

Pope Francis's Vision for Civic and Political Love in the Context of Care for our Common Home

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In the letter *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis writes as the Shepherd to his worldwide Catholic flock, encouraging them to pay attention to their relationship to the Earth, which is plagued by their callous indifference and abusive behavior. His message is nevertheless one of faith and hope, that humanity will accept its responsibility to care for the planet, a responsibility bestowed by God to humans. Care begins and ends in love, thinks Francis; through our unyielding love for God we will once again renew a life-giving, rather than death-dealing, relationship with creation itself. In the letter the Pope reminds his audience of the resources of the Christian faith that can reform their consciences; Christians can no longer ignore their responsibility to care for the planet, nor the part they have played in its deterioration. Our focus in this paper is upon a small section near the end of the letter titled "Civic and Political Love." A close reading of the passages will reveal a vision for Catholic citizenship today, a citizenship that dreams of a citizenship of our "common home," namely the earth, rather than nations in competitions with one another. Through the power of civic and political love, he avers, Catholics need to understand the call together as one, to act in communion and thereby see the bigger picture. Pope Francis tells Catholics they must renew (1) traditions of giving freely without counting the cost, (2) respect everything around them, and (3) learn to love their enemies. We shall see that Pope Francis's vision for love and the city retains common elements of classic Christian texts, such as Augustine's *Confessions* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, while also complementing more recent reflections on the nature of love, as found in the writings of C.S. Lewis and Pope Benedict XVI:

"To love someone is to desire that person's good and to take effective steps to secure it. Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of "all of us", made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society"(BENEDICT XVI, p.642).

Together, living as one, we hope for the best for one another. It is this hope, or love, that makes us a society. The texts all address how an unyielding love for God will lead Christians from their destructive ways into a path of hope, love and happiness capable of renewing the health and beauty of the earth.

Let us turn, then, to an interpretation of the section of the letter titled "Civic and Political Love." A close reading of the passages not only reveals its continuity with Christian tradition, but also provides readers with ample opportunity to consider what citizenship might look like today in light of these Christian principles. Pope Francis not only took his papal name from Saint Francis of Assisi, but also shows us how his life and legacy inform his own vision for renewed relationship to all creation that promises to heal human society. That healing requires a re-engaging the Christian tradition on love and its centrality to a well-ordered city.

Let us recall that Aristotle long-ago classified the human species as “zoon politikon” (political animal). “Zoe” in Greek is biological “life.” The kind of life humans exhibit biologically is a life that is always communal. A polis is a city, a group of humans called a “people” (Polis). Indeed, Augustine built on this tradition by calling a city, a people, an “assemblage of reasonable beings, bound together by their objects of love” (*City of God*, book 19.21). Humans are thus bound together in something greater than biological life, namely a spiritual and emotional life, that transcends biology, and that yet binds those biological groups together in communion. Pope Francis uses the term “lifestyle” to distinguish between different ways humans live together in communion:

“Care for nature is part of a lifestyle which includes the capacity for living together and communion. Jesus reminded us that we have God as our common Father and that this makes us brothers and sisters. Fraternal love can only be gratuitous; it can never be a means of repaying others for what they have done or will do for us. That is why it is possible to love our enemies. This same gratuitousness inspires us to love and accept the wind, the sun and the clouds, even though we cannot control them. In this sense, we can speak of a “universal fraternity.”

The Pope is addressing how our unconditional love for family should be universal. When we live together in a community, we are one big family. Jesus taught us that we all share the same Father, God. The bond we share with God ties us to every other child of God, making us all brothers and sisters. If we share the same father, we are therefore all tied together by this relationship. The video, *Sacred Economics* by Ian MacKenzie, addresses the problem with being ignorant in regard to this bond:

“If you are a separate self and there’s other separate selves out there and other species out there, the universe is fundamentally indifferent to you or even hostile, then you definitely want to control. You want to have power over other beings and over these whimsical, arbitrary forces of nature that could extinguish you at any time” (MacKenzie).

If we can not find fraternal bonds among each other, we cannot connect at this deeper level, and thereby accept the implicit logic of capitalism, namely that all relationships are reducible to financial transactions, including those of family and friends. Without this non-monetized connection, it is easy to feel threatened by the things we cannot control. More importantly, we detach ourselves from our responsibility to the planet. This is why fraternal love is so important. In terms of fraternal love, or “brotherly” love, we are compelled to be compassionate towards our fellow humans. This love is not about “evening out the score” or doing good deeds to repay someone. It is a type of love that one acts upon in the moment because they possess compassion. It can be as simple as offering a helping hand to someone in need or reminding someone they are loved. This kind of compassion for others allows us to bypass ailments in past relationships and help others, nonetheless. This love is evident throughout our world, especially in media. In the film *Harry Potter: The Deathly Hallows*, Harry is faced with a dilemma. He can risk his life to save his arch-nemesis Draco Malfoy or he can flee and ensure his own safety. Harry is a selfless, loving character filled with fraternal love.

Even after all the evil Draco has brought upon him, he still chooses to risk his life and save him. It is this type of pure, unconditional love that allows us to love not only each other, but the world itself. A mother always struggles when her children grow old and she loses her ability to influence their actions and choices, yet she will never stop loving them. This type of unconditional love and acceptance is also present in the film, *The Secret of Kells* (2009), when Brendan experiences fraternal love first-hand. He learns to accept and love the forest that he once considered his enemy.

The film, *The Secret of Kells* (2009), addresses the importance of accepting nature as well as one's enemies. As an historical drama, it depicts the time when the Book of Kells was being illuminated, and the main protagonist, Brendan, lives in the Abbey of Kells. This is a remote medieval outpost under siege from the time-period when raiding Vikings changed the landscape and culture of the British Isles. One day a master illuminator arrives from foreign lands carrying an ancient but unfinished book, brimming with secret wisdom and powers. To help complete the magical book, Brendan must overcome his deepest fears on a dangerous quest that takes him into the enchanted forest, where mythical creatures hide. In this film, the enchanted forest is Brendan's enemy because his grandfather forbids him from going into the woods, fearing what lies out there and his inability to control the woods. His grandfather's fear of the woods make Brendan believe that the woods are bad. It is not until Brendan disobeys his grandfather, enters the forest and meets the wolf-girl fairy known as Aisling, that he understands and accepts the true beauty of the enchanted forest. It is no longer his enemy for he learns to love it. In a way, by relating this film back to Pope Francis's words, we learn to accept everyone. Although people may appear harsh and intimidating on the outside this does not mean their hearts are cold. Nevertheless, people who do not understand Fraternal love, such as the Vikings in *The Secret of Kells* (2009), find themselves lost to superficial love. They only understand the love for material, such as gold. Their lack of fraternal love is shown in their dark demeanor. They have sharp fingers, dark cloaks, and towering bodies. When they find the Book of Kells they rip out all the pages and take the cover because it is gold. Their superficial love for gold blinded them from the true treasure, the pages within the book. It is this type of superficial love that causes us to stray from the path of God and loose ourselves and each other. We must remember that as much as one might love independence and isolation, we need our fellow humans to survive. Pope Francis addresses this greed for "superficiality" and how this corrosion leads to our demise:

"We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it. We have had enough of immorality and the mockery of ethics, goodness, faith and honesty. It is time to acknowledge that light-hearted superficiality has done us no good. When the foundations of social life are corroded, what ensues are battles over conflicting interests, new forms of violence and brutality, and obstacles to the growth of a genuine culture of care for the environment."

The message Pope Francis is portraying in this passage is better understood when the book *Dante's Divine Comedy* is referenced. In this book, Dante is given the chance to travel through Hell and the purgatory to see how living a sinful life will result in an eternity of

suffering in the afterlife. Some people live their lives with the false belief that pretending to be good, or light-hearted superficiality, can get them into heaven. However, Dante's *Inferno* shines light on this subject. Dante is exposed to all the different sins one commits to end up in eternal suffering. There are different "levels" of suffering. There are those who are trapped in Hell to suffer for all eternity, and then those in ante-purgatory and purgatory who have the ability to repent and ascend to heaven. In the 6th circle of Hell, where the arch-heretics of all cults and their followers lay, Dante sees tombs in every direction with "a ring around each tomb, great fires raised every wall to a red heat" (*Inferno* 9, pg. 78, line 115-116). From each burning coffin "an anguished moaning rose" (*Inferno* 9 pg. 78, line 119). An example of suffering in purgatory includes the lustful souls enwrapped in sheets of flame and singing the hymn *Summae Deus Clementiae* (*Purgatorio* 25, pg. 500, p. 3). Today, there is a false notion that being good is no longer worth it because there are so many bad people in the world. Nevertheless, when one understands Dante's journey and the eternity that awaits them, they realize that it is worth it. A short life of being good and decent is worth an eternity of peace and happiness. (Of course, one must first believe in, and live by, the principle that an afterlife is real for all humans.) Through understanding the story behind Dante's *Divine Comedy*, we understand that every decision we make counts; faking it is not helping anyone and will only corrode what is left of life-giving and vibrant human society. Pope Francis addresses the importance of simple love and the "consequences of exacerbated" consumption:

"Saint Therese of Lisieux invites us to practice the 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. In the end, a world of exacerbated consumption is at the same time a world which mistreats life in all its forms."

The Pope's audience is reminded of Therese's wisdom: love is simple and requires no grand gestures or complex love songs. Simple gestures, such as caressing someone's cheek, a small smile, or a compliment, move mountains. This simple love is portrayed in Augustine's *Confessions* when he begins to understand the ways of Christianity. The book starts out recounting Augustine's life before his conversion to Catholicism. Augustine followed misguided aims and exacerbated consumption, chasing material pursuits instead of pursuing the love of God. As a student, Augustine encountered sexual adventures and false philosophies. After Augustine's conversion to Catholicism, he recounts these misguided adventures and accepts his past indiscretions as lessons. These lessons taught him that a lack of love for God only leads to confusion, grief and disorder. He writes, "the more unscrupulous I was, the greater my reputation was likely to be, for men are so blind that they even take pride in their blindness" (*Confessions*, III:3.2). Just because something is big does not necessarily mean it is good. Augustine shows this when he talks about how the fewer moral principles he presents, the bigger of a reputation he would have. This reputation, although big, did not at all resemble something positive. This relates back to the presence of exacerbated consumption in our world. Humans consume what we want, but we fail to give back. Stores like Costco tell us "Bigger is Better". We buy in bulk and waste more than we consume. We cut down trees for houses, paper, and furniture but we fail to replant the trees we killed. We steal oil from the ground and animals from the sea. We consume

and consume and ignore the fact that we consume too much. Our greed has left us feeling superior. We turn a blind eye to the animals that are going extinct and the coral reefs that are dying because of our overconsumption. If we can accept integral ecology and understand that just enough is enough, we could minimize our tendency to over consume. Just as a simple gesture can show peace, a simple home can house people. There is no need for glorified homes and expensive food. Food is food, it will fill your stomach whether it is one dollar or one-hundred dollars! Just as a love for God can be shown through small gestures, such as removing sin from one's life, consumption can also be minimized to "small gestures". Pope Francis expands on the importance of small gestures and their big impact:

"Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world. Love for society and commitment to the common good are outstanding expressions of a charity which affects not only relationships between individuals but also "macro-relationships, social, economic and political ones".[156] That is why the Church set before the world the ideal of a "civilization of love".[157] Social love is the key to authentic development: "In order to make society more human, more worthy of the human person, love in social life – political, economic and cultural – must be given renewed value, becoming the constant and highest norm for all activity".[158] In this framework, along with the importance of little everyday gestures, social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a "culture of care" which permeates all of society. When we feel that God is calling us to intervene with others in these social dynamics, we should realize that this too is part of our spirituality, which is an exercise of charity and, as such, matures and sanctifies us."

This passage can be better understood when it is related to the movie *Wall-E* (2008). In this film we meet a robot who is the last one on Earth, left by humans to clean up their mess while they live in space. After 255, 642 days in space, Earth was still no better off than when the humans left. The longer humanity remained in space the less human and more robotic they became. They spent all their time looking at TV screens that they were unaware of their surroundings. However, when Wall-E boards the ship and makes the humans aware of possible life on Earth they come together to help him. This is a wakeup call to all of them and the viewer notices how eager they are to help one another. They find the love for their society one again even though it was temporarily concealed by their greed for convenience. Although, some of the gestures they did were small they made a big difference. For example, when the plant was thrown throughout the spaceship each person passed it to the next person until it reached where Wall-E was being crushed. The gesture was small, but the result was that Wall-E was saved from being crushed, which had a big impact on both Wall-E and Eve. This mutual care saved Wall-E's life and allowed the humans to return to Earth. When they got there the first thing the pilot did was plant the sprout. This was an important message to the new habitants of earth because it encouraged them to support a culture of care. Just as the sprout was planted, the camera zoomed out and the viewer could see lots of sprouts growing on the once desolate earth. The movie *Wall-E* (2008) helps to explain how small gestures of kindness can make a huge difference and when we come together as one community, we can help save the earth from environmental

degradation. There is still hope for our world if we have faith and communion, for when we come together as one there is very little we cannot achieve. Pope Francis addresses the importance of faith and community and the impact they can have on the earth and those less fortunate:

“Not everyone is called to engage directly in political life. Society is also enriched by a countless array of organizations which work to promote the common good and to defend the environment, whether natural or urban. Some, for example, show concern for a public place (a building, a fountain, an abandoned monument, a landscape, a square), and strive to protect, restore, improve or beautify it as something belonging to everyone. Around these community actions, relationships develop or are recovered, and a new social fabric emerges. Thus, a community can break out of the indifference induced by consumerism. These actions cultivate a shared identity, with a story which can be remembered and handed on. In this way, the world, and the quality of life of the poorest, are cared for, with a sense of solidarity which is at the same time aware that we live in a common home which God has entrusted to us. These community actions, when they express self-giving love, can also become intense spiritual experiences.”

Economics and politics can have a big influence on our lives. They can determine where we grow up and how we view people and conflicts. In some situations, there are people who are unable to understand these aspects, so organizations of pure hearted people are created to help these less fortunate souls. In the film, *The Mission* (1986), Father Gabriel, a Spanish Jesuit, attempts to spread the Jesuit teachings to a South American tribe known as Guaraní. These people grew up learning to hunt and survive and from an outside perspective, such as the Portuguese, their ways may be looked upon as “barbaric.” Father Gabriel aids the natives in building a church and teaches them the ways of Christianity along with introducing them to advanced methods of farming and technology to enhance their lives. During Father Gabriel's time working with the natives you see both parties’ attitudes change toward one another. At first, Father Gabriel was fearful of the natives for they sacrificed his brother. Meanwhile, the natives did not trust Father Gabriel and one of them snapped his flute in half out of confusion and fear. However, once the natives accepted his teachings, they all become a family. These natives do not understand the workings of a political life. That is why Father Gabriel was there to promote the common good for them and help protect them from slavery. Father Gabriel understands that God has given this land to all of us to share. However, the Spanish and Portuguese people disagree with Father Gabriel. They wish to enslave the natives and take control of their land, as if God had not put them there for a reason. Father Gabriel expressed self-giving love by donating his time to natives in various parts of the world to teach them the Christian way. By relating this passage to the film, we can see that we all live in a common home. Through political and civic love, we understand we were put here for a reason and each person on this planet deserves to live a content life, on the land they were gifted by God. Along with Father Gabriel’s philanthropic actions in this film, there are thousands of organizations today, that I personally connect with, that aim to help the earth and less fortunate beings.

One of the many organizations that work to help the homeless is known as the *Beyond Housing Organization*. This organization not only focuses on taking the homeless off the streets, but it also gives these people access to resources they need to thrive.

“To truly thrive, people also need access to quality childcare, education, health, jobs, financial services, and more. They need help in a crisis and support to achieve dreams. Successful communities provide those resources. Beyond Housing empowers communities to provide them” (Home page).

This organization is based in St. Louis, Missouri where their housing preservation focuses on quality and stability. Not only does it help those in need get back on their feet, it also provides them with a community to assist them in education, economic development, health, and job readiness (Home page). Helping people has always been one of my defaults. It is one of the main reasons I chose to pursue a career in nursing. The ability to change someone’s life for better not only warms my heart, but it intrigues me. I want to make a difference just as these organizations do each and every day. Along with the multiple organizations that aid the needy there are also those that work to preserve what is left of our earth.

With a team of about 250 scientists, analysts, policy and communication experts, the *Union of Concerned Scientists*, advocates for the environment. They research the world’s most pressing problems and try to develop solutions for them including clean energy solutions, global warming, and the issues of large-scale food production.

“We combat climate change and seek to alleviate harm caused by the heat, sea level rise, and other consequences of runaway emissions, we strive to develop sustainable ways to feed, power, and transport ourselves, we work to reduce the existential threat of nuclear war, we fight back when powerful corporations or special interests mislead the public on science, and we ensure our solutions advance racial and economic equity” (About).

With organizations such as this one on our side, the problems threatening our world are slightly more bearable. When we come together as a community, we are coming together as a family. Together with the same goals in mind we have the ability to achieve the unthinkable. This organization is very important to me because being environmentally friendly is one thing I have grown up learning. When my little sister decided to turn vegan four years ago, she exposed my family to an entirely new way of living. Ever since, my family has taken extreme steps to decrease waste and save the world. Plastic is not allowed in my house unless absolutely necessary. A compost pile is being utilized in my backyard to minimize garbage. I have learned to waste nothing and utilize everything. At one time I may have thought of this as an annoyance or an inconvenience, but now I find myself pushing others around me to do the same and for that I am truly grateful. When we remove our tendencies for convenience and focus on our impact, it becomes clear just how lazy and irresponsible we can be. The final type of organizations that greatly benefits our world today, and one I personally connect with, are organizations that save animals.

As human ignorance and greed grow, we tend to forget about one of earth's most important aspects, the animals. Pope Francis of Assisi was known as the patron saint of animals. He understood the important role they play in our lives and looked at them as his brothers and sisters, praying to God to help them, through him (Hopler). Members of *The Humane Society of the United States* also understand the importance of animals to our world. This organization work to stop animal cruelty in many environments. From working to end puppy mills, factory farms, trophy hunts, animal testing and other cruel industries they hope to one day achieve their vision of, yes, a "HUMANE SOCIETY".

"Along with our supporters and volunteers, we work to pass anti-cruelty laws, end the extreme confinement of farm animals in cages, stop cosmetics testing on animals, halt cruelty to wildlife and bring veterinary services to pets in underserved communities. Along with our affiliates, we care for more than 100,000 animals each year through our rescue teams, sanctuaries, and wildlife centers" (You Love Helping Animals. So Do We).

People tend to put themselves above earth's animals because they believe they are less intelligent. Let us not forget, animals can communicate too, just because they do not speak English or walk on two legs does not mean they are of less importance. God put them here, which means they are just as important as humans. One of the biggest issues in our world is human tendency to mistreat or abuse animals. Zoos and circuses tend to abuse animals because of their greed for money and convenience. When money is involved people lose all sense of humanity and become blinded by their greed. When it comes to caring for thousands of animals it is easier not to, resulting in the mistreatment and death of thousands of innocent animals each day. Ever since I was a child my family has taken in stray animals. When I was 6 my dad found a stray dog running around at his construction site and he took that dog home to us and we made her ours. My most recent pet, a cat, was spotted by my sister on the side of the highway. Someone had dumped her and her sibling there and drove away. Unfortunately, we spotted them too late and her sibling was already hit by a car. If there is one thing in this world I cannot stand, it is the mistreatment of animals. Dogs can be the most loyal creatures, yet their loyalty is taken for granted when they are forced to fight other dogs. It is sickening to think someone has the ability to mistreat a creature of God and go against His wish that:

"The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (BibleGateway, Isaiah 11:6-9).

This vision for the "peaceable kingdom" remains as an inspiration for people to pursue peace and justice. Through love in community we have the ability to stop the consumption that clouds our judgment. This love, if pure, can help us see just how desperate and despairing our culture has become. Through understanding Pope Francis words, the reality of our "throw away culture" is not only clear, it is real. We must stop losing ourselves to temptation and start seriously contemplating if we are living our lives the right way or the easy way. My love for

people, nature and animals drives me to better myself each and every day. To accept that, no, I am not perfect, but it does not take perfection to create a thriving world. All it takes is political and civic love. In nursing, care is defined as “the services rendered by members of the health professions for the benefit of a patient” (dictionary website). It is not just making the patient comfortable, or using good communication skills, it is every single skill combined that ensures you are helping your patient to your fullest extent. It is about being compassionate and openminded, and most importantly, it is about doing your job because you want to help people, not because you are getting paid to do so. After analyzing Pope Francis’s ideas and connecting them to several sources utilized in class and my own personal experiences, it is easier to understand how political and civic love can unite us. Through the teaching of Christianity, we see how love and care come together in social, cultural, economic, bio-medical, spiritual, and ecological challenges. They give us the strength we need to overcome conflicts, discover resolutions and love unconditionally.

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