

Why Conversion Is Not Coming Via a Tweet: Catholic Social Teaching, Religious Conversion, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus

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If you spend any time on Twitter (or what is now called X), you have witnessed the following on manifold occasions. Someone affiliated with the Church (could be a bishop, a leader of some apostolic group, or just an ordinary lay person) says something provocative. In September of 2025, for example, the current Vice President of the United States (and a Roman Catholic), J.D. Vance, claimed on Twitter that “Killing cartel members who poison our fellow citizens is the highest and best use of our military.” Catholics aware of the spurious quality of this claim relative to Catholic social teaching around war begin to react. They quote tweet the Vice President offering counterevidence drawn from the rich history of Catholic social teaching. Vice President Vance does not back down, nor his defenders, nor for that matter his detractors. At least for several hours, the platform is abuzz with reactions to the tweet at least until the next provocation that shifts attention to the newest tweet to generate controversy.

The temptation is to view this encounter simply as a symptom of polarized discourse: on the right, Catholics defend one set of arguments, while on the left another set of presumptions reign.¹ If only we could get the two sides together, then we could promote mutual friendship. The argument of this essay is that something more malicious is at play in this interaction on social media. Despite its ability to bring people together, social media is ultimately a digital media that tends toward the discarnate, one that is designed to bring about division and discord for the sake of creating spectacles that keep us clicking, tuning in, and therefore providing financial incentives for the tech entrepreneurs who profit from this disincarnate bread and circus.

What to do? The argument of this essay is that if one wants an account of Catholic social teaching transformative of the polis, one must move away from the act of communicating such teaching via social media to the promotion of embodied religious conversion. The essay argues that an underemphasized aspect of Pope Francis' magisterium is his focus upon the importance of the incarnate, sacramental, and contemplative conversion necessary for any authentic appropriation of Catholic social doctrine.

The essay will proceed in three steps. First, I will begin by turning to the Church's magisterium relative to its diagnosis of digital culture. The *Directory for Catechesis*, paradigmatically, has a diagnosis of digital existence inclusive of social media that sees the potential for more harm in digital communication than good. One wonders, based on

¹ For a critique of the left/right dichotomy as insufficient in contemporary politics, see Jason Blakely, *Lost in Ideology: Interpreting Modern Political Life* (Agenda Publishing, 2024).

this analysis, whether the proliferation of digital content is really the best way to promote the appropriation of the Church's social teaching. Second, the essay highlights the importance of the incarnate, sacramental, and contemplative dimension of Christian existence in Pope Francis that facilitates an authentic conversion necessary for a formative taking up of the Church's social teaching. Lastly, the essay suggests at the end that Pope Francis' final encyclical on the Sacred Heart of Jesus, *Dilexit nos*, opens a new avenue for Catholic social teaching, especially relative to the task of forming Catholics *ad intra* for taking up this doctrine. In the end, it is the personal love of Christ toward every human being that is the most rhetorically suasive reason, at least for Catholics, for the practice of virtues such as solidarity. Religious conversion after all, as the Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan contends, begins with falling in love.

The Digital Apocalypse?

My colleague, Brett Robinson, has often pointed toward the naïve treatment of social communications by the Church. Faced with the rise of radio, television, and eventually the internet, the Church has treated such media for the most part as ethically neutral. Yes, television or the internet can be full of images degrading to human dignity, but that's simply how people use this media. The same technologies might be used for more virtuous reasons such as depicting the life of Christ or communicating Catholic social teaching to wider audiences.²

In the Church's recent *Directory for Catechesis* (2020), the Church has awoken from her slumber relative to social communications. In a comprehensive way, the Church treats the digital world not as the advent of new technology but a culture that militates against the evangelization of time and space intrinsic to an incarnate evangelization. The document, although acknowledging that digital space can serve as a democratic space promoting wide dissemination of ecclesial teaching, also proclaims:

It is becoming ever clearer how social media, especially those of a digital nature, are in fact the principal agents of socialization, almost coming to the point of replacing traditional ones like a family, Church, school. Intersubjectivity seems to be ever more developed in the *social networks* and ever less so in traditional social spaces. On a practical level, one must evaluate and understand the limitations of the implicit learning experiences that the digital era provides on a daily basis. Many personal *forms of interaction* have become *virtual*, entirely replacing the need, especially in the younger generations, for traditional forms of relationship, blocking them 'from direct contact with

² Fascinatingly, Leo XIV argued against this approach to media in his 2012 intervention was the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization, arguing instead, "In order to combat successfully the dominance of the mass media over popular religious and moral imaginations, it is not sufficient for the Church to own its own television media or to sponsor religious films. The proper mission of the Church is to introduce people to the nature of mystery as an antidote to spectacle. Religious life also plays an important role in evangelization, pointing others to this mystery, through living faithfully the evangelical counsels" (https://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02_inglese/b11_02.html#).

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the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experiences' (*Directory for Catechesis*, no. 369).

The document is aware that digital natives (a term adopted rather than young people) are being socialized into a world distinct from the material reality of families, parishes, and schools. In such environments, digital natives are learning, but they are doing so outside of those material encounters that are integral to human development. Quoting from *Laudato Si'*, the document notes that digital generations no longer encounter those flesh and blood human beings that awaken them to the human condition. Digital culture, in this sense, could just as well be understood as an anti-Christian pedagogy, one that replaces flesh and blood encounter with virtuality.³

In a digital context, one wonders how well the communication of Catholic social doctrine can precipitate an authentic conversion in a digital milieu. A Pope, for example, releases a recent encyclical on peace. Tweeting a quote from that encyclical does not force the “tweeter” to come to terms with his or her own propensity toward violence, examining how the logic of violence operates not only in nation states but in my own daily discourse (especially the case, when I’m driving in traffic-clogged cities). Most malicious of all, one might begin to imagine that the retweeting of said quote is itself a sufficient way of embodying such peace. One feels that one has participated in the renewal of the social order through liking a comment. All the while, ecological devastation continues, human beings are trafficked, and migrants die while trying to cross borders. But I did like the tweet or post! Surely, that counts for something.

An alternative to this kind of disembodied approach to Catholic social teaching may be discerned in other kinds of conversions I have experienced while traveling around the United States. When visiting El Paso in Texas, I met two Mexican immigrants in the United States. During the immigration crisis in the first of Donald Trump’s terms, they were initially critical of the Church’s care for the migrant at the border. Until their pastor, Fr. Marcus, invited them to work at one of the welcome centers in El Paso. Having met their suffering neighbors in the flesh, they experienced a conversion. They went from critics of immigration to those committed to the works of mercy, organizing the parish’s outreach to migrants. They discovered this newfound conviction not through a tweet or social media post but in looking into the face of the stranger, who asked for love.⁴

³ There are theorists who underline the relationship between virtuality and embodiment, for example, Katherine G. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination* (Lexington Books, 2020).

⁴ For a phenomenological account of this transformation through the crossing of gazes, see Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Fordham University Press, XXXX), 71-101.

Pope Francis and the Materiality of Conversion

Coverage of Pope Francis, quite naturally, focuses upon his social encyclicals. In the western media, in particular, *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* received attention (the former more than the latter) as the ecological and political *cri de coeurs* of a pontiff aware of the effects of nationalism, the technocratic culture, and a politics of power where elections matter more than commitment to the common good.

Nonetheless, the stunning dimension of both *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* alike is the treatment of Catholic Social Teaching as related to an incarnate, sacramental, and contemplative view of the cosmos. After all, at the conclusion of *Laudato Si'*, one doesn't read about advocacy for new policy changes (no matter how important these may be) but a contemplative conversion toward relationship with the created order.

The conclusion of *Laudato Si'* explicitly calls for an ecological conversion on the part of the Christian: "In calling to mind the figure of Saint Francis of Assisi, we come to realize that a healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion, which entails the recognition of errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change" (no. 218). Saint Francis' various conversions, as described by Bonaventure, are increasingly material and embodied.⁵ He strips naked in the square to reveal his love of poverty, but he also kisses the face of the leper. His acknowledgment of his own poverty before God and neighbor spurs his new relationship with the created order. St. Francis can offer praise to God for every crack and crevice of creation, including sister death, because he knows the incarnate and crucified love of Christ.

Such conversion is necessarily communal, men and women committing to work together for the sake of new lifestyles congruent with creation as gift. Such communal conversions are possible, according to Pope Francis, through those embodied contemplative, sacramental, and liturgical practices that make up daily Christian life. If ecological devastation has been precipitated by human hubris, then the proper medicine for such hubris is humility; and humility as a virtue is a habit learned through specific practices such as giving thanks to God before and after meals: "That moment of blessing, however brief, reminds us of our dependence on God for life; it strengthens our feeling of gratitude for the gifts of creation; it acknowledges those who by their labours provide us with these goods; and it reaffirms our solidarity with those in greatest need" (no. 227).

Likewise, a conversion toward this humility requires that we become open to our neediness. Civic and political life is not learned, as Pope Francis implicitly argues, from

⁵ For a translation of this work, see *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, the Tree of Life, and The Life of St. Francis* (Paulist, 1978).

reading John Locke or John Rawls (God be praised). Instead, Pope Francis references Saint Therese of Lisieux's little way of love, "...not to miss out on a kind word, a smile or any small gesture which sows peace and friendship. An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness" (no. 230). It is that enfleshed encounter with one's neighbor where one discovers the roots of a civic and political love, one that can blossom into forms of social organization dedicated to a culture of care. Here, although Pope Francis does not reference it, the mundaneness of family life serves as an initiation into such embodied practices of human solidarity.⁶

Likewise, the sacraments themselves are integral to this ecological conversion. The totality of the created order, in all of its materiality, expresses God's own glory. The material world are *logoi* of the *Logos*, little words of the Word, and for that reason, creation itself is integral to "mediating supernatural life" (no. 235). All that is material including the hand that blesses and the water that blesses is integral to a sacramental economy that is necessarily material. Specifically, in the Eucharist, Jesus Christ is Himself made present through the mediation of the smallest fragment of matter such that in this sacrifice, "...the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love: 'Yes cosmic! Because when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some celebrated on the altar of the world!'" (no. 236).

This celebration includes a new relationship with time. After all, the Eucharist is celebrated not in the non-time and non-space of digital culture but on this specific Sunday in this specific parish church with this specific people. Sunday is a day for rest, for a contemplative and festive relaxation that acknowledges that all of existence is a gift to be received. Human beings are not made for work alone, and therefore in that spirit of leisure, each person is called to look anew upon the gift of the natural world and one's neighbor (no. 237).

Initially, one may not immediately perceive the same incarnate, sacramental and liturgical vision in Pope Francis' COVID encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. The encyclical ends not with a wider description of the kind of spiritual formation necessary for human fraternity but instead a call for an ecumenical and religious commitment to fostering such fraternity. Still, the central chapter of the encyclical is an ecumenical and humanistic re-telling of the parable of the Good Samaritan. As Pope Francis writes, "The decision to include or exclude those lying wounded along the roadside can serve as a criterion for judging every economic, political, social and religious project. Each day we have to decide whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders" (no. 69). Here, one is not faced with various abstract policies but the fraternal encounter that brings about

⁶ See his audiences on the family leading up to the Synod on Marriage and Family.

conversion: "...we were created for a fulfillment that can only be found in love. We cannot be indifferent to suffering; we cannot allow anyone to go through life as an outcast. Instead, we should feel indignant, challenged to emerge from our comfortable isolation and to be changed by our contact with human suffering" (no. 68).

In that sense, the conversion required in *Fratelli Tutti* is greater awareness of the human face of suffering. Political ideology functions as a sclerotic bias that blocks the functioning of *caritas*. The solution is not further abstraction but encounter, human beings learning to pick up one's neighbor and carry him or her upon our shoulders. The common good is not an abstraction but is instead the good of this one or that one in all his or her particularity.

The Sacred Heart as Social Doctrine: *Dilexit Nos* and the Non-Digital Nature of Love

Pope Francis' social magisterium, therefore, points away from non-embodied, non-material ways of engaging with human beings toward flesh and blood encounters grounded in the very liturgical and sacramental practices of the Church. It is tantalizing to consider that at the end of his pontificate, Pope Francis' final encyclical turns to that most material of matters: the sacred heart of Jesus.

Perhaps, at the end of his pontificate, Pope Francis wanted the Church to understand that all along, he was after all a rather traditional Jesuit. But I suspect that something more is happening. Describing devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Pope writes:

Devotion to the heart of Christ is not the veneration of a single organ apart from the Person of Jesus. What we contemplate and adore is the whole Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, represented by an image that accentuates his heart. That heart of flesh is seen as the privileged sign of the inmost being of the incarnate Son and his love, both divine and human. More than any other part of his body, the heart of Jesus is 'the natural sign and symbol of his boundless love' (*Dilexit nos*, no. 48).

God loves human beings in all of their particularity, and in that sense, the Sacred Heart of Jesus is manifestation of the fiery redemption brought about through divine love but also the personal comfort that God loves the human person in all of our stunning particularities: "The eternal Son of God, in his utter transcendence, chose to love each of us with a human heart" (no. 60). The vocation of every human person is union with God, and for that reason, the regular reception of the Eucharist on the first Friday of each month associated with this devotion is a medicine against a frenetic digital order that causes us to "...forget to nourish our lives with the strength of the Eucharist" (no. 84).

There is much to plumb in this final magisterial document related to the purifying love of God, but the document's conclusion offers a tantalizing claim that will require more attention from theologians interested in the Church's social doctrine:

The present document can help us see that the teaching of the social Encyclicals *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* is not unrelated to our encounter with the love of Jesus Christ. For it is by drinking of that same love that we become capable of forging bonds of fraternity, of recognizing the dignity of each human being, and of working together to care for our common home (no. 217).

The conversion asked for by these documents is not reducible to accepting certain abstract and intellectual principles (the eight principles of Catholic social teaching, for example). For a Catholic, one's concern about the created order and one's neighbor is grounded in an incarnate, sacramental, and contemplative love that brings about conversion. In the midst of parish life, in our devotion to Christ present and given in the Eucharistic species, in that personal and transformative power of Christ, one discovers the *sine qua non* of conversion relative to Catholic social teaching: God loves you, God loves everyone.

This insight takes a lifetime to appropriate, to let one's interior life and external acts be shaped by this gratuitous gift of love. In that sense, and this is the tantalizing part, Pope Francis may have ushered in a new era of the Church's social magisterium, one that more intentionally unites incarnate ecclesial life with engagement with the polis and love of our neighbor.

Again, this is a mere proposal for future research and teaching. But returning to the beginning, this conversion toward love will not happen in the digital realm. It requires leaving behind digital non-space and non-time to enter those vital flesh and blood encounters with God and neighbor that is the heart of parish life. I will let Pope Francis himself have the final word:

I ask our Lord Jesus Christ to grant that his Sacred Heart may continue to pour forth the streams of living water that can heal the hurt we have caused, strengthen our ability to love and serve others, and inspire us to journey together towards a just, solidary and fraternal world. Until that day when we will rejoice in celebrating together the banquet of the heavenly kingdom in the presence of the risen Lord, who harmonizes all our differences in the light that radiates perpetually from his open heart. May he be blessed forever (no. 220).