

War or Peace? Toward a Better Kind of (Bio) Politics

**Vatican II, Pope Francis and the Way Forward**

**March 25, 2022**

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When Michael Murphy first invited me to join this conversation, he asked me to give a few remarks in the upcoming panel on how the culture wars have distorted Catholic bioethics. But then I was relocated to this podium and given the topic: “Reclaiming the Catholic Moral and Intellectual Tradition from the Culture Wars.” If the first topic was big, the second is, colossal.

So I am going to take the original starting point that he gave me—the culture wars and bioethics—as a way into the larger question. For the culture wars have long been with us, but their particular manifestation during the COVID-19 pandemic has clarified key dimensions of this movement and confirmed, for me, a crucial way forward.

To help frame my remarks today, I want to start with what I think might be the earliest case in Catholic bioethics. Here we see the distorting culture war dynamics already at play. It is a case familiar, I am sure, to everyone in this room:

Jesus went into a synagogue, and there was a man there who had a withered hand. And they were watching him to see if he would cure him on the sabbath day, hoping for something to use against him. He said to the man with the withered hand, ‘Stand up out in the middle!’ Then he said to them, ‘Is it against the law on the sabbath day to do good, or to do evil; to save life, or to kill?’ But they said nothing. Then, grieved to find them so obstinate, he looked angrily around at them, and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out and his hand was better. The Pharisees went out and at once began to plot with the Herodians against him, discussing how to destroy him (Mark 3: 1-6).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translation, *Jerusalem Bible*.

Here we have, I would submit, the key players in the culture wars—the Pharisees (or, as I will call them for the purposes of this paper, the religious traditionalists<sup>2</sup>) in their unholy alliance with the Herodians; the man with the withered hand; and Jesus—who, standing at the center of the story points a way forward for us, beyond the contemporary manifestation of the culture wars, indicating how we might begin to move toward a truly post-conciliar Catholic moral and intellectual tradition, one shaped not by the imagination, tactics, and sequelae of war but rather by peace, reconciliation, and the flourishing of persons, communities, and creation.

### 1. An Unholy Alliance

Before Jesus even walks into the synagogue, the stage has been set for a confrontation. We are only in chapter 3 of Mark’s gospel, but the war is already simmering. In chapter 2, Jesus has forgiven the paralytic’s sins, eaten with tax collectors, refused to make his disciples fast, and plucked corn on the Sabbath. So now, the religious traditionalists have laid a trap—and the teeth of that trap is the law.

Mark’s depiction of the religious traditionalists—especially as they ally with the Herodians—reads strikingly like Massimo Borghesi’s incisive account of a new variant of Catholic Americanism, described in his recent book *Catholic Discordance*.<sup>3</sup> Borghesi argues that this form of Catholicism that has emerged since the Council rests on “two pillars.” The first pillar he calls “a strident Catho-capitalism.” Here the Catholic tradition has been refashioned as

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<sup>2</sup> I have chosen this phrase “religious traditionalists” in order to use this passage as an interpretative framework for Borghesi’s analysis below as well as to avoid using the word “Pharisee” pejoratively. I appreciate Damon Silver’s correction that in the ancient Palestinian context, the Pharisees were actually innovators.

<sup>3</sup> Massimo Borghesi, *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021).

an apology for the economic theory of neoliberalism.<sup>4</sup> For those erecting this pillar, who we might call the Herodians, Catholicism serves to support, justify, and advance a specific economic ideology and its particular understanding of the state and culture. Such a position requires a selective, partial—and quite distorted—presentation of the Catholic tradition, which Borghesi dissects in detail.

The second pillar is the culture wars, fought, as Borghesi notes, by traditionalists who have long “take[n] morality as their battleground.”<sup>5</sup> The culture warriors claim to be defending “a specific set of values...that were rejected by the dominant culture”—unborn life, heterosexual marriage, the lives of the terminally ill.<sup>6</sup> While it has shifted since the early 1970s, the terrain of the culture wars had largely been co-extensive with Catholic bioethics. More recently, however, the language has become more expansive. Take, for example, University of Notre Dame political scientist Patrick Deneen. In a piece written three weeks ago, ostensibly about the war in Ukraine, Deneen claims the culture warriors are now fighting what he calls a “new biopolitical regime.” This regime is run by those he calls the “disembodied ‘laptop class,’” or “the Virtuals,” a “woke” “radicalized messianic party, advancing its gnostic vision amid the ruins of the Christian

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<sup>4</sup> Borghesi, *Catholic Discordance*, 15-16. Neoliberalism has two key planks. The first is their anthropology, which centers on a figure of the human person as a radically individual chooser who must be free to exercise his preferences. The second is the radical minimization of government in all areas except one: protecting the markets’ freedom. Neoliberal economists, as Michel Foucault notes, argue for an “active, multiple, vigilant, and omnipresent” government intervention aimed at creating the possibility for a market economy (*Birth of Biopolitics*, 160). Correlatively, any other robust social or community entities which might impede the freedom of the individual or profit maximization—schools, churches, downtowns, unions—must also be delegitimated and/or dismantled. The primary tactics for limiting government and other social entities are captured in neoliberalism’s three key dogmas: deregulation, liberalization, and privatization. These three planks of structural adjustment programs, sometimes referred to as ‘austerity’ measures, seek to reduce governmental engagement—by eliminating regulations (from safety to financial accountability), “liberalizing” or opening borders to maximize the free and efficient flow of capital (but notably not the free movement of people), and the sale of government-owned interests (such as utilities, schools, health systems, etc.) to private companies.

<sup>5</sup> Borghesi, 15-16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

civilization.” They are “merely a new articulation of the revolutionary dream that was once vested in Communism,” who disdain the working class, and who recently sought “to impose biopolitical dominion over all of human life during the suddenly irrelevant ‘crisis’ of the pandemic.”<sup>7</sup> So what was once the landscape of bioethics has morphed into biopolitics and is now deeply interwoven with race, class, economics, and geopolitics.

Borghesi argues that these two pillars stand in an internal contradiction. They are, on their face, a sort of unholy alliance—a pragmatic plot, we might say, between the religious traditionalists and the Catho-capitalists.<sup>8</sup> His assessment is plausible, for if one accepts neoliberalism—with its tenets of the radical freedom of the individual, the radical minimization of government, the relentless pursuit of economic efficiency, the elimination of mid-level or voluntary social organizations (including the church), and the endless “economization of everything”<sup>9</sup>—then the Catho-capitalists should readily accept abortion as a commodified service especially for the full economization of women, the freedom of individuals to marry whomever they wish, the promotion of physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia to eliminate non-productive persons, and so forth. These practices are simply the logical outcomes of neoliberalism as not only an economic theory but a wider cultural ideology.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick Deneen, “Russia, America, and the Danger of Political Gnosticism: What Eric Voegelin Can Teach Us About Today’s International Crisis,” *The Postliberal Order* (Substack), March 2, 2022 (<https://postliberalorder.substack.com/p/russia-america-and-the-danger-of?s=r>).

<sup>8</sup> Borghesi: “To oppose the threat [posed by Pope Francis], the neocon movement, with its dual religious and secular soul, would join forces with Catholic conservatism, both American and European, which had stratified since the 1990s. Hence the strange alliance between conservative [neo]liberals and Catholic reactionaries hostile to the Second Vatican Council that would constitute the shock wave against the Francis pontificate. Conservative [neo]liberals and Catholic traditionalists—diametrically opposed on the topic of the value of modernity—combined forces in the ethical battle against relativism and in unquestioning fidelity to the Western-capitalist model” (145-146).

<sup>9</sup> The *Freakonomics* franchise launched by Chicago School of Economics faculty Steven Levitt in collaboration with Stephen Dubner captures this goal of neoliberalism in the subtitle of their original book, casting economics as “The Hidden Side of Everything.” See: <https://freakonomics.com/>.

But they don't. The proponents of this odd American Catholic *melange* strenuously reject these social and moral ramifications. They refuse to admit, Borghesi argues, that the new capitalist model that they unconditionally embrace is the “real engine” of these practices, creating and requiring the relativism and individualism they vehemently oppose.<sup>11</sup>

But are these two pillars really in contradiction? Before March 2020, I would have largely agreed with him on this point. But as the pandemic has brought to light so many previously ‘invisible’ realities around the globe, it has also laid bare that these two seemingly contradictory pillars are rather two faces of the same neoliberal ideology. This became clear this past summer, when some among the small but amplified minority of Catholics who opposed the COVID-19 vaccines stunningly began using the mantra “my body, my choice.”<sup>12</sup> But beyond that moment of dark comedy, the language used by anti-vax Catholics is deeply neoliberal.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> As many have ably argued, since its ascendance to global hegemony the mid-1970s, the elements of neoliberal logic have transformed almost every social, political, cultural, moral, interpersonal, and psychological space of our lives and culture. For just a few titles, see Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2016); Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 2017); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; and Adam Kotsko, “The Many Deaths of Neoliberalism,” *The Bias Magazine* (August 9, 2021): <https://christiansocialism.com/neoliberalism-joe-biden-covid-demons-theology/>.

<sup>11</sup> Borghesi, *Catholic Discordance*, 44. Or as he states: “A profound dualism comes to light in Novak’s work between the defense of the values of life, with the fight against abortion and euthanasia, and the total acceptance of the neoliberal [liberal-capitalist] model celebrated as a direct expression of personal freedom introduced into the world by Christianity” (54).

<sup>12</sup> As a number of commentators have noted, the Catholic anti-vax arguments ironically mirror the structure of the pro-choice arguments advanced for abortion, euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide and more. Captured in the slogan “my body, my choice,” both positions resist both *religious* and governmental regulation of a medical procedure. They champion the freedom of individual choice based solely on the principle of autonomy. In both instances, no morally overriding reasons are required, as the choice is deeply personal, even if that “choice” threatens the life or health of another person—or even the chooser him or herself. See Michael Sean Winters, “National Catholic Bioethics Center Still Wishy-Washy on Vaccine Mandates,” *NCR* (August 20, 2021), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/coronavirus/distinctly-catholic-national-catholic-bioethics-center-still-wishy-washy-vaccine>; and Jason T. Eberl and Tobias Winright, “Catholics Have No Grounds To Claim Exemption from COVID Vaccine Mandates,” *NCR* (August 17, 2021), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/coronavirus/catholics-have-no-grounds-claim-exemption-covid-vaccine-mandates>.

<sup>13</sup> It appears that at least once source of the current resistance to public health measures designed to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus has been coming from neoliberal think tanks and donors following the same strategies used to resist climate change policies. See David Gorski and Gavin Yamey, “Covid-19 and the New Merchants of

Here we hear the same anthropology—a radically disconnected decision-maker empowered to choose their own preferences based solely on their autonomy, now renamed ‘a right to conscience.’ Echoing the neoliberal dogma of privatization, we heard that “the vaccination question is a deeply personal issue.”<sup>14</sup> Following the neoliberal dogma of deregulation, these Catholics opposed any infringement on individual or corporate freedom, be it from local, state, or federal government but also from any other organization—be it an employer, hospital, long-term care facility, school, diocese, *or even a magisterial body*.<sup>15</sup>

These arguments—espoused by a few Catholic bishops and a few too many Catholics—echo, cite, or draw on materials prepared and disseminated by the National Catholic Bioethics Center. In the opinion of many, the NCBC materials misrepresent Church teaching on these questions by cherry-picking sentences from authoritative documents and distorting their

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Doubt,” *The BMJ Opinion* (September 13, 2021), <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/09/13/covid-19-and-the-new-merchants-of-doubt/#content>. Although neoliberalism has been the dominant ideology of both US political parties since 1980, vaccine resistance is clearly a partisan issue; see Alec Tyson, Cary Funk, Brian Kennedy, and Courtney Johnson, “Majority in U.S. Says Public Health Benefits of COVID-19 Restrictions Worth the Costs, Even as Large Shares Also See Downsides,” Pew Research Center (September 15, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2021/09/15/covid19-restrictions-appendix/>.

<sup>14</sup> Colorado Catholic Conference, 2021. This echoes a secular position—increasingly championed in the US context—that construes ‘religious’ beliefs as any position that is ‘sincerely and personally held’. See, e.g., Naval Postgraduate School, “Religious Belief vs Personal Belief” (2021), <https://nps.edu/web/eoo/religious-belief-vs.-personal-belief>. As Ruth Graham notes, “the [US] Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has specified that religious objections do not have to be recognized by an organized religion and can be beliefs that are new, uncommon or “seem illogical or unreasonable to others” (“Vaccine Resisters Seek Religious Exemptions. But What Counts as Religious?” *New York Times* (September 11, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/11/us/covid-vaccine-religion-exemption.html>). Thus, a number of Catholic bishops—with the help of the National Catholic Bioethics Center—have substituted a secular, neoliberal account of religious belief that is deeply at odds with that of the Catholic tradition.

<sup>15</sup> In opposing efforts by businesses, hospitals, and universities to require their employees and students to be vaccinated against COVID-19, the US Colorado Catholic Conference stated: “We always remain vigilant when any bureaucracy seeks to impose uniform and sweeping requirements on a group of people in areas of personal conscience. Throughout history, human rights violations and a loss of respect for each person’s God-given dignity often begin with government mandates that fail to respect the freedom of conscience. In the case of the COVID-19 vaccine, we are convicted that the government should not impose medical interventions on an individual or group of persons. We urge respect for each person’s convictions and personal choices.” Colorado Catholic Conference, “A Letter from the Bishops of Colorado on COVID-19 Vaccine Mandates,” August 6, 2021, <https://denvercatholic.org/a-letter-from-the-bishops-of-colorado-on-covid-19-vaccine-mandates/>.

meaning.<sup>16</sup> But more troublingly, the NCBC has also had no qualms directly challenging the Holy Father. As I have detailed elsewhere, their template for religious vaccine exemptions makes clear to state that "conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ." Now, all faithful Catholics know that the Vicar of Christ is, at least according to Catholic Answers, "a title of the pope implying his supreme and universal primacy, both of honor and of jurisdiction, over the Church of Christ."<sup>17</sup> Thus, the NCBC's assertion of the priority of an individual's conscience over against Pope Francis could not be more explicit.<sup>18</sup> Every Catholic is their own Pope, their own magisterium. Similarly, the NCBC's Fr. Tad Padolczyk elsewhere dismissed Pope Francis's guidance on the COVID-19 vaccines as merely his "personal judgements" or "personal opinion."<sup>19</sup> Beyond these unsubtle challenges to Holy Father's authority, the NCBC released its own statement about the morality of the COVID-19 vaccines 2-3 weeks prior to (December 8, 2021) the analyses by the CDF (Dec. 21) and the Dicastery for Integral Human Development (Dec. 29). But although the NCBC position differed significantly from these Vatican statements, they took no steps to revise their original statement in light of magisterial teaching.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., the NCBC Vaccine Exemption Template Letter (<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e3ada1a6a2e8d6a131d1dcd/t/6124ec291ca627394c21673a/1629809706093/Catholic+Vaccine+Exemption+Template+Letter.pdf>), as well as their statement on vaccine mandates: <https://www.ncbcenter.org/ncbc-news/vaccinemandatestatement>.

<sup>17</sup> Catholic Answers, "Vicar of Christ," <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/vicar-of-christ>

<sup>18</sup> M. Therese Lysaught, "Catholics Seeking Religious Exemptions Must Follow True Church Teaching on Conscience," *NCR*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/catholics-seeking-religious-exemptions-vaccines-must-follow-true-church-teaching>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.catholicnews.com/vaccine-mandates-open-door-for-bishops-to-discern-an-appropriate-action/>

<sup>20</sup> Notably, the NCBC began a steady strum of propaganda against the COVID-19 vaccines as early as April 17, 2020—well before the vaccines were even available; see e.g., <https://www.ncbcenter.org/ncbc-news/liveactionorg-the-truth-about-covid-19-vaccines-cells-from-aborted-children-and-fetal-tissue-research>; <https://www.ncbcenter.org/ncbc-news/eurasia-review-pro-life-leaders-call-for-coronavirus-vaccine-without-abortion-ties>; <https://www.ncbcenter.org/ncbc-news/eurasia-review-pro-life-leaders-call-for-coronavirus-vaccine-without-abortion-ties>; etc.

As we all know, the NCBC grounded their position in the vaccines’ putative connections to two historical abortions. This concern might have been persuasive, except for the fact that many of the figures opposing the vaccines likewise opposed from the beginning almost every public effort to stem the virus’ spread. As early as May 2020, Catholic dioceses—many with the assistance of groups like the Beckett Fund for Religious Liberty—were among those suing local municipalities about social distancing occupancy measures.<sup>21</sup> Parents at Catholic schools—and even some schools themselves—protested mask mandates—a performance that has continued up until this month.<sup>22</sup> Importantly, this all began well before the vaccines became available. In other words, well before any ‘conscience’ based concerns about abortion, the focus of the opposition

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<sup>21</sup> Frank X. Rocca, “Churches Push Back Against Coronavirus Restrictions,” *The Wall Street Journal* (November 20, 2020), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/churches-push-back-against-coronavirus-restrictions-11605867870>. As reported by the MacIver Institute—Free Market Voice for Wisconsin, the Diocese of Madison was “forced” to comply with occupancy maxima “under grave protest” (N.A., “Government Watchers’ Will Ensure Catholic Churches in Madison Comply with Lockdown,” *MacIverNews* (May 29, 2020), <https://www.maciverinstitute.com/2020/05/madison-threatens-catholic-churches-to-limit-mass-sizes-or-face-hefty-fines/>). The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty led the Diocese’s eventually-successful lawsuit, as well as a number of others across the US (The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, <https://www.becketlaw.org/>; see especially, <https://www.becketlaw.org/covid-19-religious-worship/covid-19-religious-worship-cases/>, and <https://www.becketlaw.org/covid-19-religious-worship/>). Prior to 2020 the Thomas More Society likewise litigated religious freedom cases but after Trump’s loss in the presidential election shifted its work to focus on ‘election integrity,’ in alignment with other right-wing groups. See Brian Fraga, “Religious liberty law firm fighting legal battles over election results,” *OSV*, December 12, 2020, <https://www.osvnews.com/amp/2020/12/10/religious-liberty-law-firm-fighting-legal-battles-over-election-results/>. It continued, however, working with religious anti-vaxxers: <https://thomasmoresociety.org/covid-19-employer-vaccine-mandate-responses-know-your-rights-for-religious-exemption-accommodation/>; <https://thomasmoresociety.org/vaccine-legal-help/>.

<sup>22</sup> M. Iati, “Mask Mandates Violate Religious Liberty by Hiding Faces Made in the Image of God, Catholic School Says,” *The Washington Post* (July 21, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/07/21/catholic-school-masks-image-god/>; M. Braun, and R. Fradette, “Parents at Bishop Verot Protest Mask Mandate Push for Enacting Student Opt-Out Plan,” *Fort-Myers News Press* (August 9, 2021), <https://www.news-press.com/story/news/2021/08/09/covid-parents-gather-bishop-verot-catholic-high-school-urge-opt-out-mask-mandate/5535429001/>; J. Barreto, “Dozens of Parents Protest Diocese of St. Augustine Schools’ Mask Mandate,” *CBS47-Fox30 News* (August 13, 2021), <https://www.news-press.com/story/news/2021/08/09/covid-parents-gather-bishop-verot-catholic-high-school-urge-opt-out-mask-mandate/5535429001/>; and T. Fikowski, “Protesters in Calgary Call for Boycott of First Day of School Due to Mask Mandate,” *Calgary News* (September 1, 2021), <https://calgary.ctvnews.ca/protesters-in-calgary-call-for-boycott-of-first-day-of-school-due-to-mask-mandate-1.5569796>.



was simply a purported government repression of individual freedom, camouflaged under the rhetoric of religious freedom.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Catholic opposition to the COVID-19 measures has helped to make clear that, at heart, rather than opposing a “biopolitical regime,” the culture wars and Catho-capitalism are simply two manifestations of what we could call the “biopolitics of neoliberalism.”<sup>24</sup>

Understanding this connection helps explain what has long been a deeply perplexing contradiction—or apparent contradiction—within the culture wars themselves: that while their lips speak the words “pro-life,” their overall platform is often quite anti-life.

## 2. The Man with the Withered Hand

Between Jesus and the religious traditionalists, sitting on the margins, is the man with a withered hand. He is a concrete, embodied person—probably a poor person—who has long been in need of a healing intervention. But the authoritative champions of tradition have no interest in healing him. Rather, across the synagogue invisibly stretches the law—a wire for Jesus to trip over as he moves to heal the man.

Likewise, in the US for the past 40 years, the culture warriors have positioned the “pro-life” witness as a tripwire separating the church from most policy efforts designed to assist those with withered hands. Purporting to defend “life” from conception to “natural death,” the culture warriors focus on a narrow array of actions—almost exclusively legislative efforts—aimed at *prohibiting* a select set of issues. Confounding many both within and beyond the Church, they

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<sup>23</sup> Religious freedom is also a constant theme on the NCBC blog and other offerings.

<sup>24</sup> One might object that it is secular medicine, bioethics, and public health that perform a biopolitics of neoliberalism. And that is correct. What I am arguing here is that the traditionalist-Catho-capitalist position is simply another manifestation of that same biopolitics of neoliberalism.

also often explicitly champion social policies which directly attack human life—the death penalty; war, as Borghesi documents, again in detail.<sup>25</sup> They often have little to say about the violence against men, women, children, and families occurring daily at our southern border. And as far as I can tell, they are standing silently by in the face of the newest culture war tactic, which seeks to target individuals with the penal powers of the state—deputizing neighbors against each other; threatening to jail parents; criminalizing people’s travel; and proposing the death penalty for women.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, they have strenuously resisted and continue to fight against social policies designed to protect human health, well-being, and life. Not only did many who had previously been vocally “pro-life” stand unmoved as the global COVID death toll advanced toward what is now approximately ~20 million deaths ‘excess’ deaths that have occurred since February 2020.<sup>27</sup> Prior to this, they had often lobbied against seemingly any issue designed to

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<sup>25</sup> As Borghesi notes, the Catholic Americanists have been hawkish about war at least since the US invasion of Iraq, even opposing and criticizing their heretofore-hero Pope John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and now Pope Francis (97).

<sup>26</sup> Some have noted this odd contradiction within neoliberalism itself—a tendency toward authoritarianism that is at odds with their rhetoric of freedom. For example, neoliberalism was infamously involved with the regime of Augusto Pinochet via Milton Friedman and his colleagues at the University of Chicago. Marina Martinez Mateo traces this contradiction to “Hayek’s vitalist theory of society and his understanding of authoritarian liberalism. It is his view that a state needs to protect the ‘living forces’ of the social – if necessary, against the undisciplined activities of single individuals” (“Life-protecting Neoliberalism: Hayek and the Biopolitics of Abortion in Chile,” *Economy and Society* 49, no. 4 (2020): 599, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2020.1789366>). Rudi Ann-Miller suggests that the demographic revolution created by shifting women in the workforce, “creates a political problem [for neoliberalism] called the care deficit: when women go into the labor force, groups such as children, the elderly and the sick are not cared for. While the rich may be able to purchase care services, others rely on government programs and benefits for support. Unsurprisingly, neoliberalism hates the care deficit because it means creating more socially provided services. As a result...it seeks to restrict abortion and contraception incrementally” and reinforce “conservative agendas regarding family, gender, and sexuality” (“Abortion, Contraception, and the Neoliberal Moment,” *The World at Yale*, November 4, 2014). It is this aspect of neoliberalism that helps account for the odd dualism—or contradiction—wherein the culture warriors champion religious freedom or religious liberty for themselves while working assiduously to deny the freedom of others via legislative mechanisms of the state.

<sup>27</sup> Johns Hopkins University, “COVID-19 Dashboard,” <https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>; “The Pandemic’s True Death Toll,” *The Economist* (updated March 17, 2022), <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/coronavirus-excess-deaths-estimates>; “There Have Been 7m-13m Excess Deaths Worldwide During the Pandemic,” *The Economist* (May 15, 2021), <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2021/05/15/there-have-been-7m-13m-excess->

promote human life and well-being: expanding access to health care via the Affordable Care Act<sup>28</sup>; addressing climate change; combatting the real threats to life experienced daily by people of color; expanding social services to assist the elderly, people with disabilities, children, and the poor; reducing military spending; or advancing economic initiatives solidly aligned with Catholic teaching, such as living wage or unionization.<sup>29</sup>

This is the wire Joseph Cardinal Bernardin tripped over when he sought, in the mid-1980s, to reorient the Catholic pro-life witness by envisaging a different way forward—to bridge all these issues under the umbrella of the consistent ethic of life. The vehemence of the backlash against his vision—especially from those within the Catholic church—signaled clearly that something else was driving those who were rallying under the banner of “prolife.” With thirty years of hindsight, it is now easier to see that a key driving force has been neoliberal idolatry.<sup>30</sup> For more important than healing, promoting, preserving, and protecting the lives of real people, is the iron law of neoliberal economics: anti-government, anti-tax, anti-social spending,

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[deaths-worldwide-during-the-pandemic](#); and “Tracking COVID-19 Excess Deaths Across Countries,” *The Economist*, March 17, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/coronavirus-excess-deaths-tracker>.

<sup>28</sup> As with the COVID-19 vaccines, a reason often given for opposing health and life-affirming initiatives is that they have some indirect, remote, tangential, secondary connection to one of the key culture war issues. Thus, they challenged Catholic support for organizations like Susan G. Komen breast cancer research foundation, because its occasional funding of groups like Planned Parenthood. Even though the ACA has proven to promote health and save lives (<https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/abs/10.1377/hlthaff.2019.01436?journalCode=hlthaff>), they continue to oppose it because it provides insurance coverage for contraception. The BLM movement is opposed because of its support for LGBTQ persons, and so on.

<sup>29</sup> Largely absent from the culture war and “pro-life” campaigns have been any correlate constructive actions to address the root causes of these and other threats to life—no robust support for economic and social programming for women and their children; no robust support for constructive end-of-life initiatives such as hospice, palliative medicine, home health; no robust economic measures designed to reduce the growing number of “deaths of despair” resulting from the neoliberal dismantling of the US workforce and communities; no proactive policies to repair the economic, political, and social damage in Latin America wrought by 150-years of US colonialist intervention that drives immigration; and so on.

<sup>30</sup> In addition to Pope Francis’ many references to the way that contemporary economics functions as an idol, Saint Pope John Paul II first named “money, ideology, class and technology” as idols in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (no. 37).

corporate “freedom.” In the most charitable reading, the culture warriors are “pro-life” only as long as protecting human life and well-being doesn’t require government spending or proactive public/social support. On a more wary reading, the rhetoric of “pro-life” has served to deflect attention from their deeper commitments to a nihilistic ideology that ruthlessly privileges economic profit and individual choice over human lives—a commitment to ‘an economy,’ as Pope Francis has so rightly named it, ‘that kills.’<sup>31</sup>

In addition to distorting the Catholic pro-life witness, Catholic anthropology, and the teachings of popes from Paul VI forward, one of the most significant ways that the culture warriors have damaged the Church’s witness is by deploying the tactics of war. To name a few:

- A first tactic is dehumanization. Opponents are labelled as “the aggressor” or “the laptop class” or some version of the enemy—they are targeted, maligned, and demonized, often with mockery, insults, and vitriolic *ad hominem*. As Pope Francis notes in *Fratelli Tutti*, we hear “verbal violence destructive of others...with a lack of restraint that could not exist in physical contact without tearing us all apart.”<sup>32</sup> Here the casualties are human persons and their dignity.

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<sup>31</sup> See also Jim Yong Kim, et al. *Dying for Growth* (Common Courage Press, 2002); and as Anne Case and Angus Deaton document in their book *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020) the rising death rates from suicide, drug overdoses and alcoholic liver disease — what they term ‘deaths of despair’ — in the United States since 2000. They correlate these trends with the effects of neoliberal economic policies that began to be adopted in 1980.

<sup>32</sup> *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 44. He continues, “Even in Catholic media, limits can be overstepped, defamation and slander can become commonplace, and all ethical standards and respect for the good name of others can be abandoned” (no. 46). For George Weigel, those in the Biden administration as well as supporters of both LGBTQ+ issues and critical race theory are “cultural aggressors”—a term he uses repeatedly throughout this short document; the carefully documented *1619 Project* is “an historical fantasy”; Catholic progressives are hysterical bullies, and so on: “Catholic Progressives and the Culture Wars,” *First Things*, November 17, 2021 (<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2021/11/catholic-progressives-and-the-culture-war>). Through the culture war literature, democratic politicians have been referred to for decades as “abortion extremists,” playing on the language of terrorists with whom there can be no dialogue or compromise.

- A second tactic of war is deception. As we have seen, the culture warriors incessantly misrepresent the Catholic tradition. They likewise misrepresent opponents' positions either again, through partial accounts or, via disinformation, falsely and blithely projecting onto opponents their own actions.<sup>33</sup> Here the casualty is truth.
- A third tactic of war is sophistry. This takes many forms. We hear a rejection or distortion of science. We see assertion rather than careful, thorough, logical argument. Contra Thomas Aquinas, who had no problem learning from the pagan Aristotle and the Muslim Ibn Sina, with whom he disagreed on many points, one iota of difference with another's position renders it anathema wholesale. Or we hear emotivism—positions based on feelings, such as claims that conscientious objectors need not give reasons for their positions, as long as they “feel sure.”<sup>34</sup> As Alasdair MacIntyre notes, once we move to emotivism, where moral positions are reduced to preferences and feelings, the only

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<sup>33</sup> For example, in the passage cited earlier, Deneen accuses those on the political left (whom he names ‘political gnostics’) as having an “insistent denial of reality, history, and limits...they are marked by ‘disregard for the structure of reality, ignorance of facts, fallacious misconstruction and falsification of history, irresponsible opining on the basis of sincere conviction, philosophical illiteracy, spiritual dullness, and agnostic sophistication.’” Ironically, this seems more accurately a description of the political right. Again, as in the Weigel essay cited above, the language of “bullies” and “trolls” seems more correctly applied to self-identified culture warriors than their opponents.

<sup>34</sup> National Catholic Bioethics Center, “Vaccine Exemption Template Letter”; Colorado Catholic Conference, “A Letter from the Bishops of Colorado on COVID-19 Vaccine Mandates.” Catholics may object for “a variety of [unnamed] reasons” if they are “sure” that their conscience requires them to refuse. A statement by one dissenting group of Catholic scholars notes: “[We] *fear* the circling of the wagons around abortion-tainted vaccines, advanced by powerful voices which seem ready to silence our *moral intuitions*.” They find the vaccines “morally *repugnant*” citing the “*natural disgust* felt by persons to wish to remain separate from the crime of abortion in every way.” Fear—moral intuitions—repugnance—disgust: the basis for moral argument no longer is reason, but rather individual feeling, the emotivism of personal preference championed by neoliberalism. Catherine R. Pakaluk, “Statement of Conscience to Awaken Conscience,” (2021), <https://mailchi.mp/7742dd12483f/statement-of-conscience-to-awaken-conscience>. Jeff Mirus suggests that those taking this position “identify abortion as an evil which is in a horrendous class all its own, a class that *excludes the normal rules of moral reasoning*” (“A Corrective to the Schneider Statement on the COVID-19 Vaccines,” December 18, 2020, <https://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/corrective-to-schneider-statement-on-covid-vaccines/>, *emphasis added*). As Bishop Athanasius Schneider put it, “the end cannot justify the means...not even on the grounds of preserving the health of a person or society through such vaccines” (“Covid Vaccines: The Ends Cannot Justify the Means,” *Crisis Magazine* (December 11, 2020), <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2020/covid-vaccines-the-ends-cannot-justify-the-means>).

way to resolve differences of opinion is by propaganda or force. Here the casualty is reason.

- A fourth tactic of war is vice. Lost are prudence, temperance, charity, humility, mercy, hospitality. Gone is any evidence of the gifts or fruits of the Holy Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. In the comportment of the culture warriors, one finds little that is discernably Christian. Here the casualty is virtue.
- And a fifth tactic of war is the intentional targeting of embodied human persons. Not to get too academic, but here I think Michel Foucault’s maxim comes alive: bodies are the site on which power is contested. It is on the bodies of real people that these issues continue to be fought—bodies like the man with the withered hand--“throwaway bodies,” as Pope Francis has so rightly named them.<sup>35</sup> Here the casualties are mostly innocent bystanders.

This is what has become of the Church’s moral and intellectual tradition in the hands of the culture warriors and Catho-capitalists. “Certainly,” as Pope Francis says in *Fratelli Tutti*, “all this calls for an alternative way of thinking.”<sup>36</sup> If the Catholic tradition has been distorted by a war grounded in an idolatry to an economy that kills, might the alternative be peace—a peace rooted in a very different economy? To explore this, let’s return to the synagogue.

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<sup>35</sup> As Borghesi notes: “The religious conscience had nothing to say about the logic of ‘waste’ that allowed the rejection of the handicapped, the unproductive elderly, the terminally ill, and the poor. It opposed such logic when it came to abortion or euthanasia, and yet it avoided critical engagement with the structural processes that nourished the ‘purge’ dynamics...” (44).

<sup>36</sup> *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 127.

### 3. The Body of Christ

Jesus calls to the man with the withered hand and invites him to stand up in the middle of the assembly. He seeks to dialogue with the religious traditionalists on their own terms—inviting them to a public discussion of the law. They refuse to respond—because this wasn't about truth; this wasn't about living the law. It was simply about power, with the law—God's gift for the flourishing of God's people—serving as a weapon.<sup>37</sup> Jesus is aggrieved and angry. Like the idols they worship, they have become like stones. He turns to the man and, again, invites him: "Stretch out your hand." And the man does—*he* responds. And in this encounter, the man is healed.

Here is the alternative—the encounter between the body of a marginalized person and the body of God incarnate. This encounter is the center of this story. It takes place at the center of the religious community. Two bodies come together. And indeed, here in this bodily encounter, power is contested—Jesus' radically different, life-giving power squares off against the death-dealing power of idolatry. And his power is greater. The man is healed...and freed.

To provide a detailed, theological account of *how* this passage provides an alternate way forward for the post-conciliar church would take all the way to the end of our coffee break after this session and probably to the end of our next panel. I have begun to develop this account elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> Today I simply want to direct our attention to a series of instances where Pope

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<sup>37</sup> As Borghesi notes: "The Catholic culture that resulted, and that Pope Francis inherited, was one that had left behind both social doctrine *and* new evangelization. It was an essentially 'ethical' Catholicism, polarized on a few foundational values, the model of which was expressed in the great alliance between JPPII and Ronald Reagan during the 1980s. It was a 'tactical' alliance, determined by a common adversary, that became *ideological*, adopting an *ontological* guise. Catholicism of the last thirty years is *essentially* conservative. It seeks order, moral certainties, clear opponents, bright boundaries...." (45). It is this 'ethical' Catholicism that Pope Francis has repeatedly criticized, likewise raising the ire of the culture warriors.

<sup>38</sup> M. Therese Lysaught, "The Peripheries and the Eucharist: Pope Francis, the *Teología del Pueblo*, and the Conversion of Catholic Bioethics," *Perspectivas Teológica* 51, no. 3 (Dec. 2019): 421-442, <https://faje.edu.br/periodicos/index.php/perspectiva/article/view/4221>.

Francis has publicly performed a radically different alternative to that of the culture warriors, an alternative that reprises this gospel passage.

Return with me to March 28, 2013. Holy Thursday, a mere two weeks after the conclave. Pope Francis, as I'm sure you all remember, kneels before a dozen prisoners—some Muslims, some women—and washes their feet. Year after year he repeats this with a different group of marginalized people, performing the practice that stands in for the Last Supper in John's gospel—tenderly, individually, and sacramentally washing, drying, and kissing their feet.

Move ahead to July 2013. On his first pastoral visit as Pope, Francis visits the tiny island of Lampedusa. Face-to-face, hand-to-hand, he stands surrounded by throngs of refugees—men, women, and children who had survived the perilous sea crossing, who had lost not only home and life savings but friends and family members, both at home and to the unforgiving waters. He looks at them, touches them, listens to them, laughs with them, cries with them. And then together, they move to an open-air Mass where he commemorates the thousands of migrants who had died enroute.

Fast-forward to August 2021. Where the culture warriors were wielding their interpretation of the law as an instrument of death, Pope Francis declared over and over in a video that went viral that to be vaccinated against COVID-19—and importantly to bring the vaccines to all the peoples of the world, particularly the poorest—was an “an act of love.”<sup>39</sup>

I could cite many more examples, but let me trace the key features of these three.<sup>40</sup> In the COVID-19 vaccine video, Pope Francis—amplifying Thomas Aquinas—makes clear that at the

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<sup>39</sup> Pope Francis, “Unity Across the Americas,” (August 17, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY5rwTnJFOU>.

<sup>40</sup> Such gestures have not been limited only to Pope Francis. We might also point to San Oscar Romero's decision to offer only one Mass in the entire country of El Salvador on the Sunday when he celebrated the funeral of Rutilio Grande, Manuel Solorzano, and Nelson Lemus; or to Bishop Mark Seitz's, Bishop Peter Baldacchino's and Bishop Guadalupe Torres's celebrations of the Mass through the fences at the southern US border with migrants and



center of Catholic moral discernment and the Christian life lies a different economy—the virtue of *caritas*, charity, the practice of self-gift or self-emptying love for the good of others. This economy does not derive from some philosophical account of human nature, whether from Friedrich Hayek or even natural law. Rather, it is revealed in the economic Trinity, in God incarnate in Christ via the supreme act of self-gift—namely, kenosis. In this act, the Trinity’s essence of love reached to the farthest periphery from God’s divine self, namely us, taking on our nature and showing us via Jesus’ life the fullest image of what it means to be a human person.

But God’s kenotic self-gift did not stop there. As the gospels proclaim, God in Christ did not simply assume human nature but pressed through to the farthest peripheries of human existence—per Matthew 25, to the bodies and lives of the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, the sick, the poor, the weeping—all who experience the greatest pain, suffering, and brokenness, and to death, on the Cross.

And God’s kenotic self-gift does not stop there. God in Christ presses further to each and every one of us, offering—gratuitously—to engraft us into God’s very self, so that we can embody Christ’s living presence in the world. The place of this transformative encounter is, of course, the sacraments. Through Baptism, or so we say, we become members of Christ’s kenotic, reconciling body. This identity, this reality, is reaffirmed, renewed, and deepened each time God in Christ encounters us in the Eucharist. There, in the words of St. Augustine and Benedict XVI, “we become what we consume.” In the Eucharist, we are again and again and again encountered by the Trinitarian God who is love, *caritas*, self-gift via Christ’s endlessly self-emptying body.

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refugees (<https://cruxnow.com/church-in-the-usa/2019/11/border-mass-a-reminder-we-are-called-to-live-in-communion>).

And we are thereby enabled to go forth into the world, bringing Christ's healing and reconciling love near to those on the peripheries.<sup>41</sup>

But, even then, God's kenotic *caritas* isn't done with us yet. For as we move into the world from the Eucharist—individually as missionary disciples and corporately as the Body of Christ, a missionary church—we not only bring Christ. We are encountered by Christ again—Christ who is present in the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the lame, the bereft, the poor, the imprisoned, the bombed—and those on all the world's peripheries. As a place where we meet Christ, those on the peripheries become a *locus theologicus*, in fact, a sacramental locus.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, I'm not getting all this from the Holy Father's two-minute commentary in the video on the COVID-19 vaccines, but rather from the wider corpus of his writings and his

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<sup>41</sup> As Benedict XVI puts it so beautifully: “in the case of the Eucharist...it is not we who assimilate it but it assimilates us in itself, so that we become conformed to Jesus Christ, a member of his Body, one with him.... In fact, precisely because it is Christ who, in Eucharistic communion changes us into him, our individuality, in this encounter, is opened, liberated from its egocentrism and inserted into the Person of Jesus who in his turn is immersed in Trinitarian communion. The Eucharist, therefore, while it unites us to Christ also opens us to others, makes us members of one another: we are no longer divided but one in him. Eucharistic communion not only unites me to the person I have beside me and with whom I may not even be on good terms, but also to our distant brethren in every part of the world. Hence the profound sense of the Church's social presence derives from the Eucharist, as is testified by the great social saints [for example, Mother Teresa or St. Vincent DePaul] who were always great Eucharistic souls. Those who recognize Jesus in the sacred Host, recognize him in their suffering brother or sister, in those who hunger and thirst, who are strangers, naked, sick or in prison; and they are attentive to every person, they work in practice for all who are in need. Therefore, our special responsibility as Christians for building a supportive, just and brotherly society comes from the gift of Christ's love” ([https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2011/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20110623\\_corpus-domini.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20110623_corpus-domini.html)).

<sup>42</sup> This term resounds from Gustavo Gutierrez forward. Especially for the *teología del pueblo*, popular religiosity, often dismissed as simply pastoral or benighted—is a necessary source of revelation, of the living and active presence of God's grace, necessary for strengthening and deepening the church's grasp and articulation of theological and doctrinal insight. As Juan Carlos Scannone notes, for liberation theology and the subsequently the *teología del pueblo*, the option for the poor and popular piety are “the prime locus of interpretation” (“Pope Francis and the Theology of the People, *Theological Studies* v. 77, n. 1, p. 118-135, March 2016, 133). Paul VI articulated this relationship well in his homily opening the first CELAM session in Bogotá: “We remind you of what was said by a great and wise bishop, Bossuet, on the ‘eminent dignity of the poor’ (Cf. J.-B. Bossuet *De l'éminente dignité des Pauvres*). The entire tradition of the churches recognizes in the poor the sacrament of Christ, certainly not identical to the reality of the Eucharist, but indeed *in perfect analogical and mystical correspondence with it*” (Paul VI, “Apostolic pilgrimage to Bogota on the occasion of the 39th International Eucharistic Congress; homily during the Mass for Colombian peasants, August 23, 1968,” cited in Rafael Luciani, *Pope Francis and the Theology of the People*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2017 Kindle Location 901 (emphasis added)).

witness. From *Aparecida* through *Lumen Fidei*, *Laudato Si*, *Samaritanus Bonus*, to *Fratelli Tutti*, we hear a polarity—one that Borghesi does not mention in his very fine book *The Mind of Pope Francis*.<sup>43</sup> It is a polarity that moves continuously back and forth between two sacramental locations—the Eucharist and the peripheries. In the work of Pope Francis, we find a dynamic of the Christian life that moves recursively from Christ to Christ and back again; we could say from sacrament to sacrament and back again. Or we could say, the heart of the Christian life is to be those agents where Christ encounters Christ in the recursive dynamic of Trinitarian love.

Now how does one preach this to the world without constantly orating a theological treatise that most people couldn't understand? You perform it. And that, I would suggest, is what Pope Francis did at Lampedusa; that is what he does every year on Holy Thursday. Here he physically, tangibly, brings Christ to Christ—enveloping Christ's presence on the peripheries within Christ's sacramental presence in the Eucharist. Here, as in the synagogue, two bodies come together—the body of a person who is broken, withered, hurt, invisibly relegated to the margins, and Christ's Eucharistic body. Again and again, Pope Francis brings these two together—creates an encounter between these two bodies—unleashing God's extraordinary healing power, both for these individual people as well as for those who see it—which is, of course, evangelization.<sup>44</sup>

And here, he crystallizes in these gestures, the essence of the Church. For where we find the body of Christ, we find the Church. It is in this recursive movement between the body of Christ in the Eucharist and Christ in the bodies of the poor and marginalized, that the Church

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<sup>43</sup> Massimo Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018).

<sup>44</sup> We see this same dynamic in Pope Francis' frequent recourse to the parable of the Good Samaritan where—properly interpreted—the Samaritan (God) comes close to the pain of the world (us). See, e.g., *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 77; *Samaritanus Bonus*; etc.

exists. This, I would suggest, is the dynamic captured in the vision of the Second Vatican Council. Opening with *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Council proclaims that the font of the church is the sacraments—the endless wellspring of God’s real presence in the world. Out of the sacraments, the church moves—via all the members in the *communio* of the people of God—into the world through *Gaudium es spes*, the final document of the Council. Here the church meets the world in all its “joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of the [people] of this age, *especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted*...[we rarely hear that latter part of the sentence, right?]....[these] are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”<sup>45</sup> What Pope Francis helps us see, via the Argentinian reception of the Council in the *teología del pueblo*, is that this vector is not unidirectional. The Spirit that goes forth into the world via the church as missionary disciple, returns to the church through its encounter with those on the peripheries, thus recursively remaking, renewing—even converting—the church.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, the Council gives us a vision of the Church rooted in a particular economy—an economy of gift and need that is at the heart of the sacraments. This economy and its Christological anthropology points toward a radically different ecclesiology than that espoused by *First Things* culture warrior Rusty Reno who preached to his Napa Institute audience last

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<sup>45</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, no. 1.

<sup>46</sup> For San Oscar Romero, a primary effect of his turn to the poor was the conversion of the Salvadoran church itself: “Experiencing these realities, and letting ourselves be affected by them, far from separating us from our faith, has sent us back to the world of the poor, our true home...[T]his coming closer to the world of the poor is what we understand both by incarnation and by conversion. The changes that were needed in the church...which we had not brought about simply by looking inward upon the church, we are now carrying out by turning ourselves outward toward the world of the poor. Our encounter with the poor has regained for us the central truth of the gospel, through the word of God which urges us to conversion (Romero, “The Political Dimension of Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor,” 1980, 3, <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/1980-02-02%20Louvain.pdf>). Romero’s experience of ecclesial conversion is articulated as well by key figures within the *teología del pueblo*; see Luciani, Kindle Location 317.

summer that “We’re in a season in which we need to rebuild *the walls* of the church.”<sup>47</sup> This economy and its Christological anthropology points toward a radically different moral theology than that espoused by the culture warriors, not a biopolitics of neoliberalism but instead toward what we might call a “sacramental biopolitics”—a vision of Christian discipleship—both individual and corporate—informed first and foremost by the sacraments and the peripheries and the identity of the God who encounters us there.

#### 4. A Sacramental (Bio)politics

Like Jesus in the synagogue, Pope Francis has unmasked the nihilistic idol at the center of this deadly variant of Catholic Americanism. And we know how the gospel passage ends. Jesus tripped the wire, and “the Pharisees went out and at once began to plot with the Herodians against him, discussing how to destroy him.”<sup>48</sup> Jesus was crucified. War requires dead bodies.<sup>49</sup>

Though you might not know it, this war is apparently coming for us. You don’t even need to move, it seems, to trip the wire. As George Weigel put it just this past November, paraphrasing—of all people—Leon Trotsky: “to my progressive Catholic friends I say: you may

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<sup>47</sup> Emphasis added. “Today our problem is there is very little distinction between the church and the world. It is time to rebuild. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the Temple. We’re in a Nehemiah moment in the 21st century where we rebuild the walls of the church so the world sees we are a fundamentally distinct institution that lives in accord with its own laws and principles, and not the principles and laws of the world,” <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/napa-institute-expands-fight-culture-war> (Aug. 4, 2021)

<sup>48</sup> As scripture scholar Ched Myers notes, when Jesus asks the Pharisees whether it is lawful “to save life or to kill,” he is not referring to the man with the withered hand. The Greek term translated as “kill” is *apokteinai* and is “always used by Mark in reference to political execution” (162). Thus, here Jesus is challenging their intention to kill him. See *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Orbis, 1988).

<sup>49</sup> Elaine Scarry provides a detailed theoretical argument for this claim in her seminal book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1987).

not be interested in the culture war, but the culture war is interested in you—and everyone else.”<sup>50</sup> So it appears that it’s only a matter of time before it comes for us all.

But Jesus was raised and, we proclaim, is present in his body, the Church. Thus Pope Francis, the Vicar of Christ, declares: “Never again war!”<sup>51</sup> As he has insisted almost every day since February 24<sup>th</sup>: “God is only a God of peace. He is not a God of war, and those who support violence profane His name.”<sup>52</sup>

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis has called for a better kind of politics—a politics rooted in charity, in love, a politics that prioritizes and seeks peace and human flourishing. He outlines what that might look like for the usual political actors. But if our words are to have any meaning, that better kind of politics must start with the church. There can be no room for anyone who identifies as a “warrior,” who profanes Christian witness by using the tactics of war.

As we envisage our way forward, our moral and intellectual traditions must no longer be shaped by a grasp for secular power gained by distorting Catholicism in service of particular political parties and ideologies, nor by, as Pope Francis has noted, “a disjointed multitude of [philosophical] doctrines to be imposed insistently.”<sup>53</sup> Rather, the Council points us toward a framework that finds its structure, content, and norms in the sacraments (per *Sacrosanctum concilium*) paired with Catholic social thought (per *Gaudium et spes*) and shaped by an understanding of each of us as a member of the *communio* of the Body of Christ (per Vatican II documents 2-15). Let me sketch three implications of such a framework.

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<sup>50</sup> “Catholic Progressives and the Culture War,” *First Things*, 11-17, 2021.

<sup>51</sup> *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 258.

<sup>52</sup> @Pontifex, March 13, 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Spadaro, 2013, p. 12.

First, such a sacramental-ecclesial framework would suggest that, via our Christological identity given in *Baptism*, Catholic moral reflection concerns first (not solely, but first) our own action and character as those reconfigured in Christ as missionary disciples—as both individuals and the corporate Body of Christ—rather than with policing the actions of others via lobbying for prohibitive, penalizing legislation carried out by secular authorities. Instead, it pushes us to ask: how might each and every parish wash the feet of homeless people—or refugees or ex-cons or AIDS patients or opioid users—not only as a symbolic gesture on Holy Thursday but via concrete, corporate, economic practices that bring them to the center of our churches, just as Jesus brought the man with the withered hand to the center of the synagogue?<sup>54</sup> How might bishops, one might ask, create and foster such a vibrant vision of the *corporate agency* of our parishes in our local communities as a first step in healing our moral fabric?

Second, such a sacramental-ecclesial framework would suggest that, as those reconfigured as embodiments of the Prince of Peace and gifted with the Sacrament of *Reconciliation*, our moral and intellectual traditions would be grounded at all times in the practices and tactics of peacemaking and reconciliation—commitments, for example, to the infinite dignity of each and every human person—even our enemies—in our actions and words; commitments to truth, honesty, and transparency; to reason, knowledge, and dialogue; to the practice of virtue, mercy, and the fruits of the Holy Spirit; and to the care and flourishing of all people, especially those who might be accidentally caught in the crossfire. It might also entirely reorient moral theology, helping us reimagine traditional issues, such as conflicts at the end of

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<sup>54</sup> For the transformative power of such practice see, e.g., Kyle Childress, “Austin Heights and AIDS,” in *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives on Medical Ethics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, ed. by M. Therese Lysaught and Joseph Kotva (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishers), [https://www.google.com/books/edition/On\\_Moral\\_Medicine/4\\_yBKLGRngC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=austin+heights+and+AIDS&pg=PA199&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.com/books/edition/On_Moral_Medicine/4_yBKLGRngC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=austin+heights+and+AIDS&pg=PA199&printsec=frontcover).

life. It might help us see that a case like that of Terri Schiavo—which I am sure you all remember—is less about treatment decisions than about how tragedy fractures families and their need for reconciliation. It would critique the culture warriors who held vigil and stormed the media in her case, fomenting enmity and hatred rather than embodying the healing and reconciling presence of Christ to her family.<sup>55</sup> How might such a sacramental-ecclesial perspective provide a new, truly post-conciliar framework for the discipline of moral theology?

Finally, such a sacramental-ecclesial framework would suggest that, as a church grounded in the *Eucharist*, the Catholic tradition operates out of a different economic vision, an economy of gift. As Benedict XVI notes in *Deus Caritas Est*, “a Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, a Catholic vision that emerges from the theological economy of the Eucharist and moves to the world, pushes us as Catholic intellectuals to draw on on a wider array of theoretical resources to make clear the economic and structural dimensions of every issue and to begin to reimagine correlative practices and structures.

At the beginning of *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis speaks of Saint Francis and notes:

“Wherever he went, he sowed seeds of peace and walked alongside the poor, the abandoned, the infirm and the outcast, the least of his brothers and sisters.”<sup>57</sup> Let me close with a final gesture of

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<sup>55</sup> For my analysis of the Schiavo case along these lines see: M. Therese Lysaught, “Love Your Enemies: Toward a Christoform Bioethic,” in *Gathered for the Journey: Moral Theology in Catholic Perspective*, ed. by David M. McCarthy and M. Therese Lysaught (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishers, 2007), 307-328, [https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1181&context=theo\\_fac](https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1181&context=theo_fac).

<sup>56</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 14.

<sup>57</sup> *Fratelli Tutti*, 2. Harvard political theorists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan who have documented that in the twentieth century, “campaigns of nonviolent resistance were more than twice as effective as their violent counterparts,” including in deeply totalitarian and violent contexts. Moreover, they found that it generally only takes mobilization of 3.5-5% of a group actively participating to ensure serious political change. Perhaps the neoliberals and culture warrior have been using this strategy. But if these authors are correct, the bar isn’t that high for reclaiming our own church. Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, August 2011).



Pope Francis performing this powerful vision of church—which happened today—in which we all participated. Today, on this, the Solemnity of the Annunciation, the Holy Father invited all the bishops of the world, along with their priests, to join him in praying for peace and in consecrating and entrusting Russia and Ukraine to the Immaculate Heart of Mary during the liturgical Celebration of Penance in Rome. Here, again, he brought Christ’s sacramental presence—captured in the gathered global prayer of the church—together with Christ embodied in those at the margins, in this case, in the people caught up in this horrific conflict. For as he prayed a couple of weeks ago:

Lord Jesus, born in the shadows of bombs falling on Kyiv, have mercy on us!

Lord Jesus, who died in a mother's arms in a bunker in Kharkiv, have mercy on us!

Lord Jesus, a 20-year-old sent to the frontlines, have mercy on us!

Christ—he proclaims—is a casualty of this, as of every war. For our complicity in this, we join him in praying: “Forgive us for war, O Lord.” And so forgiven, might we go forward to reimagine and embody the Catholic tradition in all its Christological light.