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The Quandary of the Two Pope Francises

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Daniel J. Mahoney

September 26, 2017

The December 2016 issue of *Quadrant* includes my reflection (see below: "[Pope Francis's Version of Catholic Wisdom](#)") on Pope Francis's contribution to Catholic social and political reflection. I write as both

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a Catholic and a student of political philosophy, one who respects the person and office of the Pope, but who is troubled by Pope Francis's increasing tendency to conflate Catholic wisdom with a left-leaning secular humanitarianism. I took my bearing from the most considered reflections of the Pope (his encyclical on ecological matters, his repeated evocations of divine mercy, his apostolic letters on the joy of the gospel and on human and divine love, as well as his thought-provoking speeches to the European parliament and to the American Congress). I found much in Francis that is in continuity with his great predecessors (much more than many of his critics acknowledge). But I also find much that smacks of the *bien-pensant* and the politically correct. Still, the balance in these official documents and speeches tilts towards sobriety, thoughtfulness, and fidelity to the great tradition of Catholic wisdom.

The same cannot be said if one pays attention to the interviews and off-the-cuff remarks by the Pope that have come to dominate the public impression of his pontificate. He got off to a bad start when he told journalists on his return from the World Youth Day in Brazil in 2013 "who am I to judge?" the activities and motives of homosexual Catholics who attempt to remain in communion with Christ and his Church. He should have anticipated that his remarks would be used at the service of moral relativism and by those who attempt to undermine traditional marriage in the name of open-ended "love" and "marriage equality." Recently, returning from another World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland, the Pope made the fantastic and disturbing claim that "Catholic violence" is just as much a problem as "Islamic violence"—and this right after the brutal assassination of Father Jacques Hammel by Islamist terrorists in a church in northern France in the summer of 2016. The only example of "Catholic violence" that Pope Francis could come up with was that of a baptized young man who had killed his girlfriend for clearly non-religious reasons or motives. The Pope insisted that every religion had its "fundamentalists," Islam no more than others. This is morally obtuse and at odds with all the evidence. And the Pope claimed, with no supporting arguments and many leftist clichés, that Islamic terrorists commit heinous acts of violence in response to poverty and social injustice. Capitalism, and the "god of money," were the ultimate source of terrorism in the modern world. These sorts of haphazard claims, which are most clearly more ideological than Christian, make it harder to respect a Pope whose more considered reflections deserve our attention and respect.

This colossal failure of practical reasoning is typical of Francis's spontaneous or off-the cuff-remarks. He displays a remarkable lack of rhetorical discipline, which can only undermine the integrity of his pontificate and of the papacy more generally. Recently in an interview with the leftist Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari, he claimed that it is the Communists today who "think like Christians." He ignored the Church's principled and long-standing opposition to every form of totalitarianism. Communists are said by Francis to have a special Christ-like concern for the poor. The Pope is silent about the tens of millions of ordinary workers and peasants who perished at the hands of ideological regimes of the Communist type in the 20th century. Cardinal Zen of Hong Kong recently wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that the Pope has no understanding of Communist theory and practice, that he associates Communists exclusively with those activists and intellectuals imprisoned or killed by the military government during the "dirty war" in Argentina during the 1970's. In a word, his vision is remarkably parochial and blind to the greatest evil of the twentieth century, totalitarianisms inspired by viciously anti-Christian ideology. Francis has obviously not reflected in a serious way on Pope John Paul II's deeply personal experience with ideological tyranny in its Nazi and Communist forms. And just the other day, he spoke about how he was "grieving" for the dead tyrant of Cuba, a man who turned that fabled island into an island prison and who persecuted the Catholic Church for many decades (even outlawing Christmas for thirty years). We Christians are obliged to pray for our enemies, but we are also required to know who they are and to vigorously oppose those who threaten liberty and human dignity and the fundamentals of political civilization. No pope should confuse a tyrant—especially one who was at the same time ideological and megalomaniacal—with a statesman deserving of our respect. The Pope's comments on Communism and Castro do not honor the truth or contribute to intellectual and moral clarity or seriousness.

The Pope also freely "psychologizes" those who remain faithful to the Latin Mass. They are said to be "rigid," suffering from some form of Pharaism. No mercy or understanding is directed at their quarter. These ill-considered remarks are an implicit assault against his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI who aimed during his short pontificate to restore greater dignity—and beauty—to the Catholic liturgy. Is he, too, to be subjected to these reductive and insulting categories? When Cardinal Burke and three other Cardinals issue a "dubia" requesting clarification on the ambiguities created by a famous footnote in *Amoris Laetitia* (does the Church still stand with Christ in affirming the indissolubility of marriage and in repudiating "situational ethics"), the Pope remains silent even as he criticizes the "legalism" of those who dare request doctrinal and moral clarity. Some left-wing ultramontanists have gone even further, arguing that the four should be deprived of the Cardinalite and even accusing them of "heresy" and "apostasy" for remaining faithful to age-old Catholic teaching. None of this is good for the unity of the Church and could point to schism down the line.

I do not believe we are obliged to honor or imitate the defects in practical reasoning that characterize the Pope's all too numerous off-the cuff-remarks. And as Ross Douthat has recently written in the *New York Times*, his "winks" and "nods" about Communion for the divorce and the remarried have no authoritative status as Catholic teaching. My hope is that the Pope learns some rhetorical discipline and ceases to distress faithful Catholics with ill-

considered judgments that properly belong to the prudence of faithful laymen (citizens and statesman) informed by what the Church used to call “right reason.” In my article, I have chosen to analyze those statements and writings of Pope Francis that deserve serious attention from Catholics and non-Catholics alike. This is Francis at his most serious. Here he speaks not as a political commentator, activist, or amateur psychologist, but as the guardian of a Christian wisdom which at its best “knows the truth about man.” This Francis is the subject of my article. I purposefully steered clear of what I am tempted to call the “other Francis.”

Pope Francis’s Version of Catholic Wisdom

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Rather than indulging his inclination to echo the opinions and prejudices of the Left’s progressive choir, the Pontiff would benefit from the example of John Paul II and Benedict XVI in honouring the timelessness of the best Catholic social and political thought.

Pope Francis is widely acclaimed today, less for his Catholic wisdom than for the fact that he is perceived by secular (and some religious) opinion as some kind of “progressive”. Whether this will lead many to return to the Catholic Church or reconsider “the truth about man” that it proffers is highly doubtful. There is an element of the *bien-pensant* in Francis’s papacy, a tendency in his utterances and self-presentation to confirm widely held Left-liberal elite opinions about politics and the world.

The consensus around Pope Francis is selective and tends towards the ideological. His admirers, and the Pope himself sometimes, confuse Christian charity with secular humanitarianism. Francis’s ill-disciplined off-the-cuff remarks are treated with utmost seriousness, and the part of his thought that is in continuity with his great predecessors is largely ignored, if not explained away. Among conservative Catholics there is deep and, I would suggest, excessive suspicion of the Pope and a growing sense that he confuses his personal judgments, largely shaped by his Argentinian experience, with the full weight of Catholic wisdom.

How does one find one’s way in the midst of this confusion? What is needed is the deployment of a “hermeneutic of continuity”, one that forthrightly confronts Francis’s continuities and discontinuities with the great tradition of Catholic thought that preceded him. Out of justice, we owe the Pope both respect and the full exercise of the arts of intelligence.

Caring for our Common Home

Pope Francis’s May 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’ (Praise Be to You)* is a perfect illustration of these continuities and discontinuities. There is much about it that is thoroughly orthodox and even traditionalist. Pope Francis repeats old Christian wisdom of a decidedly anti-modern cast when he laments the project of modern mastery which reduces human beings to “lords and masters” of nature. He affirms human uniqueness, “which transcends the spheres of physics and biology”, and emphasises our stewardship over the whole of creation. Nonetheless,

Francis's is noticeably more a theology of creation than a theology of redemption and is thus incomplete. Francis's theological defence of biodiversity probably understates the fact that organisms and species come and go quite independently of the alleged rapaciousness of human beings. This brings us to a fundamental tension in his encyclical: a society that attempts to preserve pristine nature as it is, all in the name of not "sinning" against creation, cannot meet the goal of providing "sustained and integral development" for the poor, a goal that is also central to Francis's pontificate.

Francis reminds us that technological progress is not coextensive with moral progress. He recounts the central role that technology played in the murderous rampages of communism and Nazism. In the best tradition of conservative moralism, he counsels "clear-minded self-restraint" and a "setting of limits". His critique of a one-dimensional "technological paradigm" that assumes that economics and technology can solve all our problems, without the help of virtue and self-limitation, is salutary and consistent with the best Catholic and conservative wisdom.

Pope Francis is not wrong when he argues that "modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism" linked to a "Promethean vision of mastery over the world". Man is not God and should eschew all projects of human self-deification. All social progress demands respect for limits and efforts at self-limitation. These are words of wisdom that the secular world desperately needs to hear. Yet he remains tepid on the contribution that markets and technological innovation can make in addressing a problem such as climate change. He almost always identifies markets with greed, inequality, economic imperialism and environmental degradation. Moreover, he is silent about the horrendous environmental devastation that accompanied and characterised totalitarian socialist systems in the twentieth century. Democratic capitalist systems, in contrast, have remarkable powers of self-correction.

As George Will has argued, one has only to compare the levels of pollution in Dickens's London with those in today's London, or look at the remarkable transformation of the Thames over the past fifty years, to question Francis's identification of capitalist "progress" with the accumulation of "debris, desolation and filth". To be sure, Francis occasionally notes that "business is a noble vocation" that "is directed to producing wealth and improving the world". But such balanced statements occur relatively infrequently; Francis spends much more time excoriating profit motives and lecturing on the evils of air-conditioning and the full array of consumer goods. (He even has a good word to say about subsistence farming, a way of life the poor are so desperate to escape that they flee to monstrously large and dangerous cities.)

Pope Francis loves the poor and reminds us of our special duty to be concerned with their fate. At his best, he is a moving poet and theologian of charity. Still, the biblical conception of the poor is not reducible to material poverty. One only has to think about the tension between the "poor" and the "poor in spirit" in the Sermon on the Mount. The poor are not always victims, and terrible crimes were committed in the name of the poor or the "proletariat" in the twentieth century.

In the summer of 2015, the *Economist* called Pope Francis a “Peronist”. That characterisation is apt. Peronist populism created a “rancid political culture in Argentina” that emphasised class struggle and redistribution above lawful wealth-creation. Argentina went from being the fourteenth-richest country in the world in 1900 to the sixty-third today. Sadly, Pope Francis seems to be rather indulgent towards despotic regimes that speak in the name of the poor—his silence about the persecution of mainly Catholic dissidents in Cuba was deafening. During the welcoming ceremony at Jose Marti International Airport in Havana on September 19, 2015, he spoke of his “sentiments of particular respect” for Fidel Castro, a totalitarian tyrant who subjugated the people of Cuba for fifty years and who viciously persecuted the Church.

All of this is disappointing, to say the least. The poor need political liberty, too, and the opportunities that come with private property and lawfully regulated markets. It is all the more striking then that Pope Francis never reiterates the Church’s defence of private property, a central concern of Catholic social teaching going back to Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

The Pope should also be more careful about endorsing “a very solid scientific consensus” on the causes and likely results of climate change. “Climate change” has always been with us. The “Little Ice Age” brought ice and bitter cold to North America and northern Europe for centuries. Moreover, a considerable “scientific consensus” existed in support of the Club of Rome’s 1972 report that predicted, in apocalyptic tones, that the earth would run out of crucial resources by the year 2000. That model was also computer-generated. The “ecological conversion” recommended by the Pope should avoid the secular apocalypticism that informs a good part of the environmental movement.

Pope Francis is admirably critical of abortion and population control as means of addressing our ecological “crisis”. He even criticises “gender theory” (have you heard that reported in media accounts?). But the apocalyptic dimensions of his encyclical have won him some strange bedfellows. The Vatican invited the German scientist John Schellnhuber to Rome as one of the speakers when the encyclical was released—even though he is on record defending population control and asserting that the earth can sustain only a billion people.

The Pope mentions “subsidiarity” only once in his encyclical; but he waxes poetical about a “true world political authority”. Repeatedly, Francis shows remarkable faith in the capacity of an elite of international technocrats to govern the world.

The Joy of the Gospel

Pope Francis has emphasised the joy that accompanies the proclamation of—and fidelity to—the Gospel. His 2013 apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* is a call to recover the “good news” in all its amplitude. One must never lose sight of “the delightful and comforting joy of evangelising”, of spreading God’s word with the love and hope that are the hallmarks of God’s Kingdom. While not devoted mainly or exclusively to the social teaching of the Church, the document nonetheless touches on fundamental aspects of the Christian engagement with the contemporary world.

Regrettably, the document's appropriation of Catholic social thought is surprisingly selective. Gone are the Church's warnings against ideological utopianism, its qualified defence of a market economy rooted in rule of law and sound mores, its defence of private property as necessary for personal dignity and the exercise of the moral virtues, and its forthright condemnation of the socialist confiscation of human freedom. Pope Francis repeatedly states that his fierce condemnations of liberal capitalism are in full continuity with the Church's social teaching. Still, it is hard not to see that what is distinctive to Francis is a series of emphases that tend to give a distinctly "progressivist" turn to Catholic social reflection.

Francis rightly emphasises that the Christian Gospel cannot "be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life, without concern for the soundness of civil institutions, without a right to offer an opinion on events affecting society". But rather than identifying Christian engagement in politics with Catholic statesmen from Thomas More in the sixteenth century to Adenauer and de Gaulle in the twentieth, the Pope evokes the social witness of Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Teresa of Calcutta. Both great souls preach an awe-inspiring eschatological holiness, but they are not remotely statesmen and have little to say about the properly *civic* dimensions of the common good in a sinful and fallen world. Thus, his emphasis on Christian political engagement has a decidedly perfectionist cast. The Pope speaks about the desire of "authentic faith" to "change the world", to "fight for justice" and to engage in the activity of "building a better world".

Christians must indeed fight for justice, but as St Augustine taught in *The City of God*, no political order is simply just and no political order will, or ever can, be. That is to hope for too much in a fallen world. There are better and worse political regimes and there are limits to justice inherent in the human condition. Christians must indeed work for decency. They must be fearless witnesses to truth and justice. And yet, in a profound sense the world cannot be "changed". Efforts to establish the kingdom of God on earth lead to misery and tyranny, and place humanitarian concerns above Christian truth and the drama of the human soul. Francis's unqualified appeals for us to "change the world" tend to emphasise this worldly amelioration above the supernatural destiny of man. His language, perhaps unintentionally, tends to reinforce the progressivism inherent in a distinctively late-modern sensibility regarding politics.

Pope Francis desires a "Church which is poor and for the poor". This affirmation is in the best tradition of Christian wisdom and moral witness. But again he rarely emphasises the tension between "the poor" and the "poor in spirit" which is so central to the Gospel's account of what is today called "the preferential option for the poor". The poor as a sociological category can be selfish, rapacious and prone to manipulation by demagogues, even as the rich can be oppressive and unjust and confuse their good fortune with moral virtue. To his credit, the Pope does note that the option for the poor cannot be reduced to government programs or "unruly activism" and above all suggests a "true concern for the person". Given the general trajectory of his thought, such remarks offer welcome qualifications.

Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation has little or nothing positive to say about the market economy. Rather than emphasising social and political measures to ameliorate poverty and to help the poorest of the poor, the Pope endorses government action to promote "a better

distribution of income”. This is undoubtedly in some tension with the Catholic Church’s long-standing and tough-minded support of the principle of subsidiarity. A state dedicated to full-scale redistribution will hardly respect decentralisation and local initiatives. Francis grudgingly notes the legitimacy of private property if it serves larger “social” purposes. Yet he also insists that solidarity “must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them”. The Pope too easily goes back and forth from theological to socio-political affirmations. That oscillation clearly has given rise to ideological interpretations of his thought on the part of many journalists and politicians.

Pope Francis proffers many personal prudential judgments that have a disturbing tendency to ignore or underplay the Church’s age-old opposition to political utopianism and its concerns about the threat that many versions of socialism pose to human freedom and dignity. He rightly strikes a note of modesty regarding the supposed comprehensiveness—and infallibility—of the Church’s practical recommendations to the state and civil society: “The Church does not have solutions for every particular issue.” He leaves to thoughtful laymen the task of discerning “those programs which best respond to the dignity of each person and the common good”.

His own prudential judgments are interesting and worthy of respectful consideration. But they are not coextensive with Christian political wisdom. For example, the Pope states that “authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Koran are opposed to every form of violence”. This is a rare concession to political correctness pure and simple. Mohammed murdered many infidels, including the defenceless Jews of Medina. He was a warrior as well as a religious figure. And authentic Islam endorses *jihad of the sword* even if it is not the only or highest meaning of *jihad* or struggle in the Koran or the Islamic tradition. Nothing is gained by obfuscating the troubling fact that “violent fundamentalism” finds some justification in “authentic Islam” and that Islam has never been a “religion of peace”, a fact fully acknowledged by Pope Benedict XVI in his 2007 Regensburg Address.

The Church and Europe

The future and destiny of the Christian faith have always been tied to the future and destiny of Europe. Christianity became a truly “universal” religion when St Paul crossed over to Macedonia to bring the “good news” to the Greeks. Before Pope Francis, all those who have held the See of Peter have been Europeans (the Argentinian Bergoglio is himself of Italian descent and speaks Italian as one of his native languages). The Church is inescapably “Eurocentric” and at the same time inescapably universalistic, in part due to the providential encounter of the Church with Greek philosophy and Roman culture, as Pope John Paul II liked to point out. The Church cannot be indifferent to the fate of European liberty. If Christianity is in the process of losing its European sources of vitality, this would be an immeasurable loss for Europe and for the integrity of the Christian religion. Much is at stake in the Christian religion’s continuing ability to inform Europe’s practice of liberty and its understanding of human dignity.

Pope Francis’s fullest articulation of the relationship between Christianity and Europe can be found in his November 25, 2014, address to the European parliament. He notes that Europe is now whole and free, and that the division into “opposing blocs” is a thing of the past. Like John

Paul II, Pope Francis suggests that the defence of the dignity of the human person is unthinkable without Christianity and the multiple ways in which it has helped “shape an awareness of the unique worth of each individual person”. Modern Europe must learn not only from “recent events” (the totalitarian denial of human liberty and dignity in the twentieth century) but also from Christianity’s “transcendent” affirmation of the human person. The Pope argues that there can be no true dignity if human thought and religious liberty are repressed, if the rule of law does not provide a bulwark against tyranny (it might have helped to speak these words in Cuba, too). And he defends the social preconditions of human dignity, rooted as they are in guaranteeing the basic needs of the individual and of employment that makes possible dignified work.

Like his immediate predecessors, Pope Francis defends human rights against the encroachments of a tyrannical state. He also criticises the “misuse” of the concept of human rights: severed from all notions of a “greater good”, appeals to the pure autonomy of human rights can readily become new sources “of conflicts and violence”. The human person, so understood, is quite distinct from the “monadic” and wilful individual. In one of the best passages in the speech, Pope Francis connects “transcendent human dignity” to an understanding of an enduring human nature that is informed by the “innate” human capacity “to distinguish good from evil”. Alluding to St Paul, he speaks of a “compass” within our hearts, which “God has impressed upon all creation”—thus implicitly appealing to “natural law”.

The Pope emphatically states that human freedom is not “absolute”, but always refers to “beings in relation”. Today, that understanding of human freedom and dignity is threatened by a technology that escapes moral-political control (Francis habitually refers to a “throwaway culture” which readily disposes of persons and things). If Europe is to remain faithful to “the centrality of the human person” it must remain open to “the transcendent”. However, one of this address’s troubling lacunae is its failure to even refer to the European nation as the home of self-government and free and dignified political life. There is no mention in his address of France, Italy, Germany, Poland or any other European nation. He defends the “diversity proper to each people, cherishing particular traditions, acknowledging its past history and its roots”. But he never speaks of the political form that is the nation, the concretised political form that is the home of the very traditions that he rightly says must be safeguarded today.

Churchill memorably argued at Zurich on September 19, 1946, that European unity could only be built on reconciliation and co-operation between a “spiritually great France” and a “spiritually great Germany”. There is no Europe, or European Union, without the self-governing nation. As the French Catholic political philosopher Pierre Manent has argued, the European nation allowed Christians “to govern oneself by the guidance of one’s own reason and with attention to grace”. It allowed “for the collaboration of human prudence and divine Providence”. The Church needs to relearn the language of humane national loyalty, a language that cannot be confused with the kind of toxic and pagan nationalism that abhors the Christian proposition and genuine human universality.

Francis speaks about “uniform systems of economic power at the service of unseen empires”.

Some of this is unduly ominous, some of it reflects perfectly legitimate concerns about

unchecked globalisation. Repeating some of the ecological themes that have been central to his papacy, he emphasises that “each of us has a personal responsibility to care for creation”. He reminds us that we are “stewards, but not masters” of nature. Lamentably, however, Pope Francis shows no awareness that increasingly deep ecology has become a “secular religion” shorn of all forms of Christian humanism. Christians are called to enjoy nature and use it properly. They are never called to deify it or make it an idol in place of the transcendent God.

The Pope also treats “the question of migration” as a strictly humanitarian concern. “We cannot allow the Mediterranean to become a vast cemetery!” That point is undoubtedly true. But it is not enough. Francis does not address legitimate questions of security in an age marked by terrorism, nor does he recognise that the West could be fundamentally transformed by allowing millions of Muslims, mainly young men (and some markedly unfriendly to Western “values”) to enter a Europe which has not wholly left behind its fruitful encounter and engagement with Christianity.

Statesmen, even Catholic statesmen, must weigh and balance the full array of legitimate social and political concerns. Their decisions cannot be ruled wholly by humanitarian considerations or by a sentimentality that abstracts from difficult truths and decisions. That perspective must inform Catholic social teaching if it is to avoid becoming a form of what Alexis de Tocqueville derided as “literary politics”.

The Church and America

The United States is the world’s most successful experiment in democratic self-government and a bulwark, for good or for ill, of international order. It led resistance to the worst forms of totalitarianism in the twentieth century. It has a large and vibrant (if declining) Catholic community and it provides a disproportionate share of the resources that are necessary for the Church to carry out its responsibilities in the world. What is more, the United States is increasingly a laboratory for the unfolding of both the best and worst features of liberty in the modern world. The Church therefore cannot remain silent about America or the American proposition that “all men are created equal” (in the memorable words of the Declaration of Independence). The Pope’s “Address to a Joint Session of the United States Congress” on September 24, 2015, accordingly is important both as a judgment about the American proposition and as a statement of how the Church understands Christian engagement in the contemporary world. He states that democracy “is deeply rooted in the mind of the American people”. And he invokes the inviolable dignity of the human person and cites the “self-evident truths” of the Declaration of Independence. Pope Francis points out the myriad affinities that exist between what it means to be a Catholic and what it means to be an American.

But he also warns against politics becoming “a slave to the economy and finance”. He fashions a vision of the political common good where “particular interests” are sacrificed “in order to share, in justice and peace, its goods, its interests, its social life”. What is missing from all of this is a conception of politics that knows how to reconcile individual rights with a substantial conception of a shared or common good—a conception of politics for which the classical and Christian traditions of moral and political reflection provide ample resources.

The Pope acknowledges that business can aid in the fight against poverty and in the creation and distribution of wealth. He states that “the right use of natural resources, the proper application of technology and the harnessing of the spirit of enterprise are essential elements of an economy which seeks to be modern, inclusive and sustainable”. He is no Luddite; he does not pine for an economic order that escapes the challenges of modernity. Francis’s anti-capitalist rhetoric, on fiery display in the speeches he delivered in Latin America earlier in 2015, is considerably muted in this address. (One heard little about the “nobility” of business or the essential place of the “spirit of enterprise” when Francis fulminated against capitalism in Bolivia and elsewhere.)

Francis also pays eloquent tribute to four exemplary Americans: Abraham Lincoln’s defence of liberty and equality and his struggle against slavery and for a “new birth of freedom” in the aftermath of the Civil War; Martin Luther King’s struggle for racial justice and “liberty in plurality and non-exclusion”; Dorothy Day’s quest for “social justice”; and Thomas Merton’s “capacity for dialogue and openness to God”. There is much to be recommended in the lives and struggles of these four great Americans (though it must also be noted that Dorothy Day’s admirable work for the poor was accompanied by a troubling vitriolic hostility to a market economy and a militant pacifism that denied the legitimacy of self-defence against totalitarian aggression—in this regard, she was not faithful to the full range of Catholic social teaching).

The Pope uses this occasion to denounce “every type of fundamentalism” that gives rise to violence and “ideological extremism”. But again, he fails, perhaps out of undue ecumenical sensitivity, to mention the Islamist extremism that is the source of so many “brutal atrocities” today. He warns against “simple reductionism which sees only good and evil”. He is right to criticise that kind of moral fanaticism, uninformed as it is by charity and a humanising recognition of the complexity of the soul. However, he says nothing about the scourge of our time in the prosperous and democratic West, a debilitating moral relativism that denies evil and sin and collaborates with political correctness in all its forms. What Pope Benedict XVI called “the dictatorship of relativism” is a grave threat to American and democratic liberty and to the integrity of souls in the contemporary world. The failure to mention the threat of relativism is a missed opportunity.

In the Name of Mercy

Pope Francis has placed extraordinary emphasis on the proclamation of God’s mercy—he issued an Extraordinary Jubilee Year on Mercy in 2016 and published a book of conversations on this theme with Andrea Torielli, *The Name of God Is Mercy*. Pope Francis routinely speaks of a humanity that is “deeply wounded” by the effects of “original sin” and man’s need of the mercy of a gracious God. Yet he rarely speaks of repentance.

As the German Catholic philosopher Robert Spaemann has written, Pope Francis sometimes “gets ahead of God’s mercy”. For instance, he rightly speaks of the need to treat homosexuals with delicacy and to prevent them from being “marginalised”, but there is no talk of abstinence, or the forswearing of sin. Repentance is not emphasised as a precondition for engagement with the life of the Church. There is a larger problem here. The emphasis on the gratuitous love

of God seems to crowd out the repentance that is the precondition for the soul's receptivity to divine grace and mercy. In a relativistic age, people are prone to take God's grace for granted, to assume that sin isn't truly sinful, that it doesn't distance the human person from the light of God.

The Pope does not explicitly acknowledge the difference between a Christianity that recognises the legitimate place of punishment and a secular humanitarian ethos that is guided by free-floating compassion. Divine mercy is not humanitarian compassion. It is not a substitute for personal repentance and the firm, if humane, exercise of the rule of law. If one "gets ahead of God's mercy", one risks reinforcing the tragedy of the age: the denial of sin, evil and personal responsibility. The evocation of divine mercy must never reinforce what Pope Benedict XVI called "the dictatorship of relativism". These are matters that call forth reflection and discernment on the part of all faithful Christians.

The Family in the Modern World

Released in the spring of 2016, Pope Francis's *Amoris Laetitia* is for the most part quite traditional in character. Pope Francis engages in a beautiful exegesis of what scripture has to say about the family. His reading of St Paul's famous hymn to love in I Corinthians is one of the highlights of this document. Insightful and lyrical, this discussion prepares the way for a luminous discussion of conjugal love, "the love between husband and wife, a love sanctified, enriched and illuminated by the grace of the sacrament of marriage". Unfortunately, the Pope's discussion is routinely marred by a tendency to redefine Christian family life in terms of "values" that the Church presents to the world. The Church's teaching is here presented as a "demanding ideal" to which fallible men will necessarily fall short.

The Pope notes that the Church can "hardly stop advocating marriage simply to avoid countering contemporary sensibilities". But he seems to want to meet the world halfway in the name of "compassion" and human frailty. The work suffers from a latent, and at times not so latent, bi-focalism: the Church must not "desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage" in a world marked by moral indifference and "relativism" and yet, by redefining the Church's teaching on the good life in terms of amorphous "values" and "ideals", Francis moves far away from the Church's traditional categories of "goods" and "virtues".

He assumes an unbridgeable gap between the ideal and reality—for example, in a now famous footnote, leaving too much room for pastoral discernment in dealing with cases of adultery and divorce and remarriage. He again risks getting ahead of God's mercy when he asks the Church to forgive or overlook objectively sinful moral choices and conditions, without repentance or a change in the sinner's behaviour. He acknowledges that it is wrong to place the unions of homosexuals "on the same level as marriage". But what exactly prevents the same misplaced compassion and mercy that he says we should have for the divorced and remarried from being applied to homosexual unions? Shouldn't humanitarian compassion also be at work here? Francis gives us little principled reason not to think so. He seems to remain ever-faithful to the "ideal". But whether that is the right way to describe fidelity to the Gospel and the moral law is another question.

Conclusion

Let me be clear: there is wisdom and insight to be found in the writings, speeches and addresses of Pope Francis. He is at his best when he thinks and writes in continuity with the full weight of Christian wisdom and in continuity with the insights of his immediate predecessors. But when he departs from them, he tends to confuse humanitarian concerns with properly Christian ones. He often gives a one-sided “progressivist” reading of Catholic social teaching. Remarkably, he seems to have learned very little about the gravest evil of the twentieth century, totalitarianism, hence his troubling indulgence towards communist tyranny in Cuba.

Pope Francis could benefit from paying more attention to the reflective experiences of John Paul II with totalitarian communism and Pope Benedict XVI with Nazi barbarism. No doubt, if he did so, his thought would resonate more clearly with the timelessness of the best of Catholic social and political thought. At the very least, he would be less apt in his writings and remarks to emphasise private judgments that too easily echo the progressive opinions and prejudices of his most vocal elite, Left-liberal fans.