

Robert Frost, Original Sin, and Why Good Fences Make Good Neighbors

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” wrote poet Robert Frost. In the opening line to his famous poem, “Mending Wall,” Frost explores one of the mysteries of fallen human nature. Everyone feels both a need for and an aversion to order. His questioning of the role of walls tries to explain this contradiction. Exercising the simple task of mending a stone wall on his farm, the poet works with his neighbor to repair the damages of time and weather that have thrown down stones from the barrier. He surveys the work of hunters who have created gaps by ferreting out hidden rabbits. The stone wall has breaches that “even two can pass abreast.”

Frost’s consideration of the stone fence can shed some light on the troubles on the American border. Truly something “there is that doesn’t love a wall.” There is a violent urge “that wants it down,” Frost declares with emphasis. There is a hidden sympathy for letting things run down, while there is a suspicion that order is needed.

The Nature of Borders

In the present debate about the border, there is something of Frost’s dilemma. A good part of the squabble about a border wall is not about the size and shape of an eventual barrier to bar those entering illegally. The liberal rage against the wall has much to do with the nature of boundaries. Indeed, walls, borders, and fences are manifestations of restraint. They indicate that there are differences between things on one side and the other. Limits affirm that some things are better left separate to keep the peace. Boundaries secure the property of individuals against those who have none. They

protect the sovereignty of nations against those who might enter without permission and do them harm.

Thus, walls are not loved, because walls say “no.” Many mistakenly believe that any saying of “no” is hurtful and causes people to suffer. And so, radicals claim, fences must be eliminated; they are not inclusive. The earth belongs to everyone. Walls must come crashing down.

A Rousseauian Perspective

Borders and walls have always had enemies that are ready to take them down. Such is the case of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who already in the eighteenth century promoted an anti-wall outlook. The famous French philosopher affirmed that “the first person who, having fenced off a plot of ground, and took it into his head to say this is mine and found people simple enough to believe him was the true founder of civil society.”

Rousseau further speculates, saying,

What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared by someone who, uprooting the stakes or filling in the ditch, had shouted to his fellowmen: Beware of listening to this imposter: you are lost if you forget that the fruits belong to all and the earth to no one!

Rousseau’s dramatic screed contains a major error that contrasts with the teachings of the Church and the experience of reality.

The Earth is Made to be Shared by All

The great error is the affirmation that the earth belongs to no one. Radicals might be surprised to learn that the Church teaches that the earth was made to be shared by all.

However, Natural Law does not give rules about how the earth is to be shared. That was left to human reason. Thus, St.

Thomas Aquinas teaches:

Community of goods is ascribed to the natural law, not that the natural law dictates that all things should be possessed in common and that nothing should be possessed as one's own: but because the division of possessions is not according to the natural law, but rather arose from human agreement which belongs to positive law, as stated above (Q 57, Arts 2,3). Hence the ownership of possessions is not contrary to the natural law, but an addition thereto devised by human reason.

Thus, the antipathy for walls has some foundation in reality. Were there no sin or disorder, all mankind would live together harmoniously without boundaries.

However, the sad reality of experience is that disorder and sin do exist, no matter how much the world tries to suppress them. Fallen humanity naturally resists the restraints of order that keep the unbridled passions under control. Walls are needed to keep the peace.

Keeping Peace and Harmony

Although the earth was made to be shared by all, fallen nature calls for private property, so that by caring for that which is strictly one's own, peace and harmony of society are preserved. It is well-known that what is common to all is often cared for by none. For, as Aristotle points out, if property is commonly owned, "complaints are bound to arise between those who enjoy or take much but work little and those who take less but work more."

Justice thus demands that there be property and the walls that secure it. St. Thomas Aquinas further observes that "quarrels arise more frequently when there is no division of the things possessed." These divisions that take the form of fences or walls are therefore needed to preserve harmony and prosperity. When individuals clearly know what belongs to them, they will

make the most efficient use of their own resources. They will see themselves adequately compensated for their efforts. Everyone benefits from this division. Christian charity becomes possible since people possess that which can be given to others.

Thus, St. Albert the Great affirms that “everybody is by nature inclined to pay more attention to what is his own than to what is common; so that if this will be better cultivated it will also grow to good fruition where all are concerned.” The proper Christian concept of property with walls facilitates the well-being of a world shared by all. It avoids the savagery of Rousseau’s hellish world without fences where “the fruits belong to all and the earth to no one!”

Constant Mending

Returning to Frost’s poem: It is not enough that there be walls; they must also be periodically mended. It takes the continuous effort to define those limits that separate farmers and farms. Unrepaired walls can also lead to quarrels and disputes. When borders become unclear, they can quickly degenerate into ambiguous situations that the same fallen human nature exploits to disturb the peace.

Even when harmony appears to reign, mended walls are needed. Frost playfully asks his neighbor what they are “walling in or walling out.” Frost observes that “my apple trees will never get across and eat the cones under his pines.”

To which the neighbor replies: “Good fences make good neighbors.” It is his age-old acknowledgment of fallen nature. He does not understand the theology of Original Sin or desire “to go behind his father’s saying.” He merely repeats the tradition handed down to him.

Likewise, so many do not understand the need for limits and restraint. They want to tear down walls because they say “no.” Those who defend order are like the neighbor who repeats

axioms from time immemorial without understanding why saying “no” is essential. They need to understand that walls exist because sin and disorder exist. People must overcome the mysterious attraction for disorder that haunts fallen humanity. Only by constantly restraining the unbridled passions can earth escape the Rousseauian hell.

Indeed, “something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” However, the alternatives without walls are much too disastrous to contemplate. It is far better to mend walls and make good neighbors than to take the descending road to a new barbarity.

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