

[Pope Francis's Vision for Civic and Political Love in the Context of Care for our Common](#)

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In Pope Francis's encyclical letter *Laudato Si*, he urges all people of the world to adopt a more caring and loving worldview to combat the certain destruction of unmitigated climate change. Pope Francis's vision for civic and political love that will save our common home is that of regaining a sense of immediate and selfless love for the people around us. He implores us to create communities at a small scale that embody the love of Christ and posits that this will lead to a culture that can equitably solve climate change and address ingrained societal issues. In this essay, we will argue that these communal expressions of love do embody the possibility of meaningful change through individual and collective action and explore this vision of a brighter future together.

Pope Francis begins his encyclical with an overview of climate change. There is no question of validity on the science, and this must be made clear for the importance of change to truly be emphasized. Even if one were to disagree on the exact measurement of any given quantity, one must surely realize that pumping millions of tons of toxic gas into the atmosphere and plastic and sewage into the ocean has a multitude of undesirable side effects. The collected data does not lie, and our planet is warming at a rate never before seen. It is not a question of

scientific debate. It is a truth, and to ignore it is to doom not only oneself but one's fellow people.

Climate change in general is incredibly hard to comprehend intuitively, and it can appear completely hopeless. Psychologists would say this is because humans suffer from scope insensitivity. The current pandemic demonstrates how difficult it is for our mind to grasp truly large numbers. What does it mean to say that a hundred thousand lives might be lost by a certain governmental course of action? The scale seems so incomprehensible that our daily emotions cease to serve us. We see graphs and charts and projections and hear statistical terms attached to each, but the human emotion in every single death is numb so as to not overwhelm.

Then how much more shocking is this situation concerning the entire world? Once we accept the grim reality faced by the planet which we share and refuse to ignore and denounce the undeniable mountain of evidence that things have gone horribly wrong, we must consider the possibility of billions of death, both now and in the future. If thousands are incomprehensible, the horror we feel at the thought of billions ought to be so much greater that we cannot even compare. Instead, we might feel simply empty. It is too horrific to imagine.

Saint Augustine defines a city as "an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by their objects of love." (*The City of God*, 19.24) If we are to imagine a civic and political love that encompasses the environment, we might wonder what life in such a city would entail. If our main focus is to cultivate environmentalism for the good of all, can such a city strive to both fulfill the lives of its residents in uniquely human ways and remain a paragon of environmental virtue?

Pope Francis answers that such a focus is not only a choice for a just city, but a necessity for one to exist. "Care for nature is part of a lifestyle which includes the capacity for living

together and communion.” (*Laudato Si*, 228) There is no real separation of the human interest and the environmental interest. To fully be capable of the transcendent love required of us transforms our hearts from stone into flesh, and any resistance towards loving the most vulnerable will carry over into each relationship where one is asked to give of themselves for another. Love for nature is a method by which we hone the love God grants each of us. Pope Francis continues that “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”. (*Laudato Si*, 228)

This reminder of fraternal love as the ultimate calling of the Church serves to illustrate the first visions of the home Pope Francis urges us to build. In the same way that loving nature is required for loving others, loving one’s enemies is required for entering into the true communion of acceptance. The visceral hate conjured by imagining a forced repentance to the perpetrator of a wrong against oneself is a human emotion, but it is one that stands in the way of our divine origin and calling. The idea of revenge cannot be held in concert with a vision of love. So long as one judges others worthy and unworthy of receiving love, one fails to recognize the true difficulty and true beauty of professing a universal fraternity.

In modern society, this idea can appear alien to our typical connotations associated with love. Love in a culture of consumerism is something reduced to another form of market transaction, where each party receives something from the other that they want, whether it be affection or attention or friendship, and forms a love around that positive effect. While these are

not bad things, it risks trivializing the kind of relationship true love calls us to create. It would do well for us to recall the words of Corinthians.

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” (1 Corinthians 13: 4-7)

Pope Francis is writing with these principles in mind as he develops his theory. If we see that our calling requires us to ascertain a particular worldview of love, how do we progress from our current state to this utopia? Such a love sounds beyond the power of a mere human. This carries the full strength of what the Greeks termed agape, a selfless love through God from which the good in all loves stem. Even for those familiar with Catholic teaching, where agape is taught through biblical examination, the necessary path to fulfill this vision may not be clear.

Pope Francis offers very specific advice to guide us in our cultural evolution. “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.” (*Laudato Si*, 229)

Note the specific nature of regaining a need for one another. This is beyond our original notion of choosing in freedom to live with one another; this is a complete co-dependence for survival. In mathematics and computer science, this state of affairs is often symbolically represented as a game termed the prisoner’s dilemma. The setup is simple; two prisoners, Alice

and Bob, are interrogated in separate rooms. Alice is asked if Bob committed the crime, and Bob is asked if Alice committed the crime. If both Alice and Bob cooperate and are silent, they need only serve a year in prison. However, if both talk and give information that the other committed the crime, both will serve ten years in prison. The catch comes when one prisoner talks and the other is silent. In this case, the one who talked can go free, but the convicted will serve a full sentence for ten years. If either Alice or Bob hope for the best outcome of no jail time, they are incentivized to betray the other and confess. It is only when there is some external mechanism that can force both to cooperate that they can reach the more amenable state of only serving a year each instead of ten each when both confess.

This might seem like a contrived example from an out-of-touch mathematical model, but it accurately captures the exact reality Pope Francis is urging us to avoid through our dependence. In a capitalist system, one company that commits to use an environmentally friendly method and lose a million dollars will be outcompeted by a second company that pollutes but sells cheaper goods to consumers who are solely concerned about price. Whenever any company might want to help the environment, it must be called into question if doing so will end their existence as a competitor destroys them. Only when an entire industry chooses to cooperate - to remain silent, as it were – can all interested parties both maintain a livelihood and make a positive difference.

Governments, the usual method for creating this sort of cooperation, have as of yet failed to do so in this case. The quest for power has created corruption and led to the violence of conflicting personal interests being placed above the collective as Pope Francis poignantly states. In our ideal city built on love, “Politics must not be subject to the economy, nor should the economy be subject to the dictates of an efficiency-driven paradigm of technology.” (*Laudato Si*,

189) Each person must exercise the political pressure necessary to make being good and honest and caring once again worth it; only then will corrupt leaders truly begin to seek the common good in our broken world, even if only out of self-interest.

This focus on the individual action continues as Pope Francis examines the work of a past saint. “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.” (*Laudato Si*, 230)

In breaking free of individualism and a culture of consumption we are faced with the very same struggle as humans throughout the entirety of history. Dante Alighieri wrote incredibly detailed scenes of the struggle of each soul through purgatory, as the sins inherit in our society and the souls within it are purified before entering heaven. In one of the most famous and powerful lines of the Divine Comedy, Virgil says to Dante “Lord of yourself I crown and mitre you.” (*Purgatorio* 27.143) This power of intense self-control, of wanting for goodness and actively striving to achieve what is right, is immensely hard to cultivate in an online culture of immediate gratification. Dante reminds us, however, that even though breaking the chains is a painful and difficult process, once we achieve it we will never want to go back, as our natural inclination as human beings is to love unabashedly. We are products of the stars, products of God, and our souls need a divine love to fully live. Those daily gestures that used to define our lives, from simple greetings to friends as we pass them in the hallway to short visits with grandparents to small hugs with people we’ve missed, have slowly become less common. With the backdrop of a pandemic we can note the mental toll this takes on each of us; the small bits of

human contact that were never considered when discussing the necessity of institutions previously have become the primary factor that we long for today. While work can be performed from home, basic human affection cannot. As we return to our normal lives in the times to come, we need to remember this as a society. Less usage of headphones when walking through a hallway on a college campus, less focus on a cell phone as one strolls through a park, and less settling for digital interaction can reshape society from the bottom up as short humanizing gestures of love allow us to permanently reconnect.

These tiny habits appear almost trivial when talking about an issue as imperative as global warming, but Pope Francis reminds us that “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”. That is why the Church set before the world the ideal of a “civilization of love”.” (*Laudato Si*, 231) While each of us individually may not be able to stop the destruction of the climate through rejoicing in our friends, the culture this creates is one that is capable of understanding the needs of others. Pope Francis is stating that political love is one and the same with the love we show our friends. If we love each person around us just as we love ourselves, we must adopt a political stance that reflects this commitment. Love does not lead to ideologies of hate in a world where all people are interconnected, where all things are one and the same. Rather, small gestures lead to large ones, and soon we may find the strength within us to fulfill Pope Francis’s wider call to universal fraternal love. Indeed, “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”. 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.” (*Laudato Si*, 231)

As we interpret this vision, we recall the words of Saint Augustine as he reflects on a particularly dark time in his life. “To love and to be loved was sweet to me, and more so if I could enjoy the body of someone who loved me. That meant I was in the habit of polluting the shared channel of friendship with putrid rutting and clouding its pale purity with a lust from hell.” (*Confessions*, 3.1) This is clearly not the kind of love of which Pope Francis speaks, and it is imperative that we realize this distinction. Previously we mentioned agape as one of the Greek loves. There were four Greek loves in total: storge, philia, eros, and agape. Agape is the charitable love which Pope Francis mentions, a selfless and uniting love for a community that arises in the context of care for the common good. These lesser loves that lead Saint Augustine astray, such as eros, romantic love that can be warped into a tool of sexual desire, can all be evil when taken to their logical conclusion. Parents control their children’s lives in order to secure storge, or immediate familial love, without caring about the effect this has on their mental well-being. Friends can become so insulated through philia that a message such as Pope Francis’s, to widen our communities and be accepting, can fall on deaf ears. These lesser loves are only good when they reflect the truth of agape, the love to which Pope Francis testifies.

From whence can we learn agape? In a stunning example of both apophatic and cataphatic theology, Saint Augustine explains to us his love for God. “But what do I love, in



loving you? It's not the beauty of material things, or any attractiveness of this time-bound world, not the pale gleam of the light... but I do love... the light, the voice, the fragrance, the food, the embrace of the person I am within, where something that space does not contain radiates... This is what I love in loving my God." (*Confessions*, 10.8) The embrace of the person one is within, in the boundless existence of the soul, is the necessary prerequisite for agape, and a love that unites across every border. This is why Pope Francis tells us that our care for the environment is one and the same with our care for the poor and vulnerable. A just city is never unequal.

We turn now to the final message of Pope Francis on civil and political love, a literary masterpiece that is best read and digested alone.

"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."

(*Laudato Si*, 232)

In *The Mission*, a group of Jesuits found a mission in the home of the Guarani people. Father Gabriel, the leader of the group, intends this mission to protect the indigenous people

from violence. This is a mission born from a universal and selfless love, a direct manifestation of agape. Rodrigo Mendoza is a slave trader and mercenary who ruthlessly used humans from the Guarani tribe as objects to generate wealth. After killing his brother, Rodrigo reforms and goes to serve at the mission with Father Gabriel. He insists upon carrying his old equipment up the sharp cliffs next to deadly waterfalls as a mark of repentance. Upon arriving, he throws himself at the feet of the Guarani whose friends he sold as tools. The Guarani cut away his burden and throw it forcefully into the river, sparing his life and welcoming him as a human being.

The Guarani had a culture of the kind Pope Francis is describing. They had a powerful and shared identity that allowed them to overcome the instincts of revenge and extend love even to one of the worst enemies of their people. Their extension of forgiveness completely changed and saved Rodrigo's life, leading to his dedication to fulfilling the will of God. The Guarani relied on their environment to survive and cared for its welfare, and this love bled into their culture and their actions even in politically horrific times.

Today, we often find it hard to be in community in a world that is ironically more connected than ever. This sad truth is a possibility waiting to be realized. As more people hear the messages of Pope Francis and other brave leaders, and as more people realize consumerism is no way to live a fulfilling life, there is increased demand for a place to belong, a true community. It is our calling, Pope Francis argues, to build these communities and lead them with love. Our small gestures of love can build incredible social worlds that transform the lives of those involved and multiply our positive impact more than we could imagine. This is the power of communal love, of real, open, and inviting community.

My personally relevant experience with the power of communal love came in the form of an unexpected envelope. I received this envelope after finishing two difficult final exams and

opened it in the midst of crying. A coworker from a recent summer internship had written an incredibly kind letter, wishing me the best for graduation. We had shared a love for butterflies, and attached to the letter was a bumper sticker reading “Save the Monarchs! Plant Milkweed.” This slogan is incredible, for it encapsulates exactly the structure of Pope Francis’s vision to save the world from global warming. From a small action, from planting milkweed, an entire species of beautiful butterfly can be saved. From our love, we can shape the future of our own species. This kind gesture completely transformed a horrendous week into one of fond memory. The power of community and love is never to be underestimated.

In the same way that this pandemic is a once in a lifetime tragedy of virology, this post-pandemic period is a once in a lifetime opportunity to rethink our daily routines of interaction. Our world is not permanent. The things we take for granted can be removed at a moment’s notice by a freak natural event like a novel virus. As a world, we struggled to contain and prevent the virus, but we saved countless lives with brave actions from all corners, even if such actions were late. In a similar way, as a world we are failing to address global warming. The problem is growing to the point that many scientists have said we are crossing irreversible turning points at an alarming rate. This does not mean it is too late. As a pandemic, an event that seemed supernaturally unlikely just a year ago, finally subsides, may we realize that global warming is not a vague future threat but an existential risk that will in fact destroy us should we fail to act. Our mental dependency on consumerism must be broken, and there is no better time to regain habits of peaceful love than right now as we rethink our lives.

In conclusion, we listen once more to the wise words of Pope Francis. “No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts.” (*Laudato Si*, 205) There is hope. In living our

lives in accordance with the principles of selfless love for all of our fellow humans, in creating communities that care at a small scale, in welcoming friends and strangers both in our smallest actions, we forever strive toward a real and significant change in the course of our world.

Save the world! Love each other.

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