



**Leonine Institute**  
*for*  
Catholic Social Teaching

## The Proximity of Crises - Dealing with Backyard Disasters

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Modern media has done much to bring the world together. Whilst sitting in his American armchair, a man can become intimately acquainted with the political atmosphere in Great Britain, or he can finally know the price of tea in China (and he will know it from every company both wholesale and retail, by pound, down to the tenth of a cent). Gone are the days of encyclopedias. If a young woman wishes to know about homespun of India, in the time it takes to type as much, she will know all there is to know.

While we have grown numb to knowing all the world's information, I fear that we have also been overwhelmed by the world's tragedies. As easily as one could learn about the conquest of Alexander the Great around the Mediterranean, one reads of the constant conflicts there now. One could listen to an audio book about English crime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but he could also listen to the constant stream of crime in London today. The internet has done wonders for broadening our knowledge and world-view, but I fear that it has also brought us the disasters of the world in tow.

**Yet how easy is it to become engrossed in far-away disasters?** To watch the news for collective hours spew opinions over what ought to be done? We talk candidly about *world* hunger or *world* peace as if they were like other problems that could be solved. As readily as one reads about *any* problem, one immediately begins thinking of a solution to it. Naturally, the larger the problem, the more it demands a solution. **The danger is that in an attempt to do everything, we have, in fact, done nothing.** So much time is wasted shouting solutions for things we have no control over, at people who will never hear us.

Now, we could shut everything down and pretend the wide world does not exist. This is a solution of considerable merit (blissful happiness being chief among them) but not what I propose now. In fact, the opposite: I propose that we act and talk as if the wide world actually exists and that it actually is wide. We are tricked into believing that the problems of the world are also in our possession, just like knowledge of the world is in our hand. The truth of the matter is that we are no closer to the life and time of the other side of the world than we ever were.

We ought to know about the world at large, but we ought to consider our place in it. We have been placed by God in a community, a family, a town, a workplace, a school, and so on. All of our actions will directly affect these communities. God places people where they are because He sees that it is fitting. It is our responsibility, therefore, to respond to our state in life by addressing the injustices we encounter.

G.K Chesterton notes this in The Dregs of Puritanism found in *Utopia of Users and other Essays*. He addresses a minister who condemns the use of cigarettes in the military by writing



That cigarettes are bad for the health is a very tenable opinion to which the minister is quite entitled. If he happens to think that the youth of Bromley smoke too many cigarettes, and that he has any influence in urging on them the unhealthiness of the habit, I should not blame him if he gave sermons or lectures about it (with magic-lantern slides), so long as it was in Bromley and about Bromley. Cigarettes may be bad for the health: bombs and bayonets and even barbed wire are not good for the health. I never met a doctor who recommended any of them. *But the trouble with this sort of man is that he cannot adjust himself to the scale of things.*

A minister has the influence and ear of his congregation. It is his responsibility to guide them the best he can. We have our own challenges in our communities. We should never reach *over* a young woman in our neighborhood who is considering having an abortion because we think *world* hunger is more important. Never should our sons whose lives are being ripped apart by pornography be neglected because of rumors we hear about sexual immorality elsewhere.

To dismiss the small social injustices in your backyard because they are not as grave as the ones you read about elsewhere is flippant and inhumane. It is like ignoring a man who is drowning in your bathtub as you sit on your sink and read about the floods in the rainforest. The severity of foreign crisis does nothing to negate the proximity of local ones. This is the whole point of subsidiarity.

What is more, continuing to ignore injuries to humanity because they are “little” or “insignificant” is an affront to God, who, in His infinite love and wisdom, has placed us in our communities to love and be loved. We must have faith that as surely as God put us in our community because he thought it would benefit the salvation of souls and His glorification, He has done the same elsewhere. As Saint Catharine of Siena said, “Everything comes from love, all is ordained for the salvation of man, God does nothing without this goal in mind.” We must have faith that God is God everywhere.

But, please, read the paper, watch the news, be aware of the outside world. Some people are called to directly change the world. But don’t let the wide world overshadow the home you were given; if you do not defend your home, no one will.