The Human Person in Community: Pope Francis & Catholic Social Teaching

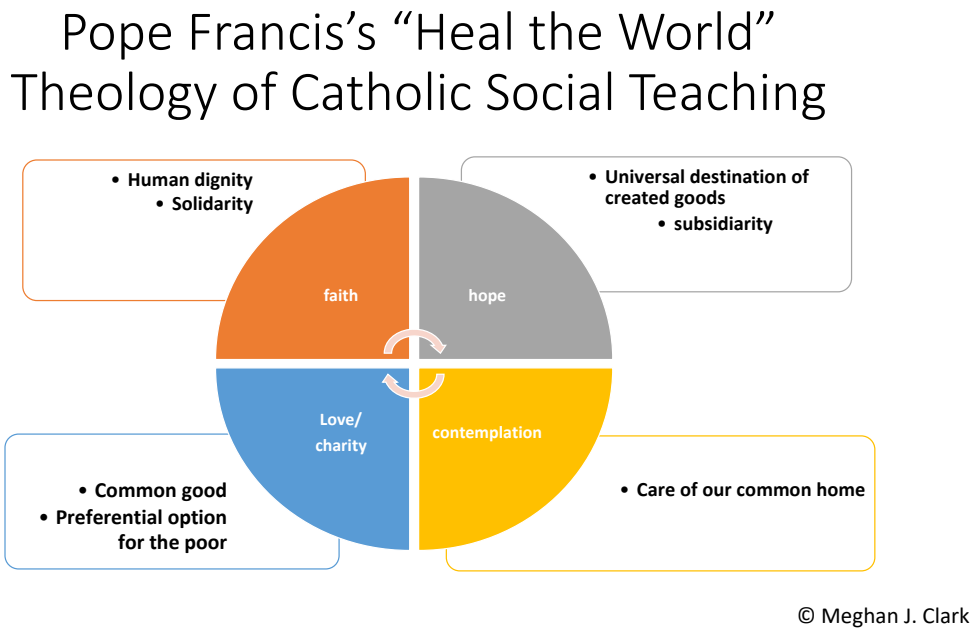
Summary of Presentation Delivered at ECCC, September 2023

Meghan J. Clark, Ph.D.

I. Introduction

On this tenth anniversary of Pope Francis's election, we pause and look back at his social magisterium within the larger tradition. The last decade has been a time of significant upheaval: economic and ecological crises, wars and conflicts, the global migration crisis, and most recently, a global pandemic. To understand Catholic social teaching's response to all these different social and political challenges, we must begin with our understanding of the human person in community. In this presentation, we will look at three aspects of Pope Francis's teaching that helps us think about human dignity more deeply. First, in the 2020 reflection series "Heal the World," Pope Francis examines the key principles of Catholic social teaching through the lens of our theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. In particular, it helps us locate Catholic social teaching in our broader theological tradition. Second, in *Laudato Si'*, the Holy Father widens the vision to include how we think about care for creation and the dignity of both persons and the rest of creation. Finally, in *Fratelli Tutti*, the pope invites us to reflect upon human dignity via the parable of the Good Samaritan.

II. Heal The World: CST Catechesis in a Pandemic:



In *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI summarized the Christian life: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but an encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." (Deus Caritas Est, 1). What I am proposing to you today, is that our

theological anthropology is a view of the person that not only provides the foundation for Catholic social doctrine but which also helps us frame living a life of discipleship. I begin with what are called the "Covid Catechesis messages."

On August 5, 2020, Pope Francis launched a nine-week series of reflections on Catholic social teaching in light of the ongoing pandemic. These brief messages provide a succinct and helpful primer into the method, function, and core content of Catholic social teaching. And as these 2 quotes on the slide indicate –he frames human dignity as tied to the virtue of faith.

"He created us not as objects but as people loved and capable of loving; He has created us in His image and likeness. In this way, He has given us a unique dignity, calling us to live in communion with him, in communion with our sisters and our brothers, with respect for all creation."

"The human being, indeed, in his or her personal dignity, is a social being, created in the image of God, One and Triune. We are social beings; we need to live in this social harmony, but when there is selfishness, our outlook does not reach others, the community, but focuses on ourselves, and this makes us ugly, nasty and selfish, destroying harmony."

The nature of human dignity, which is a window into the nature of the human person, is laid out:
1. we are CREATED,
2. the capacity to love and be loved is a hallmark that is mentioned before any reference to freedom or intelligence or rationality – this is because our theology tells us that we were loved into existence – it is the WHY we are here, God's LOVE is why there is something at all. This reference point is crucial for understanding and applying Catholic social doctrine in practice.
3. Human persons are by nature social beings. We are created and develop and exist in relation to God, to other persons, and to the rest of creation.

Drawing on a Thomistic natural law tradition, Catholic social doctrine understands all human persons to be created equal and endowed with freedom and rationality. We are called, as he explains in that message on human dignity and faith, "to live in communion with our brothers and sisters, with respect for all creation." He expands, "in modern culture, the closest reference to the principle of inalienable dignity of the person is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights…Rights are not only individual, but also social; they are of peoples, nations." Explaining human dignity within the broader human rights tradition, Francis engages both believers and nonbelievers, to work together to combat the coronavirus and "to commit ourselves seriously and actively to combat indifference in the face of violations of human dignity." Central to the way Francis understands the deepest moral and social problems in our society – whether it is individualism or indifference – is a sense in which we have FORGOTTEN what it means to be HUMAN.

Similarly, the theological anthropology of CST holds that human persons are also inherently social, therefore, concern for the common good is an intersecting yet twin foundational principle alongside human dignity. This explains many aspects of the above graphic: Human dignity and solidarity are tied to the virtue of faith, revealing this unity. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* offers the following definition: "Solidarity highlights in a particular way the intrinsic social nature of the human person, the equality of all in dignity and rights and the common path of individuals and peoples towards an ever more committed unity."

At the same time, if we emphasize universality too much, we can fail to appreciate cultural context, notes Jesuit theologian Fr. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, S.J. Catholic social encyclicals "presume a common understanding" of solidarity, which "in situations of desperation, calamity, and impoverishment," is ethically significant; "yet we may not ignore the possibility that the appeal to the notion of solidarity can assume specific nuances depending on the particular cultural context, the outcomes of which may be ethically problematic."[1] The dialogical relationship between persons and communities, the particular and the universal, is important for moving from an abstract theological anthropology to a particular lived ethic that seeks greater justice and the common good.

Building upon the virtue of faith, the common good and the option for the poor with the virtue of LOVE or Caritas further develops our theological anthropology. Catholic social doctrine's view of the person is of each and every person, without exception – so the participation of all is required to work for the common good. Who is most frequently ignored or excluded? In the answer we find the particular groups that Pope Francis lifts up.

To be created *imago dei* is in some way *Imago trinitatis* – again, filling out the social nature of the person as something that is constitutive and good about humanity. Thus, for Catholic social doctrine, "Our humanity, as in the image of God, is not only a matter of creation but also places a claim on us." (Clark 59) This claim goes far beyond not harming or impeding others. It leads us to Paul VI's observation that "There can be no progress towards the complete development of the human person without the simultaneous development of all humanity in the spirit of solidarity." (Populorum Progressio, 43) In his philosophical writings, Karol Wojtyla explained "as human beings we are capable of participation in the very humanity of other people, and because of this every human being can become our neighbor" and that "a human being finds fulfillment of himself by adding to the fulfillment of others."[2]

Recognizing the reality of sin, also in going back to the beginning of the Bible, Catholic social doctrine approaches dignity as both a matter of creation as well as part of salvation through Christ. Theologian Anna Rowlands notes, "Believing that we live within an unfolding economy of salvation means that dignity is something seen as something we *possess* and something we *become*. Dignity is something we can seriously debase in ourselves or for others but it is not something we can fundamentally lose or completely alienate."[3] This sense of human dignity as something that is *already, but not yet*, grounds Catholic social teaching's radical commitment to dignity as inviolable, while also recognizing that profound exploitation and degradation exist. Reflecting on *Caritas In Veritate* in conversation with the Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen's development-as-freedom approach to poverty, Fr. Orbator notes that focusing on human rights and human persons "has the triple advantage of, first, recognizing the human agency at the root of (under)development; thereby, second, prioritizing the human person as the measure of development; and finally, recognizing that solutions to poverty, in the form of integral development, serve rather than subvert the deep

---

[1] Orobator, Agbonkhianmeghe E., "*Caritas in Veritate* and Africa's Burden of (Under)Development" (2010). *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*. 445.
https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo_fac/445

[2] John Paul II/Karol Wojtyla, *Toward a Philosophy of Praxis: An Anthology*, ed. Alfred Bloch and George T. Czuczka (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 49

[3] Rowlands, Anna, Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic social teaching in dark times, T&T Clark, 2021.
Cf. James Hanvey, 'Dignity, Person, Imago Trinitatis' in Understanding Human Dignity, edited by Christopher McCrudden, (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

yearnings and aspirations of the human person. "[4] It is our theological anthropology, our view of the person and community that Catholic social doctrine contributes to wider conversations on economic justice, development.

Dignity is not merely individual but communal. Each of us has equal human dignity, and at the same time, communities have dignity as well. In *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Francis explains human relationality, stating, "Persons always live in relationship. We come from others, we belong to others, and our lives are enlarged by our encounter with others. Even our own knowledge and self-awareness are relational; they are linked to others who have gone before us . . .Self-knowledge is only possible when we share in a greater memory." (Lumen Fidei, 38)

In *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II also recognized that "the obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each person, contributing to the common good, according to his own abilities and the needs of others, also promotes and assists the public and private institutions dedicated to bettering the conditions of human life." (Gaudium et Spes, 30)

As Pope Francis noted, "No one is saved alone, as isolated individual, but God attracts us looking at the complex web of relationships that take place in the human community. God enters into this dynamic, this participation in the web of human relationships."4

What I hope is becoming clear is that theological anthropology is not something additional to Catholic social doctrine but is the moral vision it promulgates. And so all of the other principles you see are all rooted in and spring from the person who is the fundamental "subject" or agent in the tradition. Similarly, it is that reference point back to GOD as the reason and font from which our reflections flow. For example, the preferential option for the poor is primarily about our belief in God and our belief that all human persons are equally created in the image and likeness of God, without exception.

III. Laudato Si': Care for Our Common Home:

The theological core of *Laudato Si'* is the doctrine of creation – and within that – it implores that we REMEMBER that we too are CREATED. We are part of creation and not separate from it. Unique in our agency and responsibility. *Laudato Si'* states: "This responsibility for God's earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world." (68) We must answer for our actions, responsible to and for the natural world – yet we too are created. In over-emphasizing human specialness and aided by some damaging interpretations of Genesis, humanity seems to have forgotten its own status as created, its own dependence upon God, as well as its own dependence upon nature.

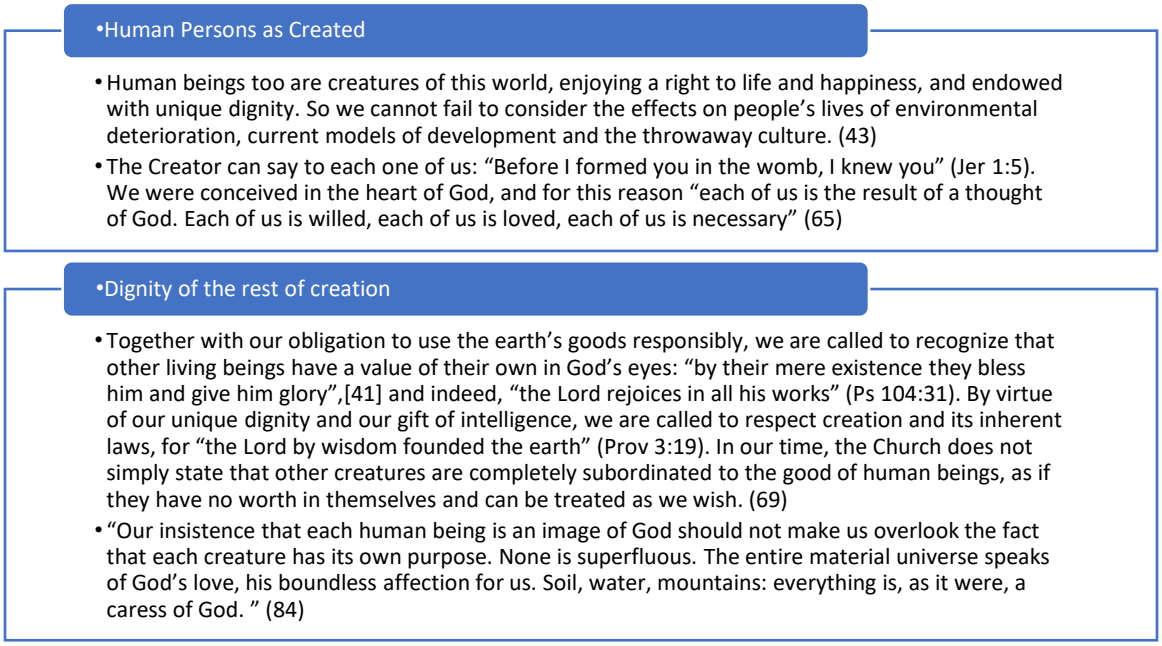
The Holy Father reminds, "Our relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God. Otherwise, it would be nothing more than romantic individualism dressed up in ecological garb, locking us into a stifling immanence." (LS 119)

My sister – a middle grade environmental science teacher of faith – often points out this deeply challenging point for reflection: without humans, the earth or the rest of creation would not only be just fine, it would also

[4] Orobator, Agbonkhianmeghe E., "*Caritas in Veritate* and Africa's Burden of (Under)Development" (2010). *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*. 445.

be better off. It would heal and thrive. Without the rest of creation, humanity dies. They can exist without us; we cannot exist without them. As a moral theologian, it is a practical and simple reminder that as much as we justifiably focus on humanity as created *imago dei*, that does not negate the dignity and value of the rest of creation.

Creation, too, is loved by God into existence and creation has dignity. Two points always to remember is that we are created in dignity and the dignity of creation reveals that God loves all creation.



IV. *Fratelli Tutti*: On Fraternity and Social Friendship[5]

In Catholic social teaching, we tend to have "favorite Bible passages," those which are most frequently invoked such as the Beatitudes and Matthew 25. As important as these passages are, they are a bit one directional. In Matthew 25, "For I was hungry and you fed me," or "I was a stranger and you did not welcome me." This helps remind us that Jesus identifies with those on the margins of society. In his pontificate and most clearly in *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis has centered the Parable of the Good Samaritan. I believe this is really important for our understanding of human dignity and the social tradition as a whole.

In *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis invites us to join him on the road to Jericho and invites believers to engage in deep personal and social reflection. Who is my neighbor? He notes "we need to acknowledge that we are constantly tempted to ignore others, especially the weak…we have become accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, ignoring situations until they affect us directly." (65) It reminds me of a homily that Gustavo Gutierrez gave years ago on the parable, in which he noted that naturally we have no neighbors, they become

[5] Meghan J. Clark and Anna Rowlands, "Fratelli Tutti: Reading the Social Magisterium of Pope Francis," Journal *of Catholic Social Thought Vol 19, no 1,* Winter 2022, p. 5-24. (19 pgs.) https://doi.org/10.5840/jcathsoc20221912

our NEIGHBOR when we leave our path and approach theirs. It is in entering someone else's reality that perhaps we truly recognize the fullness of their dignity – created *imago dei* – just like ourselves.[6]

For Martin Luther King Jr, who Francis names in *Fratelli Tutti,* his last speech offered a powerful exegesis of the Good Samaritan as a rejection of compassion by proxy and call to radical unselfishness. He expands that perhaps the priest and the Levite were afraid – so he asks us to think about how we manage our fear. For the Samaritan asks a different question – not what will happen to ME if I stop to help but what will happen to HIM if I don't? This projecting the I into the Thou is a radical unselfishness.[7]

Chapter 2 of *Fratelli Tutti*, in my opinion, is the theological core of the document and it is deeply Ignatian in its structure - - inviting us as persons and communities to discern who we are becoming. Are we becoming neighbor or not? This then provides the foundation for a greater sense of moral obligations within the local, national, regional and global communities. Parables serve to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable – as Jewish New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine notes. She goes on to explain in her reflection on the parable, tFhat it isn't just that the religious leaders keep walking, or that the Samaritans are outcasts. or first century Jewish audience the Samaritans are the ENEMY.[8]

So there's a lot going on in this parable. Francis notes there are many ways to pass by at a safe distance. He makes this indictment of a "safe distance" explicit because then the needs and vulnerability of our neighbor do not TOUCH us. Yet for Christian theological anthropology, we are all connected, but again the challenge is even deeper as the passers-by are particularly religious men, a priest and a Levite. Francis notes this shows, "belief in God and worship of God are not enough to ensure we are actually living in a way pleasing to God….Paradoxically, those who claim to be unbelievers can sometimes put God's will into practice better than the believers." It often shows that we don't really embrace/appreciate what it means to be created as a person equal among others

The complexity of our theological anthropology and the freedom of human persons is evident. The beauty and challenge of this parable is that while the Parable of the Good Samaritan is presented as offering the antidote to the intersecting social ills of inequality and exclusion, it is a parable in which, at different points in our lives, we inhabit each of the different positions.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan invites and challenges us to ask ourselves, as persons and in our communities:

1. When, like the priest & Levite am I so certain that we know what the Lord requires yet indifferent to the neighbor in my path?
2. When am I the wounded man on the side of the road in need of care? Am I able to accept help from someone who I see as my enemy?
3. When, like the robbers, am I the one responsible for wounding others?
4. And when, do we certainly hope to be like the Samaritan moved with compassion who recognizes the dignity of our neighbor and responds to their needs? [9]

---

[6] https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/gutierrez-vatican-church-must-be-samaritan-reaching-out-others
[7] Audio from "I have been to the Mountaintop Speech" 1968 "https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnP8FPviaiA
[8] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn_GpV5dbFc
[9] https://uscatholic.org/articles/202207/a-reflection-for-the-fifteenth-sunday-in-ordinary-time-2/

Ultimately, the Parable of the Good Samaritan is an invitation to discernment as “we need to acknowledge that we are constantly tempted to ignore others, especially the weak…We have become accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, ignoring situations until they affect us directly.” (FT 64) It is the personal element that Francis often emphasizes by targeting his words and actions, often using the concreteness of his place to empathize the point even further. It is the connection between our theological anthropology, the view of the human person, and the call of discipleship.