"Seeking a path to common good

'Love thy neighbor' transcends religious borders

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As a professor of International Relations, I find crises and trauma to be creative and spiritual teaching moments. The bombings experienced at the Boston Marathon provided such an opportunity.

Two weeks before the Boston bombings, students in my courses on globalization were assigned Pope John XXIII's encyclical "Pacem in Terris" (Peace on Earth). This year is the 50th anniversary of this remarkable document.

Pacem in Terris was written because of the troubling signs of the times. The nuclear arms race, the Cuban missile crisis, the construction of the Berlin Wall, the increasing internationalism of state economies, growing awareness of global poverty, and colonialized peoples around the world demanding independence were, in the mind and heart of Pope John XXIII, a confluence of events that could lead the world to an increase in armed conflict.

Pacem in Terris was the first papal encyclical addressed to all of humanity. The document addressed the need of all men and women of good will to work to establish universal peace in truth, justice, charity and liberty.

The words "common good" are mentioned 46 times in Pacem in Terris, often preceded by the word "universal." Throughout the course I have asked students to deepen their understanding of the common good. Students are encouraged to envision the search for the common good as an ongoing dialogic process rooted in one's faith.

Serious dialogue requires long-term commitment if the result is to be a deep understanding of trust, respect and friendship with one another. The global common good must be grounded in healthy communities. To have healthy communities, one must create opportunities for positive shared experiences that lead to an understanding of shared values. I challenge students to "image" a healthy community and the global common good.

Imagining the common good is difficult. The Boston bombings occurred in the midst of this academic exercise. I read the quote by Tamerlan Tsarnaev, "I don't have a single American friend. I don't understand them."

In a 2012 poll, 40 percent of foreign students in the U.S. stated they had no American friends. Sharing this with students, I asked them the meaning of the phrase "love thy neighbor," a core commandment in 12 religions. I have Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Baha’i and atheist students. Focusing on the Abrahamic religions, I shared readings on the meaning of neighbor.

In Arabic, the word "neighbor" (jaar) refers to believers and unbelievers, friends and enemies, foreigners and fellow countrymen. The Prophet Mohammed makes it clear that when it comes to loving thy neighbor, it makes no difference whether the neighbor is Muslim or non-Muslim. The concept of neighbor in Islam is not restricted to those living near one's home.

In all faiths there is a particular (familial) and a universalistic understanding of love thy neighbor. Rabbi Ron Kronish, founder and director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, writes that the verses of Leviticus 19:33-34 offer a corrective on the notion that Jews should love only members of "our own tribe."

These verses, Rabbi Kronish says, relate to "the stranger who resides within you, that is, non-Jews." He adds, a Jew should love the stranger because "we were strangers in the land of Egypt." Because of a history of being a persecuted minority, Jews, according to Kronish, have "a special sensitivity to non-Jews in our midst."

Jim Wallis, an evangelical Christian and editor of Sojourners magazine, writes that, in all Abrahamic religions, love of God comes first and then is immediately connected to our neighbor. Christians are to care for themselves and families, then are asked to care for "our neighbors as ourselves and our neighbor's children as our children." Wallis believes this is "an ethic that could transform the world."

All of us need to follow Pope John XXIII’s model of reading the signs of the times. The path to the universal common good begins with love of God and immediately proceeds to love thy neighbor. My students and all youth across the globe need to study world religions to transcend religious parochialism. Putting a face on the other through interfaith dialogue is a path to the universal common good.

The goal on any university campus is to institutionalize activities, assuring that every foreign student can become an integral part of the campus community. However, young people need mentors and role models. The question then becomes personal. How many of us model an interfaith love of thy neighbor?