

Pilgrimage to the Kingdom: The Ecclesiology of Francis's Social Magisterium

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Good afternoon! It is my privilege and pleasure to be with you. I've been enjoying the presentations and especially hearing how they relate to your own experiences and insights. I'm particularly appreciative of our hosts for their hospitality, and for our translators who make this encounter possible. By training, I am a systematic theologian with a pastoral inclination. This means in part that I seek to understand how our faith claims and actions as a church fit together in such a way that they are coherent—literally, how our beliefs all stick together and make sense. Pope Francis's term for this is “integral” or integration, and today I ask you to consider with me how Catholic social teachings are integral to our beliefs about Christ, the Holy Spirit, and our church. My claim is that Francis's social magisterium is rooted in who we are called to be as church, and in turn this magisterium not only encourages but also challenges us to conversion in faithfulness to our baptismal vocation. To look for how the church's nature and Catholic social teaching are integrally related, I provide two examples from *Fratelli Tutti*. Through these examples, I believe we can see that Francis's social teaching is not simply a finger pointed at the larger world to “do better.” Rather, it is grounded in and provides insight into how we the church must continually grow as missionary disciples.

In *Fratelli Tutti*'s fifth chapter, Pope Francis focuses on politics and considers what it truly means to be “a people.” He is addressing political contexts that go beyond the church, and the methods and aims proper to secular politics. And yet, I believe Francis' vision of what it means to be “a people” is intimately related to the metaphor of the church as the “people of God” that Vatican II reflected on with great deliberation.

The council's document on the church, *Lumen Gentium*, considers a variety of metaphors for the church which are drawn from scripture—the church is both the flock and the sheepfold, it is the farm and vineyard, it is a spouse and in exile, it is the cornerstone and the temple. Perhaps most familiar to many is the metaphor from St. Paul of the church as the body of Christ, in which our diverse members are united in one body.¹ Yet it is the metaphor of the church as the people of God that is given its very own chapter in *Lumen Gentium*. The scriptural roots of this metaphor go back to the Book of Exodus, and the Hebrew people—enslaved in Egypt—being liberated by God.² This liberation from their political and social oppression frees the Hebrew people from human bondage, establishes their identity as God's people, and initiates a long pilgrimage—a migration—to the land promised by God. When Vatican II uses this metaphor, it takes pains to point out that this people of God is not a singular nation united by a particular language, culture, or geographic border. Rather, the people of God are comprised of all those gathered by God *throughout* different countries, cultures, and centuries. God's people are on pilgrimage within their own times, cultures, and places.

Pope Francis argues in *Fratelli Tutti* that an authentic people must have a “collective aspiration.”³ In Francis's view, this collective aspiration means a people is “capable of coming up with shared goals that transcend their differences and can thus engage in a common endeavor.”⁴ When thinking about the people of

¹ See *Lumen Gentium*, 6-8.

² See *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter 2.

³ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, October 3, 2020, 157. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

⁴ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 157.

God, the word *aspiration* is an evocative one. It calls to mind the Spirit of God, God's breath, or *ruah* in Hebrew. In the second creation story in Genesis, after God forms the human body from mud, God breathes into this body, thus it is God's Spirit who gives us life. This is the same Spirit through whom Mary conceived, the same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead and that in turn Christ offers with peace to his disciples, the same Spirit that propels the disciples beyond their fear and out of the upper room, the Spirit whose descent empowered people of different lands and cultures to hear and proclaim the gospel. This is the same Spirit whom we call "Father of the poor" in the sequence for the Feast of Pentecost. At baptism, emerging from the waters of the font, Christians breathe in God's Spirit of life, of Christ's life. If the Holy Spirit inspires us, then it makes sense that the Spirit's work is our collective aspiration—our hopes put into action as we huff and puff along in our pilgrimage.

Yet naming our collective aspiration and common endeavor seems to me to be a significant challenge for the church. To some extent, this is understandable: the church's mission can be spoken about from many perspectives that all grasp aspects of the church's purpose without naming its totality. Even so, I remain troubled about whether we are able to name our collective aspiration. Each fall, I teach a course on the church for a group of undergraduate Catholic leaders, and the course focuses on what it means for the church to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. When we discuss the church's unity, the students have little to no sense of the church's purpose as articulated by Vatican II, for instance, that God invites us to share in the life of the Trinity, that this union with God and one another begins in baptism and is nurtured through the Eucharist, that we are the people of God who include but also transcend nationality, race, and culture; that the church exists as a sign and instrument of salvation, and that we have a calling and responsibility to share Christ's ministry as priest, prophets, and kings.

Instead, when I ask students what our collective aspiration as Catholics is, the overwhelmingly consistent response is that our goal is to get to heaven. The more populist among them reply that our goal is to get to heaven and to take as many people with us as we can. This is a distressingly narrow understanding of our collective aspiration and shared endeavors as God's people. If I thought that this was only an example of late-adolescent thinking, I would be far less worried, however, I suspect that for many adult Catholics, getting to heaven is *the* answer they have—that is, if they've thought about the question of our collective aspiration at all.

What is the collective aspiration of the people of God? What are we inspired—empowered—by the Holy Spirit to do? *Lumen Gentium* indicates that through our baptism the people of God aspire to build the kingdom of God. And it's God's kingdom that I'd like us to reflect on together for a short while.

What is this "kingdom" thing that we, the people of God, are entrusted to build? When you think about kingdoms, you might think about a ruler, and the people who are ruled, about laws and customs, aristocracy versus peasantry, or a certain geographic region. Jesus announces the kingdom of God, not only with his words, but also with actions, with who he is. So, when we want to think about what the kingdom of God is, we need to think about how the Gospels describe Jesus. Reflect on this: What did Jesus spend his time doing? How did he interact with others? What did he teach people about what they should do? I think of him being born poor and how he taught that we should care for the poor; I think of him in Matthew's gospel with Mary and Joseph, the whole family political refugees after Jesus' birth as they hide in Egypt from King Herod. I think of how he reached out to heal those whose illness made them vulnerable or cut them off from their community.

I think about how he said that we must love God and our neighbors as ourselves—even our enemies!—and emphasized that anyone who is in need of mercy is our neighbor, how he made sure everyone who came to hear him speak had enough to eat, that he got angry when people were treated unjustly, and that he forgave sins.

You may have other examples, but all these play into how we should understand God’s kingdom, and how it is much different than any other nation on earth. Christ the King is very different than any other king, and Christ worked for a kingdom for all people, not only those who are baptized. Nor is this kingdom simply a “spiritual” one—or rather, the spirituality of the kingdom of God *includes* human dignity and the common good; access to healthcare and education, economic systems that allow for all life to flourish; care for the earth in recognition of our shared creatureliness; the dignity of work and rights of workers; and how the needs of migrants are met not only through acts of charity, but also through public policy. Pope Francis quotes the preface for the Solemnity of Christ the King, which describes God’s kingdom as “a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace.”⁵ Further, Francis indicates in his own words that this kingdom’s borders are not limited by baptism since the kingdom’s aim is to establish “love, peace and joy in every man and in all men.”⁶ Neither is the fullness of the kingdom of God limited to human beings. In *Laudato Si*, Francis writes:

The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator.⁷

It is this fullness that we as God’s people collaborate with the Holy Spirit to bring about.

It’s important to note that the kingdom of God is already present—it begins with the birth of Christ and Jesus proclaims it at the start of his public ministry. However, we must also say that the kingdom is “not yet” completed--obviously when we look around the world, we can see that justice, love, and peace aren’t fully established. Indeed, we are often confronted with the horrifying absence of justice, love, and peace. This “already” but “not yet” aspect of the kingdom of God is important to note, because it tells us about our mission as the people of God.

Christ begins the kingdom, and through baptism and the Holy Spirit, Christians are united with Christ. We are joined forever with God’s divine life, yes, but we are not baptized directly into heaven. We are united not only with Christ’s eternal life but are also united through the Holy Spirit with Christ’s way of living on earth. This work the church does to build the kingdom isn’t just a nice project for the church to occupy us until God swoops in at the end of it all. It’s not busy work. Rather, through the Holy Spirit, God collaborates with the church.

God makes use of the work the church does to bring everything into fulfillment in the fullness of the kingdom.

⁵ Francis, “Homily for Rite of Canonization of Blesseds, Solemnity of Christ the King,” November 23, 2014, quoting from Preface of the Solemnity of Christ the King, Year A. Accessed September 9, 2023.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20141123_omelia-canonizzazione.html

⁶ Francis, “Angelus,” July 27, 2014. Accessed September 9, 2023.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2014/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20140727.html

⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si*, May 24, 2014, 83. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

Frankly, building the kingdom of God in collaboration with God is a different

understanding of the church's purpose than we sometimes find elsewhere in Catholicism. This mission insists that the church does not exist for its own sake, and it refuses to make a sharp distinction between salvation, the church, and "The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted" as *Gaudium et Spes* states.⁸ This means that even when the pilgrimage is difficult, it is not enough just to grit our teeth and get through this vale of tears to heaven. That attitude makes it seem as though heaven is the goal area in a football game, and the world around us is just a midfield obstacle course in which we kick, weave, pass, and dodge in the desperate hope we will get the ball past the opposing team and into the net of heaven. *Lumen Gentium* doesn't speak in these terms at all. Saint John Paul II echoes the necessity of the work of the people of God when he teaches "by enduring the toil of work in union with Christ crucified for us, man in a way collaborates with the Son of God for the redemption of humanity."⁹ The church's work as the people of God is to build the kingdom of God. Building the kingdom isn't about dodging the opposing team—it's not about avoiding the cultural, social, and political structures around us—it's about the choices we make and actions we take to collaborate with God's will for love, justice, and peace, both within and beyond the church, for every human being and for all creation. Thus, Catholic social teaching is integrally related to the church's very nature and purpose.

Francis's social teaching also helps us to confront dangers that may arise within the people of God, and which prevent us from fulfilling our purpose of building the kingdom. He writes in *Fratelli Tutti*: "Lack of concern for the vulnerable can hide behind a populism that exploits them demagogically for its own purposes, or a liberalism that serves the economic interests of the powerful. In both cases, it becomes difficult to envisage an open world that makes room for everyone, including the most vulnerable, and shows respect for different cultures" (155). The church certainly has our own demagogues, those who draw people into a unity not based on the Holy Spirit, but rather rooted in fear and prejudice. A pilgrim people cannot flourish in an atmosphere motivated by fear of others either within the church or in the larger world. Fear dampens our ability to encounter the Spirit through one another with faith; prejudice stands between us and the ability to even look for the Holy Spirit at work in lives and cultures other than our own. To the extent that Catholic demagogues ignore the rational, ecclesial demagoguery stands in contradiction to the Catholic intellectual tradition which unites faith and reason in our pilgrimage to authentic knowledge of God. This is not to deny emotion's rightful place in spiritual discernment; Francis' Ignatian spirituality emphasizes the role of emotion in hearing and responding to Christ's call. Rather, exploitation of fear leads people into a unity not primarily with God or each other, but rather against the ones who are feared. In turn, those who are feared are cast further, often violently, to the margins rather than being drawn to the center of the church's concern, the rightful place of the vulnerable with whom and through whom we encounter and respond to Christ.

Similarly, as is becoming well known, Francis wishes for us to be a more synodal church. The word synod means to "walk together." Yet the economic liberalism Francis warns us of in the secular sphere clearly operates within the church and challenges a synodal path. When "money talks," church communities

⁸ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965, 1.

⁹ John Paul II, "Address to Scientists and Representatives of the United Nations University," Hiroshima, February 25, 1981, 422. Quoted in *Laudato Si'*.

are tempted to listen to the wealthy to the exclusion of attending to those whose financial or social poverty buys them no place at the table. It may not be in the economic interests of the powerful to hear the poor or disenfranchised speak boldly about their discernment of the Spirit's calling; it is not usual for the powerful to authentically position themselves to learn from the poor. Further, on a very practical level, economic liberalism can lead to systemic exclusion of some from synodal processes, blinding those with economic privilege in the church from seeing the circumstances of others in their community.

Both demagoguery and economic liberalism are related to the fundamental human problem Francis identifies in *Fratelli Tutti* as concupiscence, which he interprets as “the human inclination to be concerned only with myself, my group, my own petty interests.”¹⁰ Such an attitude stands in contradiction to a people who are God's, and not their own. It militates against what Francis envisions as central to the life of an authentic people who, he writes, are “living and dynamic . . . constantly open to a new synthesis through its ability to welcome differences.”¹¹ The people of God do not advance on our journey towards the fullness of the kingdom through exclusion rooted in fear or privilege. Rather, we must learn to be companions.

Francis' desire for a more synodal church seems to me a way for the people of God to convert from such self-centered concupiscence. For Francis, journeying together as God's people requires that we develop two qualities. The first is *parrhesia*. This a Greek word, and we find it in the Acts of the Apostles as the disciples are described as speaking through the Holy Spirit with bold honesty. Francis invites the people of God to a similar bold honesty in attesting to how we perceive the Holy Spirit at work within our lives and communities. Yet Francis also notes a second quality necessary for a synodal people of God: humility. Oftentimes in the Christian tradition, humility has been seen simply as the opposite of pride—arrogance or overestimation of ourselves and our abilities. However, it is wise to remember that as with many virtues, humility stands in the center between two extremes. Pride is at one extreme, and at the other is self-loathing or a despair of ourselves and our abilities. What then is humility? It is an accurate perception of ourselves in relation to God and others as opposed to the distorted perceptions of pride and despair. If we speak with *parrhesia*, Francis says, we should also listen with humility to other people's experiences of the Holy Spirit. Only with humility will we listen to their witness in order to truly reflect and learn. Both *parrhesia* and humility are necessary for the people of God to discern the call of the Holy Spirit, to hear more distinctly what the Spirit is asking of us in our own time and place, and to see more clearly the path of our pilgrimage to the kingdom of God. It's important to note that this requires our own conversion—both personally and communally—from a concupiscence that is narrowly focused on “me and my people” to the expansive consideration that God's people must give to all people. Further, this conversion helps to make us people of discernment—those who hear more distinctly, those who see more clearly—wherever and through whomever the Spirit is at work.¹²

¹⁰ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 166.

¹¹ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 160.

¹² See Amanda C. Osheim, *A Ministry of Discernment: The Bishop and the Sense of the Faithful* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016).

This conversion is not about us coming up with a holiness rubric or grading scale—in other words, it is not about our identification of which people the Holy Spirit is speaking through and to what extent. Rather, it is our conversion to becoming ever increasingly the people of God who can recognize and respond to the Holy Spirit at work in everyone and throughout creation.

In both his social magisterium and also in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of *encounter*: our need for an ongoing encounter with Christ who meets us with mercy and tenderness whenever we turn to him; our need to encounter other people with full regard for their dignity, what they may ask of us, and what we may learn from them; our need to build a “culture of encounter” that encourages and supports these transformative relationships. As noted in Meghan Clark’s presentation, Francis highlights the story of the good Samaritan in a particular way when he describes this culture of encounter. This story makes me wonder what happened before and after the story. What shaped the Samaritan into a person who acts with mercy? Did the injured man and Samaritan develop a relationship following his return from Jerusalem? These questions point me to another word Francis uses frequently that to me links the people of God with our mission to build the kingdom. That word is “accompany,” to companion. To illustrate accompaniment and companionship, let’s look at two scripture passages. The first is from Luke’s Gospel and is the story of the disciples on the way to Emmaus following Christ’s death and reports of his resurrection. Though they do not recognize him, Jesus becomes their companion on this journey, opening their eyes first to scripture to help them to see more clearly the events of the past several days. When it seems that he is about to part ways

. . . they urged him [Jesus], “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them. And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?” So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them who were saying, “The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!” Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24: 13- 35).

How is this about accompaniment? In part, the answer is found in the literal meaning of companion as those with whom eat bread: “com” means with; “panis” means bread, or food. In this Gospel passage, we are given a particular insight into what it means to be accompanied by Christ. If we are called to accompaniment in order to build the kingdom, the following questions come forward for me:

- When do we share meals with others, and how often? With whom do we share those meals?
- Who are the people with whom we never or rarely share a meal?
- What stands in our way of inviting others to “stay with” us? What invitations have we received and turned down? What tears us away from remaining with others?
- What daily choices about everyday life help us or prevent us from opening our eyes to seeing Christ in another? How do we spend our time, to whom do we listen, whom do we center and who are on the peripheries of our lives?

Another scripture provides insight into a second way of understanding what it means to accompany. Merriam Webster describes a companion as “one employed to live with and serve another.”¹³ For me, this calls to mind the *mandatum* in the Gospel of John: “If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do. Amen, amen, I say to you, no slave is greater than his master nor any messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you understand this, blessed are you if you do it” (John 13: 14-17). This passage prompts another series of questions.

- How do we “live with” and “serve” others in imitation of Jesus Christ?
- What privileges or assumptions must we surrender in order to kneel as Jesus did?
- How and why do we resist allowing others to serve us?
- What do we learn through serving others? What do we allow others to learn about us when they serve us? Does our service change us into companions?

Clearly becoming companions and building the kingdom of God will take work—to touch back on Paulo’s presentation yesterday, it is to change reality and is relational. It requires our conversion as individuals and as communities so we may more faithfully engage with the realities of our world from war to poverty to environmental degradation to migration. Perhaps it is helpful that in *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis reminds us “To be part of a people is to be part of a shared identity arising from social and cultural bonds. And that is not something automatic, but rather a slow, difficult process... of advancing towards a common project.”¹⁴ This emphasis on the challenge of becoming a people in general is significant for living as the people of God in particular. It is a reminder that being the people of God is a sacramental gift and not a magic potion. In other words, we should expect, be expectant, rather than to be cast into despair by the many challenges of becoming more fully the people of God. The difficulty of journeying together is neither a sign that we are traveling with the wrong people, nor is it itself a commentary on synodality as our means of transportation. Rather, being the people of God requires us to learn the ways of synodality and enter into a process of conversion to becoming companions.

As with all learning, we will make mistakes. Our progress in becoming more fully the people of God and building God’s kingdom will be, as Francis says, both slow and difficult. Yet we are never alone on our journey with Christ and the Holy Spirit as our collaborators and companions. I end this presentation with three questions for further reflection and conversation:

- What historical, cultural, and political contexts are the setting for my community to build the kingdom of God?
- How is my community and ministry building the kingdom of God?

With whom do I collaborate and how?

- How can we engage in conversion from concupiscence to companionship in a synodal church?

¹³ Merriam-Webster, “companion,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/companion> Accessed 9-16-2023.

¹⁴ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 158.