

On Pope Francis and the Consistent Life Ethic

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ABSTRACT: This paper will show that Pope Francis's call to change what he bluntly names our "throwaway culture" is profound and echoes the thinking of Cardinal Joseph Bernadin and recent popes. In *Laudato Si* Francis speaks the pro-life message with simplicity while recognizing both the multiple dimensions and the moral complexity of the world's social problems. He suggests that being pro-life demands a sensitivity to the various ways in which human life is denied or diminished. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* Francis provides four principles meant to guide those working toward achieving a more just society that recognizes and respects the life and dignity of each person. Here I briefly review those principles.

Pope Francis and *Laudato si*

In the encyclical *Laudato si* (On Care for Our Common Home) Pope Francis addresses "every person living on this planet"¹ concerning our global environmental problems. Within that extended reflection on the dangers facing the planet, the pope recognizes a clear connection between environmental degradation and the serious social problems that plague our communities. Intended to inspire dialogue and "ecological conversion,"² the encyclical is not just a call for environmental activism. It is also a plea for a more "integral ecology,"³ a renewal of the environmental and social conditions that are inseparable from one another and that are essential for ensuring the common

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¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato si*, §3.

² *Laudato si*, §216ff.

³ *Laudato si*, §137ff.

good. He writes with the goal of inspiring a change in lifestyle and a rethinking of economic and social structures:

We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.⁴

Francis advocates what he calls “integral ecology.” A false and destructive anthropocentrism encourages human domination rather than stewardship and puts the natural world at risk. On the other hand, biocentrism is equally harmful, Francis contends, inasmuch it undervalues the human person.⁵ It is no secret that ideologically driven environmentalist movements aiming for “sustainability” have put pressure on developing countries to adopt Western conceptions of women’s rights, understood as access to contraception and abortion. Some environmentalists would seek to limit family size by any means necessary to save the planet.

The notion of “integral ecology,” on the other hand, implies a unity behind the pluralities of the natural environment and human society, natural ecology and economics, ecosystems and cities, human dignity and the beauty of all of creation. Francis asks: “How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties?”⁶ His answer: “When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities – to offer just a few examples – it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected.”⁷

Everything is connected. The “practical relativism”⁸ that puts the individual at the center and values everything else relative to human comfort leads to the separation of human beings from the rest of creation and to environmental degradation. According to Francis, it also leads to: a worship of market forces and an indifference to the accompanying collateral damage;

⁴ *Laudato sí*, §139.

⁵ *Laudato sí*, §118.

⁶ *Laudato sí*, §120.

⁷ *Laudato sí*, §117.

⁸ *Laudato sí*, §122ff.

human trafficking; organized crime; the drug trade; commerce in diamonds and the body parts of endangered species; the buying of organs from the poor; the elimination of children because they are not wanted (perhaps because they have Downs syndrome).⁹

In *Laudato sí* Francis talks about virtually every kind of social injustice. While speaking about the benefit of work as a setting essential for personal spiritual growth, he also mentions the obligation of the business community to resist the pull of those economies of scale that displace workers and shut out local markets.¹⁰ He writes about the need to remember the common good when deciding whether or not to allow the genetic modification of crops and animals.¹¹ He notes that some ecological movements show concern for the integrity of the biological environment by seeking to set limits on scientific research on vegetative and animal life but do not have the same concern for human life and biotech research on human embryos.¹²

For Francis, “it cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected. Time and space are not independent of one another, and not even atoms or subatomic particles can be considered in isolation.”¹³ For this reason Francis thinks that fragmented knowledge can be a form of ignorance. An economic ecology, a social ecology, a cultural ecology, a human ecology: these are all parts of a much needed integrated ecological vision.

Cardinal Bernadin’s Gannon Lecture

Francis’s integration of life issues and work issues with the environmental challenges that are his main focus in *Laudato sí* is reminiscent of Cardinal Bernadin’s 1983 Gannon Lecture at Fordham University. At the time Bernadin served as Chairman of the Pro-Life Committee of the National Council of Catholic Bishops. Reflecting on the U.S. Bishops’ pastoral letter “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response,” Bernadin he expresses his commitment to shaping a position of linkage among the life issues.¹⁴ *The*

⁹ *Laudato sí*, §123.

¹⁰ *Laudato sí*, §124-29.

¹¹ *Laudato sí*, §130-35.

¹² *Laudato sí*, §136.

¹³ *Laudato sí*, §138.

¹⁴ Joseph Cardinal Bernadin, “A Consistent Life Ethic: An American-Catholic Dialogue,” Gannon Lecture, Fordham University, 1983. Published in *Consistent Ethic of Life: Joseph Cardinal Bernadin*, ed. Thomas Fuechtmann et al. (Sheed and Ward,

Challenge of Peace, he suggests, is “a starting point for developing a consistent ethic of life.”¹⁵

According to Bernadin, the operative principle at work in the Church’s opposition to both abortion and nuclear attack – even an attack that would be in response to a prior nuclear attack – is the sacredness of all human life. This principle establishes a presumption against the taking of any human life, a presumption whose abandonment would require strong and convincing countervailing reasons. The cardinal says that respect for this presumption has grown in strength over the previous thirty years.¹⁶ Among other sources for this viewpoint, he cites John Courtney Murray’s 1959 article in *Theological Studies*. There Murray documents Pope Pius XII’s reduction of the threefold set of justifications for going to war (defense of one’s country, recovery of stolen property, and punishment of guilt) to “the single reason of defending the innocent and protecting those values required for decent human existence.”¹⁷ Cardinal Bernadin also makes mention of a shift in the opinion of U.S. Catholic bishops related to capital punishment, and he comments on the way in which Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II sought to dissuade states from executing criminals. At the root of this shift, says Bernadin, is a “more acute perception of the multiple ways in which life is threatened today.”¹⁸

Facing the growing potential for nuclear war, the threat that prompted the

1988) 1-2. Accessed 8/9/2019: <https://www.hnp.org/publications/hnpfocus/BconsistentEthic1983.pdf>. A good reflection on the consistent life ethic is found in John L. Carr’s “A Consistent Life Ethic: A Look Back, A Look Around, A Look Ahead,” speech at the University of St. Thomas Law School Symposium: “Can the Seamless Garment Be Sewn? The Future of Pro-Life Progressivism.” *University of St. Thomas Law Journal* 2/2 (2005). Accessed 8.9.19: <https://www.priestsforlife.org/consistentethic/ustlawjournalconsistentethic.pdf>.

¹⁵ *A Consistent Life Ethic: An American-Catholic Dialogue* §§1-6, <https://www.hnp.org/publications/hnpfocus/BConsistentEthic1983.pdf>, accessed 8/9/2019. A good reflection on the consistent life ethic is found in John L. Carr’s “A Consistent Life Ethic: A Look Back, A Look Around, A Look Ahead”: speech at the University of St. Thomas Law School Symposium entitled “Can the Seamless Garment Be Sewn? The Future of Pro-Life Progressivism,” *University of St. Thomas Law Journal* 2/2 (2005): 256-71.

¹⁶ *A Consistent Life Ethic* §3.

¹⁷ *A Consistent Life Ethic*. See John Courtney Murray’s essay, “Remarks on the Moral Problem of War” accessed 8/9/2019: <http://cdn.theologicalstudies.net/20/20.1/20.1.2.pdf>.

¹⁸ *A Consistent Life Ethic*.

U.S. Bishops to write “The Challenge of Peace,” Bernadin says that a consistent life ethic is required in order to deal with the diverse and troubling challenges that technology is bringing to bear on a society that reflexively accepts whatever comes and only later realizes the inherent danger. In the same way that Francis’s *Laudato si’* is a response to the environmental degradation brought about by an unbridled and unwitting technologically enhanced consumerism, Bernadin identifies technological advance – in this case, nuclear technologies – as the source of a new and serious threat to human life.

Cardinal Bernadin argues that progress on any of the life issues requires “a concern for the broader attitude in society about respect for human life.”¹⁹ Since the principle of the sacredness of human life will be effective only if it is consistently applied, attitudes that internalize this principle need to be fostered. In this context Cardinal Bernadin speaks the quality of life of the vulnerable in society:

Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us: the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented immigrant and the unemployed worker. Such a quality of life posture translates into specific political and economic positions on tax policy, employment generation, welfare policy, nutrition and feeding programs, and health care. Consistency means we cannot have it both ways. We cannot urge a compassionate society and vigorous public policy to protect the rights of the unborn and then argue that compassion and significant public programs on behalf of the needy undermine the moral fiber of the society or are beyond the proper scope of governmental responsibility.²⁰

At the core of Bernadin’s position is a recognition that the move from protecting human life to providing conditions for human fulfillment is a natural and consistent move. Respect for the life of each person, if consistently applied, readily translates into respect for the dignity of each person and care for ensuring the conditions required for living with dignity. Essential to this project is an attitudinal (not merely a doctrinal) perspective.

John Paul II and *Evangelium vitae*

John Paul II offers a position somewhat similar to this in the course of the biblical exegesis he undertakes in *Evangelium Vitae* when reflecting upon the

¹⁹ *A Consistent Life Ethic.*

²⁰ *A Consistent Life Ethic.*

story of Cain and Abel:

Before God, who asks him about the fate of Abel, Cain, instead of showing remorse and apologizing, arrogantly eludes the question: “I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?” (Gen 4:9). “I do not know”: Cain tries to cover up his crime with a lie. This was and still is the case, when all kinds of ideologies try to justify and disguise the most atrocious crimes against human beings. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”: Cain does not wish to think about his brother and refuses to accept the responsibility which every person has towards others. We cannot but think of today's tendency for people to refuse to accept responsibility for their brothers and sisters. Symptoms of this trend include the lack of solidarity towards society's weakest members-such as the elderly, the infirm, immigrants, children – and the indifference frequently found in relations between the world's peoples even when basic values such as survival, freedom and peace are involved.²¹

These words reveal an ethic seeking to protect human life at all stages. It recognizes its many vulnerabilities and various circumstances. Alluding to the practice of capital punishment, the pope focuses on the fact that God did not desire to punish Cain for murdering Abel by executing Cain. He cites Genesis. God “put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him” (Gen 4:15). The pope explains: “Not even a murderer loses his personal dignity, and God himself pledges to guarantee this.”²² God preferred correction over death for the murderer. The pope then adds:

And how can we fail to consider the violence against life done to millions of human beings, especially children, who are forced into poverty, malnutrition and hunger because of an unjust distribution of resources between peoples and between social classes? And what of the violence inherent not only in wars as such but in the scandalous arms trade, which spawns the many armed conflicts which stain our world with blood? What of the spreading of death caused by reckless tampering with the world's ecological balance, by the criminal spread of drugs, or by the promotion of certain kinds of sexual activity which, besides being morally unacceptable, also involve grave risks to life? It is impossible to catalogue completely the vast array of threats to human life, so many are the forms, whether explicit or hidden, in which they appear today!²³

²¹ *Evangelium vitae*, 1995: §8. Accessed 8/9/2019: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.

²² *Evangelium vitae* §9.

²³ *Evangelium vitae*, §10.

This encyclical focuses on the explicit and direct threats to human life that are often asserted to be rights. They are threats that occur at the heart of the family and arise from a mentality that favors efficiency – in Francis’s words, a technocratic paradigm and a throw away culture. John Paul II very purposefully decries abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia as injustices within the broader category of threats to life in a culture of death. He focuses on these most immediate and direct threats to the very life of innocent persons, for these practices are always and everywhere wrong, evil in themselves. Unlike capital punishment, which in principle could be a legitimate form of punishment, abortion, infanticide and euthanasia are never morally licit. Noteworthy about this account in *Evangelium vitae* is the catalogue of evils that the pope mentions and their inclusion within his “culture of death” discussion.

Pope Benedict XVI and *Caritas in veritate*

In *Caritas et veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI similarly connects diverse social and moral problems in order to show what is involved in “integral human development,” a theme that Pope Paul VI had introduced in *Populorum Progressio*. Benedict applies it here to global economic and social conditions in 2009: “The right to food, like the right to water, has an important place within the pursuit of other rights, beginning with the fundamental right to life.”²⁴ He also says that the right to life cannot be separated from a concern for human development, the development of impoverished areas of the world. He expresses concern for the high infant mortality rate within poor, developing countries, and he points out that population control through contraceptive and sometimes even mandatory abortion policies work against “integral human development.” A respect for life and dignity are connected: “The acceptance of life strengthens moral fibre and makes people capable of mutual help.”²⁵

In the context of his focus in chapter four on taking responsibility for the environment, Benedict turns to the theme of complexity, integration, and the need for a broad vision that sees connections and interrelationships between social conditions and problems:

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *Caritas et veritate*, 2009 §27. Accessed 8/9/2019: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html.

²⁵ *Caritas et veritate*, §28.

The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society.²⁶

Francis: *Evangelii gaudium* and the Common Good

How can a community embrace the consistent life ethic if every issue is a life issue, if disagreement is inevitable, and if the level of social and political discord is high? In these divided times, Francis offers certain guidelines as a foundational approach to reality, a kind of philosophy of polarity. These guidelines are intended as a practical way for dealing with political and social tension and disagreement. They offer a way of thinking through problems and living in the midst of conflict while seeking a more just society.

In a well-known interview with Italian journalist Antonio Spadaro, Pope Francis speaks about the influence of Romano Guardini on his own thinking about the Church and about reality in general.²⁷ Both men notice, as a kind of framework, the tension of opposing forces and ideas. Francis, in his typically informal way, describes a view of reality that gives prominence to polar opposition, to polarity:

Opposition opens a path, a way forward. Speaking generally, I have to say that I love oppositions. Romano Guardini helped me with his book *Der Gegensatz*, which was important for me. He spoke of a polar opposition in which the two opposites are not annulled. One pole does not destroy the other. There is no contradiction and no identity. For him opposition is resolved at a higher level. In such a solution, however, the polar tension remains. The tension remains; it is not cancelled out. The limits are overcome, not negated. Oppositions are helpful. Human life is structured in an oppositional form.²⁸

²⁶ *Caritas et veritate*, §51. In *Resisting Throwaway Culture*, Charles Camosy calls special attention to this paragraph in which Pope Benedict speaks very clearly about the connection between seeming disparate social issues and problems. Charles C. Camosy, *Resisting Throwaway Culture, How a Consistent Life Ethic Can Unite a Fractured People* (Hyde Park NY: New City Press, 2019).

²⁷ The interview with Antonio Spadaro was quoted by Massimo Borghesi in his *The Mind of Pope Francis, Jorge Mario Bergoglio's Intellectual Journey*, translated by Barry Hudock (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2017).

²⁸ Borghesi, p. 105.

In witnessing the political conflicts during his childhood and adult life in Argentina between the Peronists and the anti-Peronists, handling the relations between church and state, acting as Jesuit Provincial in Argentina during a time of great internal conflict, finding a way among the ecclesial factions within South and Central America and beyond, Francis became familiar with conflict. Indeed it is the “lifeblood of concrete-living,”²⁹ according to Guardini. Bergoglio views the Jesuit, the Church, the Christian, as well as reality itself as a coincidence of opposites, antinomies, paradoxes, and polarities that find synthesis, but a synthesis that does not destroy one of the pairs.³⁰

For Francis, time is greater than space, unity prevails over conflict, realities are more important than ideas, the whole is greater than the parts. The pope introduces these principles in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel). In the context of discussing what he calls “the social dimension of evangelization,” Francis looks toward a “peaceful and multifaceted culture of encounter”³¹ and suggests that these four principles, in relationship to constant tensions that occur in every society, can be usefully applied toward making peace and working toward the common good, that is, toward achieving integral ecology, a consistent life ethic.

Principle 1: Time is greater than space

Time is greater than space. Another way of expressing this tension is to speak of fullness versus limitation or the future versus the finite. Fullness, thought of as time, offers a horizon that constantly opens up and toward which we look, a future that is better.³² At one pole, Cardinal Bergoglio says, there is “that attraction that God puts in the heart of each one of us, so that we seek what makes us more free.”³³ The other pole is the “limitation, which is always

²⁹ Borghesi, p. 106. Guardini’s influence on Jorge Bergoglio, the future pope, was significant according to Borghesi’s biography. Guardini’s *The End of the Modern World* informed Francis’s discussion of the technocratic paradigm in *Laudato si*. His earlier work *Der Gegensatz*, according to Borghesi, inspired Francis’s own philosophy of polarity, especially as expressed in *Evangelium gaudium*.

³⁰ Borghesi, p. 101ff.

³¹ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium, Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis, The Joy of the Gospel* (Boston MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2013), §220.

³² Borghesi, p. 113.

³³ Borghesi, pp. 113, 114.

present together with the fullness that attracts us” but which “instead pushes us back.”³⁴ The tension remains – one must think of the future, plan for and desire the common good, but recognize limitations. Still, for the Pope, time is superior to space, to present limitations. This principle signifies an openness to the future. It is hope that invites patience and confidence that good prevails.

Principle 2: Unity is greater than conflict

Unity is greater than conflict. In *Evangelii Gaudium* the pope speaks about how people respond to conflict, a section especially pertinent to the present political reality. Some people ignore conflict, as if it does not exist. Others are consumed by it, become its prisoners, project confusion and dissatisfaction – I might add, anger – and in the process exacerbate division. Beyond these are those he calls great persons and peace-makers who are willing to see others “in their deepest dignity.”³⁵ They recognize the human dignity of the other; they do not demonize. Civility and charity is preserved:

This requires acknowledging a principle indispensable to the building of friendship in society: namely, that unity is greater than conflict. Solidarity, in its deepest and most challenging sense, thus becomes a way of making history in a life setting where conflicts, tensions, and oppositions can achieve a diversified and life-giving unity. This is not to opt for a kind of syncretism, or for the absorption of one into the other, but rather for a resolution which takes place on a higher plan and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides.³⁶

Principle 3: Realities are more important than ideas

Realities are more important than ideas. Francis warns: “Ideas disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action. What calls us to action are realities illuminated by reason.”³⁷ What this polarity forestalls is a kind of “slavery to ideology.”³⁸

History witnesses to the danger of ideology. A person who is ideological

³⁴ Borghesi, p. 114.

³⁵ *Evangelii gaudium*, §227, 228.

³⁶ *Evangelii gaudium*, §228.

³⁷ *Evangelii gaudium*, §232.

³⁸ Borghesi, p. 122. Borghesi quotes a writing by Cardinal Bergoglio entitled “Servizio della fede e promozione della giustizia” in the periodical *Stromata* (Jan.–June 1988), *Pastorale sociale*, 80.

lacks the humility that comes from concrete experience. The pope suggests that being in touch with the real experiences of people is essential to the pursuit of justice.

Principle 4: The whole is greater than its parts

Francis as pope and leader of the universal church concerns himself with the global Church. The image that he adopts for reality is not a globe, a sphere, because a sphere is not greater than its parts, but merely the sum of its parts. It lacks the distinctiveness of parts which in themselves are beautiful. “The polyhedron...allows humanity to grow.... [It] defends the particularity of the person, or of a people or a culture.”³⁹ In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis distinguishes the sphere, whose parts are equidistant from the center and all the same, from the polyhedron, whose parts are distinct, like the individuality of each person and each culture on Earth. “Pastoral and political activity alike seek to gather in this polyhedron the best of each. There is a place for the poor and their culture, their aspirations, and their potential.”⁴⁰ He ends the section by speaking of the Good Shepherd and the Gospel’s “intrinsic principle of totality.” It is the Good News for all peoples, until all are brought together to God’s kingdom.⁴¹

Admittedly, these are not clear resolutions or solutions to the moral and cultural ills of our day. Rather they are meant to be guiding principles, perhaps more attitudinal than intellectual, for those seeking to advance a more just society. Francis is not here embarking on new territory, rather he is offering in *Laudato Si* and in *Evangelii gaudium* a message that reflects upon the most serious problems of the day through the lens of the same consistent life ethic embraced by Cardinal Bernadin, as well as some of his papal predecessors. His is a different formulation of the Church’s same pro-life message, updated to address the most critical challenges of our own day.

³⁹ Borghesi, p. 119.

⁴⁰ *Evangelii gaudium*, §236.

⁴¹ *Evangelii gaudium*, §237.