

Pope Francis: Catholicism, Peronism, and the Temptation of Ideological Dreaming

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José Mario Bergoglio, an Argentinian of Italian descent, Provincial General of the Society of Jesus in Argentina from 1973-1979 and Archbishop of Buenos Aires from 1998 to 2013, took the name of Pope Francis upon being elected pope on March 13, 2013 (with that saint's humility and deference to the goodness of the created order—the ecological order, Francis might say—clearly in mind). Unlike his august predecessors, the Polish Pope John Paul II and the German Pope Benedict XVI, Francis was neither a philosopher nor theologian of note and had indeed spent time teaching chemistry to high school students in northern Argentina. But the Argentinian pope nonetheless has a marked theological orientation or point of view. At the time of his election to the papacy, he had a reputation as an advocate of reform within the Catholic Church, but within the broad contours of Catholic orthodoxy. As pope from 2013 onward, he has spoken loosely (and enigmatically) about “making a mess of things” and of the imperative to “change the Church.” He habitually speaks of the Church as a “field hospital” and of the need to prioritize mercy above all else. But he rarely invokes the essential links between mercy, justice, and repentance, so central to historic Christianity. He is widely understood to be an advocate of “nonjudgmentalism” (“Who am I to judge,” he famously remarked in response to the papal legate to Uruguay being caught having sex with a male prostitute in a public park).

A Peronist?

His approach to Catholic social teaching has had a decidedly anti-capitalist bent, with the pope tending to identify social justice with a “progressivist” emphasis on egalitarianism, economic redistribution, and a broadly left-wing populism. Despite his occasional nod to business as a “noble vocation,” it has rightly been suggested by the economist Andrew Yuengert that Francis typically sees in arguments for economic competition “a mere cover for exploitation.”¹ In his speeches, encyclicals, and myriad off-the-cuff remarks, he often identifies the market order with oppression and domination by the greedy and rapacious. Even though Argentina was among the top fifteen industrialized nations in the world at the dawn of the twentieth century (fourteenth, to be precise) and at the same broad level of economic development as Australia in 1930, Pope Francis identifies her subsequent economic decline with the influence of “neoliberalism” and the machinations of amorphous and dictatorial “hidden interests,” as he often puts it. A much more plausible explanation is the excessive domination of the economy and civil society by the statist model of political economy inaugurated by dictator Juan Perón from 1943 onward. That approach to political economy did much to undermine the rule of law and stifle entrepreneurship as well as economic growth and creativity. Peronism has also displayed at best an ambiguous commitment to political liberty. It was birthed in the middle of World War II as a semi-fascist ideology that later took on strikingly progressive overtones. But through all its permutations it has remained statist through and through. Perón opened the Argentinian political process to the poor and working classes (arguably in a heavy-handed, demagogic way as evidenced by the constant appeal to the “people” by his faux-saintly wife Évita) while establishing a Caesarist regime that nonetheless tolerated some opposition.² Later twenty-first-century Peronists, such as Presidents Nestor and Cristina Kirchner, ruled heavy-handedly and with highly questionable democratic credentials.

In 2015, a leader in *The Economist* (July 9, 2015) identified Pope Francis as a Peronist, not a Marxist, and there is much evidence to support such an identification, at least in a broad sense.

In a 2023 book of interviews with the pope published in Spanish in Argentina, *The Shepherd: Francis's Challenges, Reasons, and Reflections on His Pontificate*, Pope Francis denies this label on the somewhat specious ground that he “was never affiliated with the Peronist party” and “was not even a party member or supporter of Peronism” (*Catholic News Agency*, February 28, 2023). It is true that he quarreled with the Kirchners when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires and showed no sympathy for the dictatorial propensities of some currents of Peronism. But he shared genuine affinities with the broader Peronist approach to political economy and the “social question.” In that volume, Francis was equally defensive when confronted with the charge that his own approach to political economy will tend to keep the poor immersed in poverty. In response to his generally sympathetic questioners, Francis nonetheless agreed that “it is by no means wrong to produce wealth for the good of all.”

To be sure, Francis has never been an advocate of an approach to liberation theology that advocated strict adherence to Marxist-style “social analysis” or that aggravated class conflict in an openly or aggressively un-Christian manner (approaches unequivocally condemned by his immediate predecessors). But his evident sympathy toward Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution in a series of addresses and remarks made during a visit to Cuba in 2015 led the Cuban-born Yale scholar of religion Carlos Eire to write biting, and with some justice, about Francis’s “preferential option for the oppressors” (*First Things* website, September 24, 2015). At a minimum, this non-Marxist pope is, as argued in the course of this essay, too indulgent toward despotic regimes that speak in the name of the poor.

Fraternity without Borders

Pope Francis has repeatedly claimed that he is “only” reiterating Catholic social teaching when he moves that teaching in an emphatically progressivist, liberationist, and humanitarian direction. That claim does not stand up to sustained critical analysis. For example, Pope Francis published an encyclical in 2020, *Fratelli*

Tutti,³ on “fraternity and social friendship,” that is unique in the history of the genre. It is not addressed to his brother bishops or the universal Church per se but rather speaks to universal humanity in a manner befitting its broadly humanitarian message.

Best described as a cross between an encyclical and a humanitarian manifesto, it invokes the authority of Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb and the 2019 Abu Dhabi declaration at least a dozen times, as if to say that the Holy Roman Pontiff is just one religious partisan of global humanity, among others. The encyclical’s presentation of the requirements of fraternal love partakes of humanitarian ideology as much as any distinctive Christian teaching. I say this without polemical intent. In proclaiming “fraternity without borders” and a “politics of love” (secs. 180–82), in recognizing “local flavor” (secs. 143–45) and global humanity as the twin poles of human existence, Pope Francis seems to bypass or overlook the familial and national expressions of fraternity and social friendship, that is the common good of a free and decent society.

Pope Francis’s identification of fraternity with humanity as such largely ignores the naturalness of love of one’s own and the dangers of embodying fraternity or social friendship at the level of unmediated humanity. One critic at *Crisis* magazine (*Crisis*, October 7, 2023) has rightly faulted the pope’s enthusiastic adoption of the French revolutionary slogan Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity (secs. 103–11) in seeming abstraction from the totalitarian, or at least highly ideologized, import of that revolutionary slogan. Pope Francis is surely no friend of totalitarianism, but he never acknowledges that politically enforced fraternity, grounded in abstract sentimentality, can give rise to new and inhuman forms of despotism. A prominent French aristocrat turned revolutionary once famously proclaimed, “Be my brother, or I will kill you.” Those words continue to chill the soul and to reveal the essence of revolutionary terror. An older Church was fully cognizant of the connection between coercive fraternity, atheistic humanism, and the confiscation of freedom and human dignity.

The lesson is clear: brotherhood, devoid of a sense of moral reciprocity and a deep appreciation of the capacity of fallen men

for evil, is capable of giving rise to the antithesis of true fellow-feeling and, indeed, to truly monstrous forms of political oppression. But sin and evil are barely acknowledged in this encyclical other than the predictable attack on the “hidden interests” that are alleged to manipulate markets and a liberal economic order. Sin and evil are barely mentioned. The encyclical verges on becoming a humanitarian manifesto or the mission statement of a nongovernmental organization, a proclivity of this pontificate regularly criticized by Cardinal Gerhard Müller, the former head of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Defense of the Faith under both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis.

Christian versus Ideological Responses to the Poor

Pope Francis’s genuine concern for the poor is evident in the 2020 encyclical, but he is too quick to elide the crucial biblical distinction between the “poor” and “poor in spirit.” The poor as a political category can be as despotic, self-seeking, and rapacious as the rich. In addition, the “people’s movements” (secs. 118–20) that the pope lauds are often demagogic and sympathetic to political and socioeconomic models that promote envy and that eliminate precious political, intellectual, and religious liberties. For example, Peronism, Castroism, Hugo Chavez’s “Bolivarian revolution” in Venezuela, and Evo Morales’s (and his successors’) despotic mix of socialist and indigenous ideologies in Bolivia hardly speak for liberty, human dignity, and the defense of the poor as Christ Jesus has enjoined us to do. As Pierre Manent has written, free-floating compassion is hardly a virtue in and of itself. To become a virtue, compassion must be “guided by the cardinal virtues of courage, justice, and prudence. Without this guidance, however, it does more harm than good.”⁴ Manent adds a striking reminder of the massive crimes committed in the name of humanitarian or revolutionary ideology: “Who could count those murdered in the twentieth century in the name of compassion for the ‘poor’ or for the ‘workers’?”⁵

And in each case, these leftist populist revolutionaries threatened the freedom of the Church to preach the Gospel and to

defend fundamental human liberties. The pope's failure to fully appreciate this is perplexing, to say the least. As I will argue, given his broad intellectual and political orientation (let us loosely call it Peronist, tinged by nonviolent advocacy of liberation theology), it is difficult for him to acknowledge enemies on the Left, at least in any robust and sustained way.

As already stated, throughout his papacy Pope Francis has repeatedly claimed that he is "only" reiterating Catholic social teaching when he moves that teaching in an emphatically progressive direction informed by doctrinaire egalitarianism and constant invocations of ill-defined "social justice." That claim is hardly credible in light of *Fratelli Tutti* and other authoritative and revealing Franciscan documents. For example, Pope Francis never repeats the Church's long-standing opposition to socialism in its various forms. Encyclicals such as Pope John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* (1991) and Pope Benedict XVI's *Spe Salvi* (2007) that persuasively and authoritatively expose the inhumanity of utopian and revolutionary ideologies in theory and practice are barely mentioned by this pope, and if they are, they are distorted or taken out of context. That failure is troubling, as sympathy for Communist theory (and even practice) becomes widespread among disaffected young people, including "progressive" Christians. When it comes to Catholic social teaching, Pope Francis has hardly pursued what theologians call "a hermeneutic of continuity."

When the Vatican celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Centesimus Annus* in 2016, Francis's acolytes invited Bernie Sanders and Evo Morales to speak, in open contempt for the principal themes and emphases of that great anti-totalitarian encyclical of the Polish pope. No reasonable or faithful Catholic can quarrel with Pope Francis's claim that the right to private property must serve larger "social purposes" (secs. 118–20). But his affirmation of the right to private property is so tepid, so qualified, that it distorts the very body of teaching it claims to represent (compare it on this point with Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* with its emphatic defense of private property as a natural right to be used liberally and responsibly). Despite an occasional (and welcome) rhetorical nod to

the nobility of business as a vocation (sec. 123), Francis generally sees economic initiative and the market order as realms dominated by greed, “hidden powers,” and criminal machinations, theme to which he repeatedly recurs. A more capacious defense of private property as necessary to human dignity and to the free economic initiatives that enrich civil society (and allow for the exercise of divinely ordained charity) is simply absent from the pope’s thought.

The Theological Status of the Nation

When Francis defends seemingly limitless “rights without borders” (sec. 121), he ignores the crucial role of self-governing political communities in sustaining social friendship, as well as the rights and obligations of a free society, at the only level where social friendship is politically viable. That cannot be done by effacing the morally necessary distinction between citizen and noncitizen. We must love our neighbor whoever he may be, but we are not obliged to become citizens of an amorphous and nonexistent global community. Humanity, so understood, is not the theme of the Gospel because humanity as such does not exist. As a personalist, as an impassioned defender of human dignity, Francis should grasp that essential truth. The seasoned Vatican observer John Allen has pointed out that Pope Francis occasionally acknowledges that a morally serious approach to immigration, legal and illegal, requires “prudence” as well as “heart” (*Crux*, September 13, 2017). But when Pope Francis spoke at Marseilles on September 22 and 23, 2023, he called for open borders on humanitarian grounds and did not even mention his host country, France (*AP News*, September 22, 2023). Moreover, the radical dechristianization that the continuing demographic transformation of Europe entails is not an explicit concern of his.

In perhaps his most impressive book, *Memory and Identity* (published in English in 2005), Pope John Paul II, a patriotic Pole and the most faithful of Christians, argued that “Catholic social doctrine holds that the family and the nation are both natural societies, not the product of mere convention.”⁶ He added, in words most worthy of Pope Francis’s attention, that “therefore, in human history they cannot be replaced by *anything else*” (my emphasis).

John Paul II proceeded to theologize, in a most impressive way, about the dignity of the self-governing nation, committed as it once was to Western and Christian ideals. He refused, too, to conflate or identify the “essential function of the nation” with “unhealthy nationalism.” Nowhere does Pope Francis refer to this crucial distinction.

But Pope John Paul II defended a firm yet moderate and self-critical conception of the nation that he identified with the virtue of patriotism: “Whereas nationalism involves recognizing and pursuing the good of one’s nation alone, without regard for the rights of all others, patriotism, on the other hand, is a love for one’s native land that accords rights to all other nations equal to those claimed for one’s own. Patriotism, in other words, leads to a properly ordered social love.” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a passionate Russian Christian and patriot, often maligned as an extreme nationalist, said much the same thing in almost identical language. But when the nation arises in Francis’s discussion, it is almost always associated with pathologies, as in *Fratelli Tutti*: “narrow and violent nationalism, xenophobia and contempt, and even the mistreatment of those who are different” (sec. 86).

Only the local and the global appear to have genuine ethical validity, or moral substance, in Francis’s account. He forgets that the nation was the natural home for the fruitful coexistence of what the French Catholic political thinker Pierre Manent has called “the pride of the citizen and the humility of the Christian.”⁷ And, as Manent added in his book *Beyond Radical Secularism*, “the nation understood as an exclusive valorization of one’s own people and homicidal aversion for people from elsewhere” only arose when Europeans “were subjected to regimes that explicitly rejected the God announced in the Bible.”⁸ And as Father Gaston Fessard, S.J. argued in his magisterial (and recently republished) 1936 book *Pax Nostra*,⁹ the nation is a dignified collective and moral personality without which the vocation of humanity as creatures under God cannot come to fruition. As Fessard states in the opening chapters of that book, the nation is too important to be abandoned to nationalists, and peace is too important to be ceded to irresponsible

pacifists. Pope Francis, to his credit, greatly admires Fessard's book on the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius. But he seems wholly unfamiliar with his equally profound theology of the nation.

Francis's Quasi-humanitarian Reading of the Parable of the Good Samaritan

Pope Francis's explication of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) in *Fratelli Tutti* provides a moving call to solidarity and love of neighbor (secs. 56–87). Yet he gives the parable a largely ethical, even humanitarian, reading. Where Augustine, Origen, and others of the Fathers read it theologically so that Christ is the central character, Pope Francis places *us* at the center of the narrative. In truth, the Samaritan of the parable speaks and acts with rare authority, and he finally leaves the care of the wounded and bloodied man to the innkeeper. He promises to return in the (indefinite) future. As Pierre Manent writes of Pope Francis's treatment of the Parable of the Good Samaritan in his 2020 encyclical, the pope presumes that men and women can meet the highest requirements of *caritas* without divine grace, and he is thus silent about Christ's own enduring role in this most famous of parables.¹⁰ Francis revealingly speaks of the "humanism" inherent in the parable as if that gets to the heart of the matter.¹¹ He emphasizes the need for all of us to exercise "our innate sense of fraternity, to be Good Samaritans who bear the pain of other people's troubles rather than fomenting greater hatred and resentment" (sec. 77).

That call is most welcome but must be understood on a more than humanitarian plane. Yet the face-to-face encounter with our neighbor in need is hardly a call for replacing political distinctions that serve the cause of social friendship and the civic good with sentimentalized global humanitarianism. Francis's lucid appeal to solidarity and brotherly love could be fruitfully supplemented by reflection on the moral and political advantages of decentralized authority, subsidiarity, and national self-government, themes long central to Catholic social teaching and to civic good sense. Alas, subsidiarity is mentioned only in passing in *Fratelli Tutti*. This is a

shame, since subsidiarity provides a form of community and self-governance conducive to liberty and human dignity but having nothing in common with the desire for unmediated access to humanity as such. Subsidiarity, first articulated in Pope Pius XI's magisterial 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, is the crown jewel of Catholic social teaching without which appeals to "solidarity" become thin humanitarian gruel indeed.

In the later sections of the encyclical, Pope Francis increasingly relies on what one may call his "private judgment," or personal opinions, and less on the inherited weight of Christian wisdom. His inspirations are figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu, and Mahatma Gandhi, as the pope himself notes in section 286. These final sections drift markedly toward humanitarianism, sentimentality, and a kind of *bien-pensant* progressivism of the soft rather than the hard, tyrannical kind.

Let me provide some revealing illustrations. Pope Francis forthrightly condemns terrorism on both humanitarian and Christian grounds (sec. 285). But he links it to an ill-defined "fundamentalism" and once again invokes the authority of his shared declaration with Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb (sec. 284). The massive threats to the lives and liberty of Christians in the Islamic world, from Indonesia to Azerbaijan, and the prohibitions against evangelization and conversion in even many "moderate" Muslim countries are passed over in silence. The pope rightly calls for historical memory of great crimes and injustices that "must not be forgotten" (sec. 247). He speaks with dignity and moral gravity about the monstrous crime of the Shoah, the war against the Jewish people "spurred by false ideologies" that failed "to recognize the fundamental dignity" of the human person (sec. 247) —often justified by accusations of "hidden powers" behind free markets and free societies, one might add.

War, Peace, and the Death Penalty

Yet Pope Francis is silent about the criminal character of another "false ideology," Communism, that was responsible for the death of one hundred million people globally in the twentieth century and

that waged war on the Christian Church with unparalleled atheistic fanaticism and cruelty. Francis rightly invokes the memory of the use of atomic weaponry at Nagasaki and Hiroshima (sec. 248), but without any mention of the semi-fascist Japanese imperial regime that killed ten million innocents or more in its rapacious march through Asia. To remember Nagasaki and Hiroshima outside this larger context is to criminalize peoples and governments that resisted the criminal Japanese regime's naked aggression and openly racist disdain for other peoples and nations. Historical memory, precious as it is, must be informed by the arts of moral and political reasoning. Shorn of that moral and intellectual discipline, it risks giving way to ahistorical moralism and an ideological perspective bereft of balanced judgment.

The most problematic and troubling section of the encyclical deals with "war and the death penalty." Are Christians really obliged to take their bearings from the Charter of the United Nations (sec. 257), an organization long dominated by authoritarian and totalitarian states, and hardly friendly to the Church? Pope Francis cites the Catholic Catechism on the legitimacy of national defense against aggression and the accompanying legitimacy of just war reasoning (sec. 258). He is obliged to do so. But he quickly and unilaterally declares that war can never be a solution to aggression or injustice. He claims without evidence or argument "that every war leaves our world worse than it was before" (sec. 261). That is a questionable empirical claim.

For all intents and purposes, Francis, against the full weight of the tradition, identifies peace with the absence of war, and not with the "tranquility of order" articulated by St. Augustine in Book 19 of *The City of God*. Who is to resist the terrorism that Francis rightly condemns? Was Winston Churchill right to fight a regime that would have destroyed liberal and Christian civilization and universalized the Shoah or Holocaust in the process? Francis's semi-pacifist arguments and affirmations owe more to sentimental and utopian secular humanitarianism than they do to specifically Christian arguments and understandings. They ignore the presence of evil, of radical evil, in this fallen world of ours. St. Francis

was a saint, and a deeply inspiring one at that, but so was the faithful Joan of Arc, who took up arms in defense of her beloved France. Charles Péguy, the great French Catholic poet and philosopher, rightly took aim at those who confused Christian love with an indulgence to “peace at any price.” The Church should always be a voice for just peace even more than just war. But Francis is the first pope to identify peace with pacifism, however dishonorable or incompatible with our obligations to our fellow citizens. Francis’s humanitarian version of Christianity lacks the realism of the truest and most faithful Christian thought. One can only wonder what Christian realists such as Reinhold Niebuhr, John Courtney Murray, S.J., and Paul Ramsey would make of Pope Francis’s approach to diplomacy and statecraft.

As for the death penalty, Pope Francis believes that those who advocate it are simply succumbing to vengeance and thus deny the dignity of the one to be punished by execution, even for a truly heinous crime. But Kant believed that such a punishment reflected deep respect for the moral agency and responsibility of a murderer, for example. And St. Paul, St. Thomas, and almost every previous pope denied that capital punishment is always and everywhere “inadmissible” (sec. 263). Pope Francis gives the game away when he comes out against life imprisonment, which he calls “a secret death penalty” (sec. 268). With all due respect to the Holy Father, he has confused the Christian religion with what C. S. Lewis called in *God in the Dock* “the humanitarian theory of punishment.”¹² C. S. Lewis says very well what half-humanitarian Christians have forgotten—namely, that “the Humanitarian theory wants simply to abolish Justice and to substitute Mercy for it.” Whatever this replacement is, it entails a radical and disturbing departure from age-old, sober Christian teaching that knows, as Lewis suggestively puts it, that mercy and justice “must meet and kiss.”

I make no apology for responding respectfully but critically to those parts of *Fratelli Tutti* (and the rest of this pope’s reflection) that partake of humanitarian categories and assumptions finally in tension with, or even incompatible with, a Christian anthropology and conception of natural justice. The Holy Father is a good man

and bishop, a witness to the Gospel, who rightfully reminds us of the priority of neighborly love and “social friendship” for all Christians and men and women of good will. But when he departs from a specifically Catholic-Christian understanding of these imperatives, he relies more on “private judgment” than on the “truth about man” that is the source of the Church’s exquisite expertise about how human beings ought to live together. As his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI never ceased to insist (most impressively in his 2006 Regensburg lecture), Christianity is never reducible to a humanitarian moral and political message. To do so is to “falsify the Good,” in the pregnant words of the Russian religious philosopher Vladimir Soloviev.

Pope Francis sometimes evinces a simple, more traditional faith, one that acknowledges the existence of the Devil and attacks abortion as a means for “executing” the unborn. From time to time, he criticizes gender theory as a mode of “ideological colonization” incompatible with the Christian view of the human person. At the same time, his acolytes and advisors are uniformly progressives. Depressingly, this pontificate takes regular and specific aim at those who are most faithful to the moral law and the faith of the Fathers. Open and aggressive heresy in the German Church goes largely unremarked and unchallenged, but those who love the age-old Latin Mass are held in contempt and duly punished. The more orthodox American Church is scowled at by the pope and falsely identified with theological and political “reaction” (for this, see in particular his May 19, 2024 *Sixty Minutes* interview). Moreover, those around the pope increasingly refer to his “personal magisterium” as if the Catholic religion began anew with his pontificate and his private judgment about all things under the heavens. The game of “popesplaining,” as the theologian and Catholic Worker member Larry Chapp wittily calls it, the art of constantly justifying or explaining Francis’s more troublesome utterances, has worn thin. Faithful Catholics, and men and women of good will more generally, must have the courage to see and tell the truth, respectfully but firmly and unequivocally. That remains an elementary human and Christian obligation.

Enhanced Christian-Communist Collaboration?

One is inclined to give the Holy Roman Pontiff the benefit of the doubt. But that is sometimes difficult to do. Quite recently, the Argentinian pope has called for greater dialogue and cooperation between Christians, on the one hand, and Marxists and Communists, on the other. In remarks to DIALOP, a group dedicated to dialogue and political cooperation between Christians and Marxists, Francis lauded such cooperation to fight war and injustice and to “imagine a ‘better world’” (*Vatican News*, January 10, 2024).

His statement shows no evidence that Francis understands Communism on the level of theory or practice or the limits of this-worldly utopian “dreaming,” as he calls it. “[T]he great dreams of freedom, and equality, of dignity and fraternity” are deemed “a reflection of God’s dream,” and they alone are said to have “produced progress and advances.” These naive effusions ignore the murderous consequences of ill-conceived dreams being put into revolutionary practice and the confiscation of political, intellectual, and religious liberty that has inevitably accompanied the replacement of political reason and moderation by coercive utopianism. How have Christians fared in the Soviet Union, Communist China, and the People’s Republics of East-Central Europe and in North Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam? To ask the question is to answer it. In the last few years, Catholic bishops and priests have been arrested in both Marxist Nicaragua and the People’s Republic of China (although a Nicaraguan bishop and a score of other clerics have just been exiled to the Vatican—hardly a victory for true political or religious liberty). Perhaps it is time for the pope to take note.

In his statement recommending enhanced Catholic-Communist collaboration, Francis takes indiscriminate aim at ill-defined “market mechanisms” but says not a word about how concrete human beings, including the poor, fare in societies that have brutally suppressed private ownership, market competition, and a civil society that can challenge and limit the self-aggrandizement of collectivizing state power. Somehow, Marxists, aided and abetted by progressivist Christians, are called to fight corruption and defend the rule of law. But when have Marxist regimes respected

the rule of law and the dignity of the human person? It is no accident that Francis's statement calling for enhanced cooperation between Christians and Marxists makes passing reference to the crimes of the Nazi dictatorship but says not a word about the comparable crimes of an untold number of Communist dictatorships, including Cuba, led for fifty-five years by a tyrant whom Francis publicly called in 2015 his esteemed "friend."¹³ In contrast, Pope John Paul II negotiated with Communist regimes (such as the one in his native Poland) from a position of spiritual strength, and he never believed that real cooperation was possible between Christians and Communists.

As commentators such as Rod Dreher and Edward Feser have ably pointed out, Francis not only ignores the forceful criticism of Communist theory and practice by his ten immediate predecessors, but he refuses to judge Communism by the myriad ways in which it has suppressed human liberty and actively warred on the Christian faith. He abstracts from its materialism and atheism, which are essential elements of Communist theory and practice. Has he even opened the covers of Solzhenitsyn's masterwork *The Gulag Archipelago*, the most powerful account ever written of the deadly fruits delivered by applied ideology, by utopia-in-power? Francis's immediate predecessors, in contrast, referred to that book with admiration and respect.

In a rare moment of lucidity regarding the nature of totalitarianism, in 2023 Francis lamented the increasingly vicious persecution of the Catholic Church by Nicaragua's Sandinista regime. He added, astutely enough, that "it is something out of line with reality; it is as if we were bringing back the communist dictatorship of 1917 or the Hitler dictatorship of 1935" (*Catholic News Agency*, March 10, 2023). But in all this and in his more recent comments about the situation of the Church in Nicaragua, Francis has followed up by calling for enhanced and renewed "dialogue" between the Church (and civil society) and the regime that persecutes it. But dialogue is possible only with those who accept reasoning, however imperfectly, as an operative principle of ethical and political life. Any individuals minimally shaped and informed

by an older Christian wisdom ought to know this to the depth of their being. A modicum of Christian realism would show the limits of dialogue with those who adopt totalitarian premises and implement them in practice. Otherwise, “dialogue” simply becomes another form of ideological manipulation.

Earlier Papal Warnings

Francis’s great predecessors knew better. Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, from Poland and Germany respectively, knew totalitarianism from the inside and immediately discerned its incompatibility with the Gospel of Christ, as well as with liberty and human dignity. They opposed liberation theology in its *Marxisant* forms while pleading for full respect for human rights and the well-being of the poor and disadvantaged.

In his 1971 Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, Pope Paul VI incisively warned that Christians “cannot adhere to the Marxist ideology, to its atheistic materialism, to its dialectic of violence and to the way it absorbs individual freedom in the collectivity, at the same time denying all transcendence to man and his personal and collective history.”¹⁴ Hardly a political conservative, Paul VI feared and lamented every ideological and utopian appropriation of the Christian faith. And in a recent interview with the German press republished in *Catholic World Report* (CWR, May 21, 2024), Cardinal Gerard Müller, the former head of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Defense of the Faith (recently renamed the DDF), lamented Rome’s growing indulgence toward an ideology and political movement that is intrinsically godless, collectivist, and totalitarian. It should be noted that Cardinal Müller has lived and worked in Peru for the past thirty summers and is deeply sympathetic to work on behalf of the poor that is guided by authentic Christian faith and humane political prudence. But he sees Communism for exactly what it is: an inhuman deformation of *caritas* and love of the poor that transforms them into inexpiable violence, struggle, hatred, and dictatorship.

Dreaming is never enough, and false dreams are inevitably calamitous. Human beings, and Christians among them, also need

a profound sense of “limitation,” Pope Paul added in his 1971 Apostolic Letter, a genuine appreciation of those limits integral to human nature and the nature of things. Pope Francis made much the same point quite eloquently in chapter 3 of his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*,¹⁵ without, alas, drawing all the appropriate moral and political consequences. There is much classic Christian wisdom on display in the section of that encyclical entitled “The Crisis and Effects of Modern Anthropocentrism” (secs. 115–36). Humanitarian and ideological “dreaming” is precisely one of the most pernicious consequences of such atheistic humanism, as Cardinal Henri de Lubac famously called it.

And as Andrew Fowler points out in a fine article at *RealClearReligion* (January 12, 2024), addressing Pope Francis’s disturbing accommodation with Marxism (even if the pope is, strictly speaking, no Marxist), Pope Pius XI had warned in his great encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) that Communism had the appearance of the good only when it was in fact a dangerous “false messianic idea,” one that is and remains thoroughly totalitarian in theory and practice. It was hardly the way to improve the lot of the poor and disadvantaged, since they, too, thrive only in liberty. Communism is, the pontiff insisted, intrinsically incompatible with “reason and Divine Revelation,” and in its very nature relies on “half-truths and deceptions.” Where Francis sees concern for the “least of the brethren,” his predecessors rightly saw mendacity and a demonic falsification of the Good.¹⁶ It is time to renew a hermeneutic of continuity that draws on tried-and-true Christian wisdom.

The Limits of Ideological Dreaming

Francis’s pontificate is winding to a close. May his successors (and Francis himself if God allots the time) take note of the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski’s magisterial words in the conclusion of his classic work *Main Currents of Marxism*, the best existing book on the subject. Writing in 1978, Kołakowski rightly called Marxism “the greatest fantasy of the twentieth century ... a dream offering the prospect of a society of perfect unity, in which all human aspirations would be fulfilled, and all values reconciled.”¹⁷

Kolakowski brilliantly concludes his masterpiece with these fitting and memorable words:

The self-deification of mankind, to which Marxism gave philosophical expression, has ended in the same way as all such attempts, whether individual or collective; it has revealed itself as the farcical aspect of human bondage.¹⁸

A final salutary warning: some dreams, those contrary to human nature and the nature of things, turn out to be nightmares that ravage the bodies and souls of human beings made “in the image and likeness” of God, a point powerfully made by the likes of Kolakowski and Eric Voegelin. Christians have an obligation to oppose them intelligently, but with might and main. Read generously, the Argentine pontiff recognizes this, but only occasionally and haphazardly. This is one more reason for the restoration of a hermeneutic of continuity, both in the realms of theology and in Catholic political reflection. When read in light of older and enduring classical and Christian wisdom, and of the cardinal virtues of justice, moderation, and prudence, Francis’s commitment to compassion, fellow-feeling, solicitude for the poor, and human fraternity can be productive of much good. But the goods that Pope Francis rightly emphasizes should not be confused with humanitarian sentimentality or utopian ideology. Christian hope is not, and never will be, a form of ideological dreaming.¹⁹

Notes

1. Cited in George C. Leaf, “The Pope and Markets,” *Regulation*, Spring 2018. The sermons, speeches, and addresses collected in Jorge Mario Bergoglio / Pope Francis, *In Your Eyes I See My Words: Homilies and Speeches from Buenos Aires*, vol. 3, 2009–2013 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021) readily confirm this point.
2. On all this, see Jeane Kirkpatrick, *Leader and Vanguard in Mass Society: A Study of Peronist Argentina* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), esp. pp. 30–38 and 211–23.
3. Cited throughout this article are the appropriate section numbers of Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 2020).

4. See Pierre Manent, “Who Is the Good Samaritan?,” in Manent, *The Religion of Humanity*, ed. and trans. Paul Seaton (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2022), 107.
5. Ibid., 108.
6. All quotes in this section are drawn from Pope John Paul II, *Memory and Identity: Personal Reflections* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005).
7. Pierre Manent, *Beyond Radical Secularism*, trans. Ralph C. Hancock, intro. Daniel J. Mahoney (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press), sec.12, p. 64.
8. Ibid., sec. 20, p. 112.
9. See Gaston Fessard, S.J., *Pax Nostra: Examen de conscience international*, new ed. (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2022).
10. Pierre Manent, *The Religion of Humanity*, 102–8.
11. Ibid., 104–5.
12. All quotations in this section are from C. S. Lewis, “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment,” in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).
13. For a discussion of Pope Francis’s visit to Cuba in fall 2015, see Daniel J. Mahoney, *The Idol of Our Age* (New York: Encounter Books, 2018), 95 and 112.
14. Pope Paul XVI’s 1971 Apostolic Letter is readily available on the internet.
15. See Pope Francis, *Praise to You / Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home* (San Francisco: CA: Ignatius Press, 2015).
16. For illustrative examples, see the sixteen papal documents collected by Anthony J. Mioni Jr. in *The Popes against Modern Errors* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 1999).
17. Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, The Golden Age, The Breakdown*, trans. P. S. Falla (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 1206.
18. Ibid., 1212.
19. A distinction that is not always evident in Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020). In contrast, see Pope Benedict’s firm differentiation of Christian hope and ideological utopianism in his 2007 encyclical *Spe Salvi (On Christian Hope)*, a work that is available in numerous editions.

