The common good is especially concerned with social structures, challenges, and human life, which hopes to urge and guide a collective action that addresses social concerns.⁶³ It is founded on a good anthropological grasp of humans as a social being, a commendable sociological understanding of the messiness of human reality, and a sound ethical theory based on teleology.⁶⁴

According to the Church, the common good must possess the following characteristics: it should respect the rights of individuals, promote the spiritual and temporal well-being of society, and sustain peace and security among citizens.⁶⁵ For the common good to be actualized, there has to be social participation from the individual and the sponsorship of the state for its development. Here, the common good becomes a political and social enterprise precisely because it deals with the good of all in a societal context. The fundamental reason for this is that people who possess dignity live in a community with others. As a result, individual good, which stems

⁶¹ William A Barbieri, “Beyond the Nations: The Expansion of the Common Good in Catholic Social Thought,” *The Review of Politics* 63, no. 4 (Autumn 2001): 723–54, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034670500032149>, 747.

⁶² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec. 1906.

⁶³ Barbieri, “The Expansion of the Common Good in Catholic Social Thought,” 749.

⁶⁴ Barbieri, “The Expansion of the Common Good in Catholic Social Thought,” 748.

⁶⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec. 1925.

from human dignity, must be squared with the collective good.⁶⁶ It is important to note that the common good, while it does value the individual good, is not merely a conglomerate of individual goods that are molded together.⁶⁷ It is a good that recognizes some goods in society as common to all, and that the care for these goods would eventually develop the good of individuals.⁶⁸

Since the common good is a social matter, there must be social participation from individuals. Their generous outpouring in the social sphere and their voluntarism are needed.⁶⁹ To be socially participative for the common good at the individual level, humans must take charge in the domains that they have control over: they must assume personal responsibility and do their part.⁷⁰ How can humans do their personal responsibility? By making sure that, for example, their children are educated properly, there is food on the table because of their work, and that their family has a secure source of income.

5. Towards a Catholic-Thomistic Response

Now, we must go back to misinformation and the common good. We said that the information provided in the media (including social media) should serve the common good. The CCC clearly states that proper information, in the spirit of justice and charity, should be able to form sound public opinions on matters that concern the common good.⁷¹ Misinformation runs contrary to the purpose of proper information, as it leads to the formation of unsound public opinions on important issues affecting both individual and societal well-being. These unsound opinions would, then, form incorrect biases that would motivate people to do that which is contrary to the

⁶⁶ Rochus-Antonin Gruijters, "Solidarity, the Common Good and Social Justice in the Catholic Social Teaching within the Framework of Globalization," *Philosophia Reformata* 81, no. 1 (May 2016): 14–31, <https://doi.org/10.1163/23528230-08101002>, 17.

⁶⁷ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 166.

⁶⁸ Charles E Curran, "Catholic Social Teaching," *The Good Society* 10, no. 1 (2001): 1–6, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/20710992>, 4.

⁶⁹ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 164.

⁷⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1914.

⁷¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2495.

truth and justice. Furthermore, social media can reduce vigilance in what people share, potentially shaping flawed minds that fail to resist harmful influences.⁷² If misinformation are shared, this danger becomes more apparent. Proper guidance and discipline should, then, be taught to social media users so that this may be avoided.

In the face of all these, what can the Catholic individual do? I propose a response to misinformation that Catholics may adopt, which I call “charitable instruction”. The Catholic Church is clear that Catholics should be charitable in the field of communication and in imparting information, and that he or she should impart information honestly and properly with esteem to the human dignity of the person and the moral laws.⁷³ The information that Catholics should provide must be true, complete, and in the service of the common good.⁷⁴ At the outset, it is clear that both the information that Catholics share and the way in which this is shared should be in the spirit of Christian charity. The dignity of the person and the pursuit of the good must remain at the heart of all communication. To communicate information effectively, the Catholic should do it charitably.⁷⁵ It is hoped that these would answer the demands of the formation of sound public opinion and the need to guide people toward the truth.

It is the duty of the Catholic individual to propagate and share the truth. We have discussed the instruction of the ignorant as a work of mercy fueled by charity and as an obligation for the faithful. In this context, the Catholic individual is called to instruct those who have been misled by misinformation, as well as those who continue to spread it—whether knowingly or unknowingly—leading others into error. As vanguards of the truth, the Catholic faithful is called to fulfill their obligation to charitably instruct others and avoid the sin of negligence in one’s obligation.⁷⁶ Thus, charitable instruction would contribute to the common good inasmuch as it both instructs the ignorant and provides the proper avenues for the apt formation of the correct conscience and the discipline of the individual when it comes to social media usage.⁷⁷

⁷² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2496.

⁷³ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 524.

⁷⁴ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 525.

⁷⁵ *The Church and Internet*, 3.

⁷⁶ *Inter Mirifica*, 17.

⁷⁷ *The Church and Internet*, 7.

With the background and foundation given by charitable instruction, proper education is the key that may address the plague of misinformation that we are experiencing, particularly in the Philippines. Since Catholics have the duty to promote truth in the media and to charitably instruct others on sharing that which is true and lead them to the truth, they must be responsible users of social media by ensuring that what they share is truthful. To achieve this, training programs, seminars, and forums that deal with topics on misinformation and appropriate social media use should be given at the parochial and grassroots levels.⁷⁸ Simple yet meaningful and enriching programs such as media literacy seminars may be given to our parochial social communications team and to our parish catechetical ministry. These members can then share some practical strategies for countering misinformation on parishes social media accounts and in the schools where the catechists teach.⁷⁹ If Catholics themselves are not equipped with the proper skills to discern truth from falsehood, they cannot charitably instruct others and fulfill their obligation. They may even fall into the sin of thoughtlessness. Thus, it is important that parishes offer forums to teach the skills needed to discern the truth from falsehood and to charitably instruct others. Catholic schools must also take part in this sacred mission. If students know how to use social media properly and how to charitably instruct others to be wise on online platforms, we contribute to the common good. This not only enhances the well-being of individuals but also fosters discerning and honest citizens for the benefit of society as a whole. The teaching may happen in two ways: first, in the proper organization, preparation, and execution of the Media Literacy courses of Catholic Schools as mandated by the Department of Education.⁸⁰ There are several ways to ensure the effective execution of the curriculum: first, by hiring qualified teachers who are experts in the field and providing them with effective training; second, by conducting authentic assessments to ensure students have mastered the required competencies; and third, by integrating real-life applications and practical scenarios into the curriculum to help students recognize its relevance and proper use.

⁷⁸ *The Church and Internet*, 11.

⁷⁹ See *Inter Mirifica*, 18.

⁸⁰ Department of Education [DepEd], “Media and Information Literacy,” K To 12 Basic Education Curriculum, accessed March 8, 2025, https://www.deped.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/SHS-Core_Media-and-Information-Literacy-CG.pdf.

The second way is through media literacy forums by inviting expert speakers to conduct workshops for Catholic school students, thereby enriching their learning experience. Additionally, as Catholics, we have the duty to remind and urge the state to uphold the common good by enacting programs that support charitable instruction, in the context of social media usage and misinformation. This can be achieved by improving our educational system and its delivery, as well as enhancing our fact-checking capabilities and communication competence.

6. Conclusion

In sum, the issue of misinformation in the country remains one of the problems that contemporary Filipinos face. This humble work proposes that Catholics have the duty to instruct those who have been misled by misinformation—whether intentionally or unintentionally shared—and to guide them back to the truth, as part of their contribution to the common good of society. Furthermore, they have a personal Catholic responsibility to address this issue, which they must fulfill, lest they fall into the sin of negligence. To realize this, we have explored the need for a Catholic charitable instruction and some of its practical applications at the parochial and educational levels. We have also briefly explored how charitable instruction may be instrumental in the seminars and fora that can be given in parishes, in the involvement of Catholic schools in this effort, and in the sacred duty of Catholics to remind their governments to uphold the common good in addressing the plague of misinformation.

The challenge now is for Catholics to go forth into the world and do their best to address misinformation, both within their communities and beyond. In a world increasingly shifting toward a post-truth and relativistic era, and where authentic fraternal correction and the search and longing for the truth are becoming rarer, Catholics are called to be beacons of light and vanguards of the truth. The question is: are they up for this sacred mission?

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