

POPE FRANCIS,
THE DIGNITY OF
THE PERSON,
AND THE
'REVOLUTION OF
TENDERNESS'

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Volunteers prepare plates of food on Christmas morning at Our Lady of the Road, the South Bend Catholic Worker Drop-In Center.

Photo: Erin Blasko/South Bend Tribune (25 December 2013). Reused with permission.

It's negative 10 degrees. It's been snowing all day, and now a threatening wind picks up, blowing snow into mountainous drifts and plunging the wind chill to forty below zero. The National Weather Service warns that prolonged exposure to these brutal conditions will result in death. Ten men who have spent the better part of their day trying to find some protection from the elements gather, bundled as well as can be, at the door of Our Lady of the Road in South Bend, Indiana. Here, waiting in the dark and the snow and the wind, are the men who, Pope Francis says in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, are no longer “society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised”; they are the “excluded,” the “outcasts,” the “leftovers” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §53). Here are the human faces of his question, “How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?” (*EG* §53). Here are the causalities of our “profound human crisis: the denial of the primacy of the human person!” (*EG* §55).

They file into the weather amnesty room—Bill, John, Dave, Andy—cold and beleaguered. One by one, they blow into the breathalyzer, collect some snacks, go out back for a smoke, or rummage around for some papers to roll a fresh cigarette. Someone curses. Someone laughs. Dan starts a pot of coffee. By 11:00pm, the only light in the room comes from a string of white Christmas lights taped along the wall and a small lamp on the desk where I sit keeping vigil. Here sleep ten men, the victims of what Francis has time and again called “a throw-away culture” (*EG* §53). The occasional snoring fit or other bodily emission interrupts the cyclical hum of the heater. Otherwise it is quiet.

It is Epiphany.

The fourth chapter of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* never seems more apt than in these utterly unromantic, hidden moments, moments in which—truth be told—I would rather be in the warmth of my own bed *thinking* about doing great works of mercy. In this chapter, “A Lady of Little Faith,” Father Zossima counsels “a sentimental society lady whose inclinations were in many respects genuinely good,” who is afflicted with lack of faith.¹ She inquires of the venerable old monk, “What can give me back my faith? . . . How can it be proved, how can one be convinced?”² To this Zossima replies:

“One cannot prove anything here, but it is possible to be convinced . . . by the experience of active love. Try to love your neighbor actively and tirelessly. The more you succeed in loving, the more you’ll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. And if you reach complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will even be able to enter your soul.”³

But, she wonders, just what is active love, and how far down does this love go? In her dreams she performs the works of mercy with intimate tenderness, exclaiming that “no wounds, no festering sores”⁴ frighten her in these dreams where she binds up and kisses wounds and nurses the afflicted. But, she reveals, the more fervent her love for the idea of humanity grows, the less she loves the particular human face before her. Here, locked within oneself, festering wounds are pristine, the afflicted are always grateful, and listening to snoring for hours becomes a beautiful symphonic experience. A merely general love of humanity allows one to embrace the whole world while touching no one. It never goes out from itself. The love of dreams “weakens in isolation and comfort” because it never leaves “security on the shore” (*EG* §10); it is never given away.⁵ It never touches with great tenderness the “harsh and fearful”⁶ particularity of another.

It is Epiphany, the day in which Christians celebrate the love of God made manifest to the nations. This love is the precise antithesis of Dostoevsky’s portrayal of the “sentimental society lady whose inclinations were in many respects genuinely good.”⁷ God goes out of himself, leaving “security on the shore” and reveals himself not “in strength and power, but in the weakness and fragility of a newborn babe.”⁸

As we gaze with the magi on the infant Christ, a child in need of constant tender care, we encounter a God who has chosen to love by taking on all weakness, limitation, and suffering. He has put on humanity at its most defenseless and vulnerable. We encounter a God who does not love merely the generic idea of humanity; rather, he loves with “aggressive tenderness,” a radiant tenderness which pours forth from the Cross at the very moment when all seems lost (*EG* §§5, 85). This is the “harsh and fearful”⁹ love that reaches down and touches our festering sores, kisses them, binds them up, and takes them into the heart of God. This is the

inexhaustible splendor of a love that draws near, a love that takes up all vulnerability, a love that “embraces human life” (*EG* §24). God’s love takes up human fragility at its breaking point and embraces it, not in a dream, but in the flesh of his only Son.

It is this vision that Pope Francis offered when, during his homily on the Vigil of Prayer and Fasting, he exclaimed, “To be human means to care for one another!”¹⁰ Upon initial reading, this simple exhortation may seem on the one hand so superficially self-evident that it requires no further thought or explanation. One may be tempted to affirm the Pontiff’s statement as an abstract principle but then begin to impose various qualifications about just whom it is one must care for and just how far down one’s commitment to care for the other must go. Indeed, philosophers, scientists, economists, and politicians, armed with sharpened ideas, are particularly adept at specifying an ever narrowing concept of what it means to be human and what it means to care for one another. On the other hand, some may interpret Francis’ exhortation as a mere platitude, rendering it simply as a dressed-up version of the parental command heard by children in every corner of the world—“Be nice!”—the subtext of which reads something like, “Be polite, affable, and inoffensive.” To reduce Francis’ words to the mere exercise of manners does not begin to penetrate their depth of meaning. To interpret his words as either principle or platitude misses the deeply theological vision of the human person inscribed in his characteristically unadorned and deceptively simple rhetoric.

Indeed, only if we ignore the theological wellspring from which it flows could we possibly interpret Francis’ compact exhortation as a trite call to a generalized humanitarian sympathy. Situated within a larger homiletic narrative that draws our gaze to the mystery of salvation—the goodness of creation, the rupture of fraternity, and the regeneration of humanity

through the Cross and Resurrection—Francis has made a profound assertion about what it means to be human. In these nine words, Francis upends the modern construction of the human person as a radically independent, self-sufficient, autonomous agent, and declares that to be human is to be radically and incontrovertibly dependent. We cannot alone care for ourselves; indeed, to be alone is to die. To be human is to draw near to others in active love. Just as “the experience of active love” is for the “sentimental society lady” the key to regaining her faith, so it is that “through the tireless love of neighbor” one is convinced of the dignity of each human being.¹¹

God’s ‘Aggressive Tenderness’

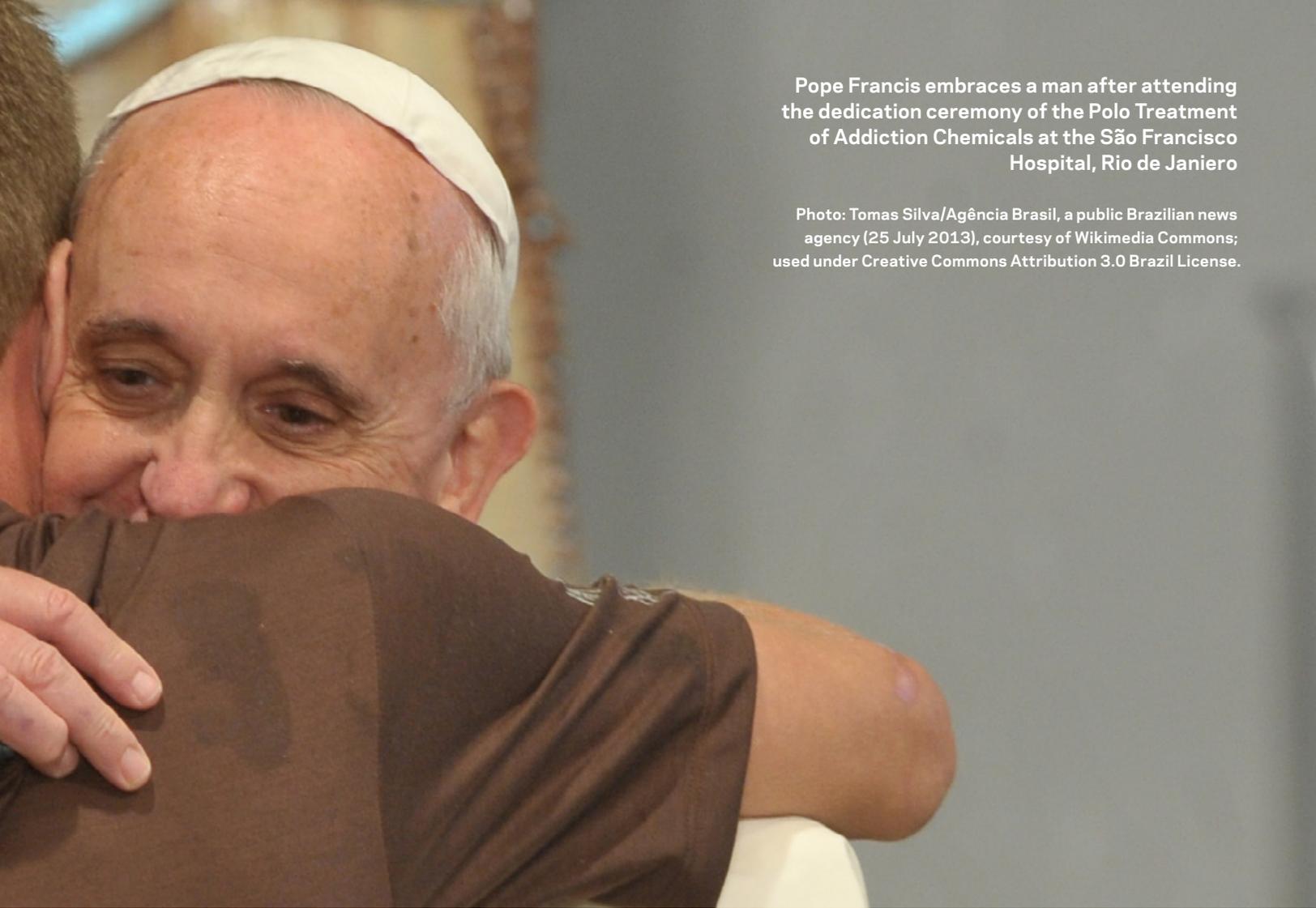
It is only by touching one’s neighbor, confronting the face of another, and reaching out to her with an indefatigable love that one encounters the dignity of another. It is in these moments of encounter, when flesh touches flesh, that the “infinite dignity” of each human being is made manifest; a dignity that resides not in specific capacities or abilities, not in one’s usefulness or efficiency, but in one’s “being . . . the object of God’s infinite tenderness,” taken up into the heart of God in the wounded flesh of Christ (*EG* §274). Indeed, it is in Christ that God touches the flesh of an aching humanity, gazing upon us with a burning, tender love. This is a love that descends to the depths of all human weakness and vulnerability, a love that “embraces all his people” (*EG* §268).

Francis’ frequent use of this word *tender* precedes his pontificate, and like his statement, “To be human means to care for one another,” one can easily miss the theological import of the term and dismiss it simply as a superfluous rhetorical flourish. But Francis means the word to do some real work. Indeed, his emphasis on this term illuminates the logic of the Incarnation and the radiant dignity of human life.



In his repetition of the word *tender* in all its various parts of speech, Francis lifts up the essential quality of God's love: it is deeply and unavoidably personal. This love becomes flesh. This love assumes a human face. To speak of resting "in the tenderness of the arms of the Father" (*EG* §279) is to speak of a warm, protective, and intimate love, a love that by committing itself to the proximity of embrace makes itself vulnerable to human suffering. In his "tender compassion" God draws near in order to meddle "in our miseries," approaching our wounds and healing them with his own flesh.¹² Indeed, in his intimate love for humanity, God lowers himself to embrace all human misery, making himself tender and fragile, capable of being bruised and crushed. Where life is at its weakest, his love blazes forth.

From the beginning, as Francis has pointed out, God has identified not with a generic mass of humanity but with each of us; he takes "the name of each of us and makes it his surname: 'I am the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, of Pedro, of Marietta, of Armony, of Marisa, of Simon, of everyone.' God's surname is each one of us."¹³ The culmination of his identification with us—the apex of his salvific action of drawing humanity into his very heart—is found in the luminous face of the child in the arms of his mother, in the countenance of the man who receives his mother's "gaze of tender love" (*EG* §125) as his love bursts forth from the Cross, the throne of glory. This is the "face of the God Jacob," who "does not save us only by decree, with a law; he saves us with tenderness, he saves us with caresses, he saves us with his life given for us."¹⁴ In the face of Christ we encounter



Pope Francis embraces a man after attending the dedication ceremony of the Polo Treatment of Addiction Chemicals at the São Francisco Hospital, Rio de Janeiro

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the one who has totally emptied himself and embraced radical dependency. We encounter the one who is Life—not in spite of his self-emptying and dependency and vulnerability but precisely because of it. In the most vulnerable moments of his earthly life, we find Christ surrounded by the faces of Mary his mother, Joseph, the disciples, Mary Magdalene. Men and women whose very being flows from the heart of the triune God are now entrusted with the care of the incarnate Word, the Logos of God made needy and fragile.

The love of the Father made incarnate in Jesus is *the* work of mercy (EG §112). God has risked everything in order to assume human fragility and vulnerability in the flesh of Christ so that we might share in his joy. This outpouring of love demonstrated in the crèche and on the Cross is both gentle and fierce. To be convinced by

this love is to “believe in a Father who loves all men and women with infinite love,” realizing that in and through such love “he thereby confers upon them an infinite dignity.’ To believe that the Son of God assumed our human flesh means that each human person has been taken up into the very heart of God. To believe that Jesus shed his blood for us removes any doubt about the boundless love which ennobles each human being” (EG §178).¹⁵ The inner logic of the “revolution of tenderness” (EG §88) contests the contemporary attempts to reduce what it means to be human to a series of traits and capacities, with radical self-sufficiency being most prized among them.

'Revolution of Tenderness'

This tender, self-giving love is the content of God's revelation, and the proclamation of this love-made-flesh, Francis writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*, "will be a basis for restoring the dignity of human life" (*EG* §75). Indeed, it is precisely the encounter with Christ that heals what Francis has frequently and vigorously denounced as the "false model of man and society."¹⁶ This false model of man reduces the human person to his or her economic utility, systematically obscuring the dignity of human life. Francis has repeatedly declared that the reduction of men, women, and children to objects of consumption has produced a "throwaway culture," whose victims are "the weakest and most fragile human beings—the unborn, the poorest people, sick elderly people, gravely disabled people . . . who are in danger of being 'thrown out,' expelled from a machine that must be efficient at all costs."¹⁷ This culture, in which "human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded" (*EG* §53), is ruthless and anonymous. Indeed, Francis observes, this culture is so systemically pervasive that "almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own" (*EG* §54). This vision, predicated by its emphasis on utility, consumption, and autonomy, is utterly bereft of the tender warmth of love. It recoils from vulnerability, it pushes suffering and weakness to the periphery, and it draws back from personal encounter with the suffering and weakness of particular human beings.

In a culture that systematically obscures the dignity of human life, the proclamation of the Gospel transforms and heals our vision, summoning us to the "revolution of tenderness" (*EG* §88). From Christ's pierced side flows the tender love of God, his life, the "stream of joy";

and from this great stream of mercy flow the Works of Mercy—feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty, sheltering the stranger, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, burying the dead—which constitute the form of life that renders present *the* work of mercy in every age. The inner logic of this form of life runs counter to the logic internal to the "throwaway culture." Unlike the "throwaway culture," the Works of Mercy are not principally concerned with efficiency but with the giving of oneself, "even if this appears to bring us no tangible and immediate benefits" (*EG* §210). Indeed, they cultivate a vision that sees the other not as an object but as "the prolongation of the incarnation" (*EG* §179). Formed by this vision, Francis proclaims that "Christians . . . are called to care for the vulnerable of the earth" (*EG* §209), the unborn, the elderly, victims of human trafficking, the homeless, the poorest members of society.

This vision begets a form of life that runs out to the periphery, embraces the vulnerable, touches the suffering. It is the form of life conformed to the mystery of the Incarnation, the form of life that offers oneself in the very act of mercy. It is in drawing "near to new forms of poverty and vulnerability," Francis explains, that we embrace human life and touch the "suffering flesh of Christ in others," and by which we both render present and encounter "the fragrance of Christ's closeness and his personal gaze" (*EG* §169). One's neighbor is no longer an anonymous object to be used and disposed; or an autonomous, self-reliant agent with whom to contract a relationship with various benefits and duties; or even merely one in possession of fundamental rights and equality. Rather, the neighbor is "immensely holy" and "worthy of our giving" (*EG* §274). This giving costs something. Indeed, the gift of salvation—*the* work of mercy—costs God something: the life of his only Son. This is the tender love made manifest at Epiphany, the stream of love outpoured

on the Cross. This is the love that draws near; cleanses festering sores; binds wounds; kisses the suffering. It is the love that expresses itself, not in dreams, but in the reality of one's flesh.



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NOTES

1 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 12th ed., trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 53.

2 Ibid., 56.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 58.

5 Citing Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, *Aparecida Document* (29 June 2007), 360.

6 Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 58.

7 Ibid., 53.

8 Pope Francis, tweet on 1/2/2014 (@pontifex).

9 Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 58.

10 Pope Francis, "Vigil of Prayer for Peace" (Saint Peter's Square, 7 September 2013). <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130907_veglia-pace.html>

11 Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 53, 56.

12 Lk 1:78; see Pope Francis, "Contemplation, Closeness, Abundance" (Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, 22 October 2013). <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2013/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20131022_contemplation.html>

13 Pope Francis, "God's Surname" (Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, 17 December 2013). <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2013/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20131217_god-surname.html>

14 Ps 24:6; Pope Francis, "Contemplation, Closeness, Abundance."

15 Citing John Paul II, "Message to the Handicapped" (Angelus Address, 16 November 1980): *Insegnamenti*, 3/2 (1980), 123.

16 Pope Francis, "Address to a Delegation from the *Dignitatis Humanae* Institute" (Clementine Hall, 7 December 2013). <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/december/documents/papa-francesco_20131207_istituto-dignitatis.html>

17 Ibid.