

# An Appeal to the Common Good: Pope Francis's Speech to Congress

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# AN APPEAL TO THE COMMON GOOD: POPE FRANCIS'S SPEECH TO CONGRESS

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**AN APPEAL TO THE COMMON GOOD:  
POPE FRANCIS'S SPEECH TO CONGRESS**

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This paper analyzes Pope Francis's view of politics, particularly politics in the United States. Beginning with his speech before a special joint session of Congress on September 24, 2015, this paper explores many of the themes the Pope introduces in this speech, and compares those themes to those in other works he has published since being elected Pontiff in 2013. Then, this paper applies what he has said about contemporary American politics with the analysis of other scholars of American politics. Ultimately, I find that the Pope is very aware of problems in the United States, but hopes to present a positive alternative to address what he identifies as the contemporary world's ills.

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## AN APPEAL TO THE COMMON GOOD: POPE FRANCIS’S SPEECH TO CONGRESS

During his first visit to the United States, Pope Francis made a speech before a special joint session of Congress.<sup>1</sup> For many people, this was a moment of great importance. For many of the listeners in the audience assembled in the chamber of the House of Representatives, watching the address on television, or reading about it in the newspapers the next morning, the speech was an uplifting reminder of the positive history of progress and justice in the United States. The Pope, reading his remarks in heavily accented English, thanked the Congress for this invitation to address the people residing in the “land of the free and the home of the brave.” In an attempt to connect with these people, the pope framed his speech with the stories of great Americans – Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton – and praised the impacts they had on America’s formation as a nation. Looking to America’s founding, he also quoted Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence and its recognition of “self-evident” truths such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The Pope saw these

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will be using a transcript of the speech the Pope delivered before Congress. The transcript was published on *The Washington Post* website, published on September 24, 2015. A link to the transcript can be found here: “Transcript: Pope Francis’s speech to Congress,” in *The Washington Post*, published September 24, 2015, accessed May 3, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/transcript-pope-franciss-speech-to-congress/2015/09/24/6d7d7ac8-62bf-11e5-8e9e-dce8a2a2a679\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/transcript-pope-franciss-speech-to-congress/2015/09/24/6d7d7ac8-62bf-11e5-8e9e-dce8a2a2a679_story.html).

figures as a way to connect with the nation he was addressing, and as a way to make clear his admiration for the United States and its history.

For others in the audience, the speech was also a call for change. Like many observers and scholars of modern American politics, the Pope sees things about the United States – and much of the rest of the modern world – that disturb him, and he used this address to Congress as an opportunity to address those issues directly. Inequality, individualism, and a disregard for the poor and the environment have become rampant in the modern world, with no end in sight, some observers lament. Having these concerns does not mean Pope Francis or these other critics are disparaging of Americans as people and their ability to address these issues. Instead, it is clear from his speech that the Pope is very hopeful about the ability of modern Americans to recognize their country's ills. What the Pope was offering in his speech before Congress was a friendly criticism of modern America, with the hope that his audience will be able to address these ills and make a change for the better.

In his speech, the Pope offered his perspective of the world as a spiritual leader for one of the largest organized religions in the world. But can his perspective offer a new way of looking at American contemporary politics? Offering this opportunity for new reflection seems to be one of the missions of his papacy. In his time as Pope, Francis has written and spoken extensively about topics like inequality, the environment, and the poor. Each of his papal encyclicals has addressed these issues and more. But why should Americans – especially non-Catholic Americans – care what the leader of the Roman Catholic Church has to say about contemporary America? What authority does an Argentinian leader of a world religion have that allows him to get involved in American

politics? These are all fair questions, and a discussion of why former House Speaker John Boehner and Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi chose to invite the Pope to address Congress during his visit to the U.S.

However, my concern lies with the contents of his speech. I argue that the Pope's speech before Congress was his attempt to bring the messages of his encyclicals and of the Catholic Church as a whole to an American audience. I do not deny that the Pope is attempting to meddle in American politics. The Pope's speech was political in its nature; he addressed an audience of American political actors in a setting where policy is debated and laws are written. He brought his faith and the faith of the Catholic Church, framed it in American themes, and introduced it in a public setting with the purpose of making his views – and the views of many others, Catholic faithful or not – to the attention of the American public. For that reason, his speech to Congress deserves a close reading and attempt at understanding. In this paper, I will present Pope Francis's position of inclusion and solidarity, using his speech and his various writings to explain his position. His speech to Congress draws on his multiple encyclicals and other major writings, so it is important to examine them to understand the message he gave to Congress in September. That message was not so dissimilar from the message of other prominent American thinkers and scholars, which I will also show. I also acknowledge when there are differences between the Pope's position and the positions of others, but I suggest that Pope Francis is above all offering Americans an opportunity to reflect on American politics.

## 1.0 THE POPE'S SPEECH

Right after thanking the Congress for inviting him to address the chamber, Pope Francis introduced the theme of his remarks: the idea of common responsibility for both public and private individuals. “Each son or daughter of a country has a mission, a personal and social responsibility,” he told the Congress. This common responsibility included the responsibility of all private citizens, whom the Pope hoped to address through this speech to their representatives. He hoped to use this as an opportunity to speak to “the many thousands of men and women who strive each day to do an honest day’s work, to bring home their daily bread, to save money and – one step at a time – to build a better life for their families.” These people he said are the life of the society, some acting as the “storehouse of wisdom forged by experience,” and others who were just at the beginning of their lives and had grand aspirations for themselves and their society. The Pope wished to commend them for working to improve society around them, and called for them to find solidarity with one another.

In order to address these Americans, the Pope told Congress that he would frame his message with the stories of several great Americans from history. The first was Abraham Lincoln, “the guardian of liberty,” who worked tirelessly to give the country a “new birth of freedom.” This new birth required Lincoln to understand and commit himself to the common good, which he believed to be unity among the inhabitants of the whole country. In the present, America exists in a world where violence and division threaten to pull the country apart. Instead of fighting over slavery or states’ rights, the Pope recognized that one great threat to America today is radical religious and

ideological extremism. Groups like the Islamic State threaten the United States and the rest of the world with terror and death; but still, the Pope added, groups that foster extreme political partisanship and ideological polarization are just as threatening to the future of American politics. Both of these forms of extremism prey on people's willingness to believe "simplistic reductionism which sees only good or evil; or, if you will, the righteous and sinners."

The degree of polarization in contemporary America, and the willingness its people have to split people into two sides of an issue rather than encourage collaboration, is dangerous for American politics he suggested. This divisiveness leads to turning those who do not agree into an enemy rather than a fellow man. This is a temptation Americans and their politicians must avoid. "We know that in the attempt to be freed of the enemy without, we can be tempted to feed the enemy within," he said. But, "our response must instead be one of hope and healing, of peace and justice." These offerings must be made to all people, regardless of whose side they are on politically. We make these offerings by honoring commitments made to them and fostering a sense of solidarity and understanding with them, with the hope to create a sense of unity and togetherness among all people. Fostering this unity is a task that the various faith groups in the United States have proven themselves to be well-equipped to do. These denominations, who have been able to in the past pool together their resources and talents to form interfaith organizations dedicated to tackling issues like racial inequality and the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s. These groups must continue to cooperate with one another to "eliminate new global forms of slavery" like human trafficking and economic slavery,

and again bring out the best in the society. Interfaith groups are essential to America's progress throughout history, and will continue to be important actors in the future.

Still, it was not the faith groups alone that were able to effect change in the United States. It was a concerted effort of the people as a whole, who together have an idea of what is good for all the people rather than a few, who were able to take that idea and make lasting changes to American society. "Here," the Pope said, "I think of the political history of the United States, where democracy is deeply rooted in the mind of the American people." A dedication to democracy and equal rights motivated the leaders of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. Democracy is about allowing all citizens to participate in the maintaining of their own dignity and the dignity of others. In order to do this, politics cannot be a "slave to the economy" and only focus on what is economically beneficial for the markets or for particular industries. Instead, democratic politics gives all people the opportunity to participate and express their views, then try to come to a common consensus. This process encourages people to hear and understand one another's views, making them more aware of other positions. This kind of politics fosters a community that is willing to make concessions, even sacrifices, for the sake of justice and the good of the whole.

This reflection on the importance of democracy brings Pope Francis to the accomplishments of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the march from Selma to Montgomery. This march, the Pope said, was representational of the American commitment to being a land of "dreams," dreams that all Americans can have and share. These dreams have inspired many Americans to action in their communities. These dreams have also inspired millions of people to come to the United States in pursuit of their own dream,

namely the pursuit of a better life. “We, the people of this continent, are not fearful of foreigners, because most of us were once foreigners,” said the Pope, whose own family had immigrated to Argentina in 1929. “Building a nation calls us to recognize that we must constantly relate to others, rejecting a mindset of hostility in order to adopt one of reciprocal subsidiarity, in a constant effort to do our best.” True to his speech’s theme of embracing American history to convey his message, the Pope recognized that the settlers of both North and Latin America did not always embrace a peaceful mindset with regard to immigration. Hostile mindsets were the basis for the past sins committed against those who were here “long before us,” meaning members of the Native American tribes. Pope Francis extended his “great esteem” and respect for the Native American population, and called for all to remember their cultural importance in the United States.

The Pope then called for Americans to never again turn their backs on “the stranger in our midst,” whether here before us or newly arrived to our country. These strangers include the millions of people who have become economic or political refugees throughout the world. These refugees, whether they are fleeing to Europe to escape terrorism and civil war, or migrating from the countries south of the United States to find a better and safer life, are in need of solidarity and humanitarian aid rather than refusal and prejudice. “Is this not what we want for our own children?” the Pope asked. Instead of seeing them as mere numbers, he encouraged Americans to see them as people with stories that demand sympathy. Their hopes for better are not alien to those who live in a country of immigrants and of dreamers. Thus, the Pope reminded his audience, this is a time to apply the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This means as people, all are called to “seek for others the same possibilities which we

seek for ourselves.” Here, the Pope intended to remind everyone of their responsibilities, including the defense of life “at every stage of its development.”

From Pope Francis’s perspective, the defense of life includes a societal responsibility for caring for the poor. The demand for justice and for solidarity in accordance with the Golden Rule includes addressing the cycle of poverty that many find themselves trapped in. Both the condemned and the impoverished are in need of hope and an opportunity to change their situation for the betterment of themselves and their society. At this point in the speech, Pope Francis reflected on the impact of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement. Day, according to the Pope, was an example of how faith and the Gospels inspire a commitment to the equal rights and economic and social opportunities. The Catholic Worker movement was dedicated to providing housing, counseling, and education to needy and homeless people. The *Catholic Worker*, a newspaper also founded by Day in 1933, publicized social justice issues such as fair living wages and the care for the poor through charity and job training, all while embracing the Church’s teachings as the moral justification for these reforms. Through the work of people like Day, society has made great strides in bringing people out of poverty. However, there is still much to be done, and eliminating the cycle of poverty must remain a priority for Americans and lawmakers the Pope argued.

To eliminate the cycle, it is important to identify what is contributing to that cycle. This brought the Pope to one of the major themes of his pontificate: the effect that the creation and distribution of wealth has on the poor. Pope Francis is not suggesting that the production of wealth itself necessarily causes poverty, and does recognize the improvements capitalism has had for many people globally; his speech, he clarified that

“Business is a noble vocation, directed to producing wealth and improving the world. It can be a fruitful source of prosperity for the area in which it operates, especially if it sees the creation of jobs as an essential part of its service to the common good.” He condemned however business practices that are ignorant of their impact on their employees and their community. Businesses can show concern for their employees by offering fair wages and working hours, and by giving back to their local communities through donating to fundraisers or sponsoring events. But when business is in the position to give back in this way but instead divorces itself from the community around it, it is no longer capable of being an actor in the common good.

Another element of business’ responsibility to the good of the community is a commitment to practices that do not harm the environment around it, an environment which serves as “our common home.” Businesses that ignore the impact that their production procedures have on the environment are not living to their shared responsibility for the world that they inhabit. Production that results in the pollution of rivers is dangerous to the community that relies on those rivers. It is important for Americans hold their companies responsible, encouraging them to foster a “culture of care” for the communities. This includes advocating that individuals and companies invest in technology that makes their production cleaner, make efforts to prevent pollution, and give back to the communities by giving back through charitable acts and paying their workers fair wages.

The Pope acknowledged that he had laid out many complex responsibilities with major impacts on individuals and communities alike. He also recognized that there are many possible approaches to addressing these issues, approaches that not everyone might

agree with. Thus, none of this progress is possible without first having a willingness to dialogue with one another, the Pope said. Calling to mind the example of the American monk Thomas Merton, the Pope encouraged the American people to see Merton as a man of dialogue and prayer, who aimed to promote peace among people regardless of their faith. Merton, who wrote prolifically on faith and social justice, also fostered dialogue with other religious leaders such as the Dalai Lama and Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Merton was passionate about issues of civil rights and nuclear nonproliferation, and published in Day's *Catholic Worker*. He was aware of his responsibility to foster dialogue and come to common ground on important issues. Pope Francis then recognized his own role in the dialogue, as one who attempts to build bridges between parties. This is the role of a good political leader, Pope Francis said. "A good political leader is one who, with the interests of all in mind, seizes the moment in a spirit of openness and pragmatism. A good political leader always opts to initiate processes," he said.

A leader who is open to such a dialogue can accomplish tremendous things, including the end of armed conflicts throughout the world, Pope Francis urged Congress. But another important step to accomplishing this goal is the ending of the arms trade. The arms trade is not a matter of justice or maintaining political or strategic balance, the Pope argues; the selling of weapons to those who plan to inflict harm on others with their new tools is done purely for financial reasons, and has deadly results. In exchange for others' suffering, the arms dealer receives "money that is drenched in blood." Refusing to acknowledge this makes society culpable in the bloodshed, the Pope warned.

At the close of his speech, Pope Francis turned to one of the reasons for his visit to the United States: the World Meeting of Families occurring in Philadelphia later on

that week. He told Congress that family would be a reoccurring theme throughout his visit. “I cannot hide my concern for the family, which is threatened, perhaps as never before, from within and without,” he said. He mentioned his particular concern for the youngest members of the family, who are suffering in contemporary America. Here he turned to the issue of inequality in the United States. For many young people, “a future filled with countless possibilities beckons, yet so many others seem disoriented and aimless, trapped in a hopeless maze of violence, abuse and despair,” he observed. Not everyone benefits from the opportunities available to young people, because not all young people have access to those opportunities. This disparity poses a problem for the whole society’s future. Pope Francis is concerned with how the over-abundance of opportunities for some, but the lack of opportunities for others, will affect the attitudes of the youngest generation regarding their willingness to start their own families. “At the risk of oversimplifying, we might say that we live in a culture which pressures young people not to start a family, because they lack possibilities for the future. Yet this same culture presents others with so many options that they too are dissuaded from starting a family,” he said. Since the family is one of the most essential elements to building a country, this dilemma is significant for the society as a whole.

In his conclusion, Pope Francis summarized his speech using the lessons taught by the great Americans he had used as examples:

“A nation can be considered great when it defends liberty as Lincoln did, when it fosters a culture which enables people to ‘dream’ of full rights for all their brothers and sisters, as Martin Luther King sought to do; when it strives for justice and the cause of the oppressed, as Dorothy Day did by her tireless work, the fruit of a faith which becomes dialogue and sows peace in the contemplative style of Thomas Merton.”

Thus it is important for the United States to follow in the footsteps of its cultural heritage, and embrace the spirit of those who came before, see how it was their commitment to a common good and a common responsibility to that good that inspired their greatness. It is important for the Americans in the present time to learn these lessons, so that those generations that come next will find the same opportunities to dream their own dreams for the betterment of the whole.

Throughout his speech to the American people and their Congress, the Pope addressed many of the ills that he sees afflicting the contemporary world. His overall message is clear: there is a collective responsibility to address these ills. It is necessary to address them, because they affect Americans in a significant way. These are complex issues, and Pope Francis recognizes their complexity. Still, Pope Francis's message is hopeful: he believes that it is not too late for Americans to rise above these challenges. But it will take political action, coalitions of interfaith groups and "good political leaders" who aim to build bridges rather than burn them. This is an optimistic message for a serious situation, and it is not a situation that we are unaware of.

What is most remarkable about this speech is that its message is not unfamiliar to those who follow contemporary political scholarship. Many scholars of American culture and democracy have seen the same issues emerging in the United States. There the Pope and these other scholars overlap merits a discussion of the issues. To do this, I will take the arguments Pope Francis laid out in his speech to Congress, and relate them back to his other written works, the papal encyclicals *Light of Faith* and *On the Care of Our Common Home*, as well as his apostolic exhortation *Joy of the Gospel*. By doing this, I hope to show how the Pope's argument is in fact a continuation of a longer line of

thinking present in the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope, like Day and Merton, is taking the moral teachings of the Church and applying them to the modern world. While demonstrating the Pope's positions, I will include observations on the same topics by other political scientists and thinkers, discussing where they agree and where they disagree. This will show how the Pope's message can be used as a way to bring to the forefront contemporary issues while offering a unique perspective on how modern Americans should address those issues. During his speech, the Pope said his intention as a good "political" leader is to foster dialogue and to build bridges. The aim of this paper is to highlight some places where those bridges might be built.

## 2.0 JOY OF THE GOSPEL: AN ECONOMIC ARGUMENT

In 2013, Pope Francis released the apostolic exhortation *Joy of the Gospel*. An apostolic exhortation is a form of communication between the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church, in which the Pope usually encourages the community to act in a particular way. The message of *Joy of the Gospel*, an apostolic exhortation about the Church's mission, quickly made waves after its release. In *Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis condemned the indifference and “the throwaway culture” of the modern world.<sup>2</sup> The great danger facing the world today is the “desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart,” encouraging people to be focused on pleasures and ignorant of their consciousness.<sup>3</sup> In a society focused on pleasures, there is no room for others. It is only by encountering others that “we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption,” and again act in a fully human manner.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.1 ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

The Pope recognizes many of the benefits of the accomplishments of the modern world. Technology that has improved education, health care, and communication among people are all blessings that the world has embraced. However, not all people have seen their lives improving. Many continue to struggle to live day to day while others are able to

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium*, (New York: Image, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

continue to gain. For these people, the Pope said, “the joy of living frequently fades, lack of respect of others and violence are on the rise, and inequality is increasingly evident.”<sup>5</sup> This has been set in motion by the rapid changes in technology, which encourages people who can afford the changes to become focused on acquiring the newest pieces of equipment. They promote the improvements of technology as the same thing as improvements to the quality of life for all, while becoming more blind to those whose lives are not improving.

While the reports of violent crime in the United States have not risen in the past couple of years,<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis’s concern for the effects of an unequitable society does apply to contemporary America, and has been of much interest for American researchers. Economic inequality is on the rise in the United States. Pew Research released a report in December 2015 analyzing the status of the middle class in America. It found that middle-class incomes have fallen behind the incomes of those in the upper-tier of earners.<sup>7</sup> In terms of overall wealth rather than income, the gap between lower-, middle-, and upper-income families has also increased.<sup>8</sup> The report found that only upper-income families have seen gains in their wealth from 1983 to 2013, while the lower- and middle-class remained largely unchanged. Other scholars, Gary Burtless and Ron Haskins, found that

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 42.

<sup>6</sup> “Violent Crime Rate Remained Unchanged While Property Crime Rate Declined in 2014,” *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, last visited May 3, 2016, <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/press/cv14pr.cfm>.

<sup>7</sup> “Middle class incomes fall further behind upper-tier incomes,” Pew Research Center: Social and Demographic Trends, accessed May 3, 2016, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/09/4-middle-class-incomes-fall-further-behind-upper-tier-incomes/>

<sup>8</sup> “Wealth gap between middle-income and upper-income familiarizes reaches record high.” Pew Research Center: Social and Demographic Trends, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/09/5-wealth-gap-between-middle-income-and-upper-income-families-reaches-record-high/>.

among U.S.-born Americans in particular inequality is on the rise.<sup>9</sup> While some immigrants might be able to find better opportunities in America compared to their countries of origin, upward mobility stagnates after a couple of generations. This lack of mobility is concerning for Americans of all ages, research has shown. In 2014, sixty-five percent of Americans believed that the gap between higher-income Americans and all other Americans has grown in the last ten years.<sup>10</sup>

This has had a dramatic effect on the way Americans perceive their present situations. A Bloomberg National Poll in 2013 reported that 64 percent of Americans responded that they no longer believed that the United States offers equal opportunities to all.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the perception is that those who have already reached the top in earnings are more likely to remain at that current level, while those who have yet to reach similar levels of earning are unable to find the opportunity to do so. This popular opinion was followed the economic reports that show the richest ten percent of all Americans earned more than half the income.<sup>12</sup> While there is no direct relation between inequality and rising crime rates in the U.S., this evidence does suggest that current economic conditions are having a negative impact on the American perception of the justness of their own society.

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<sup>9</sup> Gary Burtless and Ron Haskins, "Inequality, Economic Mobility, and Social Policy," in *Understanding America: The Anatomy of an Exceptional Nation*, edited by Peter H. Schuck and James Q. Wilson, (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 495-496.

<sup>10</sup> "Most See Inequality Growing, but Partisans Differ over Solutions," Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics and Policy, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/01/23/most-see-inequality-growing-but-partisans-differ-over-solutions/>.

<sup>11</sup> David J. Lynch, "Americans Say Dream Fading as Income Gap Shows Unequal Chances," on *Bloomberg.com*, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-12-11/americans-say-dream-fading-as-income-gap-hurts-chances>

<sup>12</sup> "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2012," U.S. Census Bureau, issued September 2013, accessed April 22, 2016, [ww.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p60-245.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p60-245.pdf).

## 2.2 POVERTY

In *Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis also discussed the pitfalls of the modern economy.

“Just as the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say ‘Thou shalt not’ to an economy of exclusion and inequality,”<sup>13</sup> he wrote. This is an economy that excludes those who do not contribute to it, such as the elderly and the homeless. Pope Francis criticized that when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure it is not considered worthwhile news, but a temporary dip in the stock market is treated as a tragedy.<sup>14</sup> As long as the society remains blind to this exclusion of the elderly and the homeless, it will become worse than any other kind of neglect the world has seen. This blindness is a result of a competitive world, where the powerless have become dominated by the powerful, those without any use at all have been pushed even beyond the fringes of society.<sup>15</sup> This is also where the Pope criticized the theory of “trickle-down economics.” He called such theories “cruel,” with a naïve trust in those with the economic power.<sup>16</sup> While the believers in trickle-down theories promise that the benefits going to the top will eventually trickle down to those at the bottom, “the excluded are still waiting.”<sup>17</sup> It is not sufficient for a society to wait for help to go to those most in need someday while those in need are suffering today. The

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<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 43.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

people cannot treat aiding the poor “as though all this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own.”<sup>18</sup> What is needed is a more immediate response to the poor and the elderly who have been excluded from the present economy and its dramatic gains.

Gary Burtless and Ron Haskins describe Americans’ attitude toward poverty assistance as an impediment to some breaking out of this cycle. Most Americans are less supportive of giving to those that they consider able-bodied but unable (or as some Americans see it, unwilling) to work.<sup>19</sup> A common concern for the American public is the accessibility of “welfare” programs, which have a bad reputation of being an easily abused system benefiting those who do not work at the cost of the taxpayer. On the positive side, that attitude might be changing; a Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll reported in 2014 that Americans are as likely to blame poverty on uncontrollable circumstances rather than the laziness of the welfare recipient, a change from 19 years ago the report notes.<sup>20</sup> But, as Burtless and Haskins noted, some of the aid designated in the federal budget is discretionary, or dependent on Congressional appropriations, making it possible that those who are eligible for those funds might not receive them due to budgetary constraints.<sup>21</sup> Other, smaller programs are administered by the state with the assistance of federal funds, but are not comprehensive enough programs that can focus on helping sustain individuals living in poverty as well as address the underlying causes of poverty itself.

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<sup>18</sup> Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 44.

<sup>19</sup> Burtless and Haskins, “Inequality, Economic Mobility, and Social Policy,” in *Understanding America*, 505.

<sup>20</sup> Patrick O’Connor, “Attitudes Toward Poverty Show Dramatic Change – WSJ/NBC Poll,” in *The Wall Street Journal*, published June 20, 2014, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2014/06/20/attitudes-toward-poverty-show-dramatic-change-wsjnbc-poll/>.

<sup>21</sup> Burtless and Haskins, 525.

In 2004, Burtless and Haskins wrote that the United States has a relatively small social welfare state because “[o]n the whole, Americans are not particularly concerned about the income distribution and are less persuaded than citizens in other rich countries of the need for public policies to temper inequality.”<sup>22</sup> Americans are more likely to believe that individuals are responsible for their own welfare, and should seize the opportunity when it arises as opportunities present themselves for everyone.<sup>23</sup> While government assistance matters, what the individuals do to help themselves plays a greater part in their outcome. For the most part, this attitude is no longer as prevalent in contemporary America; the research presented in Robert D. Putnam’s *Our Kids* focuses on the effects that circumstances like the quality of education and parent time a child has while young have on the child’s later development.<sup>24</sup>

While this may be the case, the United States does commit a significant amount of the federal budget to alleviating poverty among the elderly. In 2010, more than ninety percent of the allocated mandatory funds for entitlement benefits funded programs that benefitted the elderly, disabled persons, and working households such as Medicare and Medicaid, Social Security, food assistance, disability assistance, and other programs. Of those funds, more than half went to programs for those aged 65 and over.<sup>25</sup> One

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<sup>22</sup> Burtless and Haskins, 531.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 532.

<sup>24</sup> Robert D. Putnam, “Parenting,” in *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 80-134, and Robert D. Putnam, “Schooling,” in *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 135-190.

<sup>25</sup> Arloc Sherman, Robert Greenstein, and Kathy Ruffing, “Contrary to ‘Entitlement Society’ Rhetoric, Over Nine-Tenths of Entitlement Benefits Go To Elderly, Disabled, or Working Households,” on Center on Budget and Policy Priorities website, published February 11, 2012, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.cbpp.org/research/contrary-to-entitlement-society-rhetoric-over-nine-tenths-of-entitlement-benefits-go-to>.

Brookings Institute study found that the U.S. spends 2.4 times as much on programs offering assistance to seniors as on programs that benefit children.<sup>26</sup>

There has been a renewed interest in the rates of children living in poverty in the recent years, some of it focusing on the social element of childhood poverty. Robert Putnam argues that a significant factor to the continuation of childhood poverty is the lack of recognition of a collective responsibility to these children. While these at home factors do play a defining role in the development and future success of a child, Putnam also argues that the society as a whole has an obligation to addressing the underlying causes of poverty, starting with taking care of the children who are in need. “Many constraints on equal opportunity in America today...are attributable to social policies that reflect collective decisions,” Putnam writes. “Insofar as we have some responsibility for those collective decisions, we are implicated by our failure to address removable barriers to others’ success.”<sup>27</sup> These responsibilities include support for policy initiatives like increasing funding for public schools in high-risk areas, and offering subsidized contraception for at-risk youth and young adults to help prevent unplanned pregnancies. Beyond writing to a political representative about improving policies or allocating more funds to certain programs, Putnam encourages each person get involved in their community in a more hands-on manner. Ending pay-to-play policies in the local public schools would open up extracurricular activities and their life-skill building potential to children who are unable to pay the fees required to participate in activities like sports or

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<sup>26</sup> Julia B. Isaacs, “Spending on Children and Elderly,” on Brookings Institute website, published November 2009, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2009/11/05-spending-children-isaacs>.

<sup>27</sup> Putnam, *Our Kids*, 230.

music programs.<sup>28</sup> While playing flag football will not immediately put an end to the broader socioeconomic struggles poorer youth will meet throughout their development, excluding children from these kinds of basic opportunities merely perpetuates inequality. Like Pope Francis, Putnam is calling for a renewed sense of responsibility among the people, which can then be the motivator for political leaders to address these issues.

### 2.3 CONSUMERISM

Contributing to this inequality is an economy that promotes consumption as the highest good. As a result, man is reduced to a being that consumes and cares about nothing else.<sup>29</sup> This obsession with consumption is an individualistic passion; it focuses on the individual and his or her desires. This has a dramatic effect on how the individual sees him- or herself in relationship with everyone else. The Pope suggested that this individualism contributes to widespread relativism.<sup>30</sup> But when each citizen wants to be the bearer of his or her own truth, it is harder for citizens to come together in a common consensus about their society.<sup>31</sup> This is one of the reasons why the state is becoming less capable of resolving the problems of increasing inequality or violence, according to the Pope. “This imbalance is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation...they reject the right of states, charged with vigilance for the common good, to exercise any form of control,” the Pope wrote.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Putnam, *Our Kids*, 258.

<sup>29</sup> Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 45.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Instead, what will continue is “a culture of conflict, a culture of fragmentation, a culture in which I throw away what is of no use to me, a culture of waste,” the Pope said.<sup>33</sup>

What the Pope is concerned with is the products of an evolution that early observers of American democracy such as Alexis de Tocqueville recognized as an emerging trait of the democratic Americans. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville wrote of the democratic taste for material well-being. “What attaches the human heart most keenly is not the peaceful possession of a precious object, but the imperfectly satisfied desire to possess it and the incessant fear of losing it,” he said.<sup>34</sup> Those who have possessions – namely, the upper- and middle-class Americans – are focused primarily on maintaining their standard of living. “The passion for material well-being is essentially a middle-class passion; it grows larger and spreads with this class; it becomes preponderant with it. From there it reaches the higher ranks of society and descends within the people.”<sup>35</sup> In America, according to Tocqueville, no man is so poor that he does not imagine improving his condition. It becomes a consuming passion of his, achieving this imagined future. For this reason, “[l]ove of well-being has become the national and dominant taste; the great current of human passions bears from this direction; it carries everything along in its course.”<sup>36</sup>

This love for material enjoyments is dominant, but Tocqueville did not see this as a threat to the democracy. Democratic man longs for material things, but those things are not excessive. Instead, the democratic man wants things that improve his livelihood.

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<sup>33</sup> Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 100.

<sup>34</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, edited and translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Debra Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 506.

<sup>35</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 507.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 508.

“These objects are small,” Tocqueville acknowledged, “but the soul clings to them: it considers them every day and from very close; in the end they hide the rest of the world from it, and they sometimes come to place themselves between it and God.”<sup>37</sup>

Tocqueville was pointing out that the materialism of democratic man is not of the amoral sort; instead, it becomes the fuel for his increasing religiosity as man hopes to not harm his chances in the future world. It is a materialism that does not corrupt souls, but merely makes them softer. In this respect, materialism is not detrimental to American democracy. But it is based on the idea that there exists an equality of conditions among the citizens of the democracy. Every man dreams of achieving a better life, and the conditions necessary for him to at least attempt to accomplish this goal. But when the conditions do not exist it becomes harder for the man to dream of improving himself. The harder it is to achieve the Dream, the harder it is to believe in the Dream. Instead, man withdraws into himself, and tried to accomplish the dreams still available to him, such as acquiring smaller material goals to substitute for the larger improvements they wished for. Man replaces the object of his truth faith with idolatry such as momentary desires, which further distracts and disorients him.

## 2.4 RELIGION

This individualistic tendency is affecting the role of religion in the modern society. Catholics are turning away from the Church, the Pope observed, because they perceive

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<sup>37</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 509.

the atmosphere are being unwelcoming.<sup>38</sup> Relativism in modern times makes it more difficult for a person to accept moral teachings that he or she see as interfering with their personal freedoms.<sup>39</sup> Faith is becoming increasingly privatized and internalized, and institutions like the Church that continue to teach common moral truths are being rejected for appearing totalitarian and unwelcoming. But without a form of common faith and moral teaching, modern man is left feeling a void.<sup>40</sup> Pope Francis hypothesized that this was been the motivation behind the explosion of new religious movements have appeared in the past few decades. These movements have two tendencies, he noted: some tend to fundamentalism; while others offer their believers a sense of spirituality without teaching about the existence of God. They are religions that are offering immediate solutions to the emerging void in modern man, but are not equipped to provide a common morality for all people to embrace.

This common morality is important for the cohesiveness of a society. As Tocqueville writes, Christianity tells man to prefer others in order to gain access to Heaven and because it is the wishes of their God.<sup>41</sup> Without a common believe that serves as a uniting and driving force, there is less motivation for man to come together. Man no longer attempts to foster what Pope Francis calls a “trustworthy love.” Without trustworthy love, “Human unity would be conceivable only on the basis of utility, on a calculus of conflicting interests or on fear, but not on the joy which the mere presence of others can give.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 50.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>41</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 504.

<sup>42</sup> Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei: The Light of Faith*, with forward by Scott Hahn, (New York: Image, 2013) 70.

Robert Wuthnow also sees an increasingly privatized quality in American religion today.<sup>43</sup> Americans are more likely to experiment with new religions, and adapt what they like from one religion to another in order to produce a more hybrid, personalized faith. He cites the example of a woman who told researchers Robert N. Bellah and Richard Madsen that she professed a belief in “Sheilaism,” referring to the voice inside of her that tells her right from wrong and reminds her to love herself.<sup>44</sup> The impact of privatized religions such as Sheila’s Sheilaism is the emphasis they put self-seeking and identifying oneself, rather than participating in a community as a whole. “It has become increasingly important to ‘find God’ in one’s own way and on one’s own,” Wuthnow writes.<sup>45</sup> Such an inwardly-focused approach has implications on the society as a whole.

## 2.5 THE FAMILY

According to the Pope, This emphasis on the consumption of pleasure and moral relativism is resulting in a profound crisis affecting one of the most important bonds in the society, the bond of the family.<sup>46</sup> Family is where humans learn to live with one another, despite differences in opinions or temperament. The family is also where faith is passed along to children, thus exposing children to the common morality that is required to function in a complex society. The root of the family exists in the marriage of two

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Wuthnow, “Religion,” in *Understanding America: The Anatomy of an Exceptional Nation*, edited by Peter H. Schuck and James Q. Wilson, (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 283.

<sup>44</sup> Robert N. Bellah and Richard Madsen, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, with a New Preface*, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Wuthnow, “Religion,” in *Understanding America*, 284.

<sup>46</sup> Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 52.

people who have agreed to enter into a communal life with one another for the betterment of themselves and the society as a whole. The problem, the Pope argued, is the way that the meaning of marriage has changed. Marriage has become nothing but an emotional bond that can be modified at any time, and dissolved then the emotional bond is no longer sufficient for either party. Thus, individualistic emphasis on pleasure has undermined the stability of the family and other personal relationships.<sup>47</sup> This has major impacts on how individual citizens treat each other in the society.

Changing attitudes toward marriage has a significant impact on those households that are now headed by a single parent. As Linda J. Waite and Melissa J. K. Howe note, marriage between two individuals usually results in a specialization of duties that improve efficiency and cohesion in the home.<sup>48</sup> This specialization results in increased economic well-being, expansion of available resources in the form of familiar aid, and more efficient production.<sup>49</sup> Marriage also serves as a contractual bond between the two individuals, with certain determined responsibilities and expectations on which basis the individual can understand their role in the household.<sup>50</sup> However, once marriage is regarded as an emotional bond rather than a contractual commitment, the bonds of marriage significantly decreased.

Waite and Howe write that the decline of the family has had a profound effect on American society. Marital disruption has an impact on the welfare of the children of that

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<sup>47</sup> Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 52.

<sup>48</sup> Linda J. Waite and Melissa J. K. Howe, "The Family," in *Understanding America: The Anatomy of an Exceptional Nation*, edited by Peter H. Schuck and James Q. Wilson, (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 310-311.

<sup>49</sup> Waite and Howe, "The Family," 311.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 312-313.

marriage, they observe.<sup>51</sup> Single parent households are unable to specialize the way that two-parent households can. With only one wage earner contributing to the household, families with a single parent tend to be less economically stable than two-parent households. A single parent's familial network is smaller as well, thus limiting the amount of aid he or she might be able to receive from family members. All of these factors have impacts on the success rates of the children of single parents. While many children of single parents do well, "the chances that they will complete high school, obtain a college degree, or enter a prestigious occupation are lower than for children raised by single parents," Waite and Howe observe.<sup>52</sup> They, like the Pope, see increasing individualism as posing a threat to familial cohesion, with sometimes dire impacts on the children may who in turn become trapped in cycles of similar economic hardship.

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<sup>51</sup> Waite and Howe, "The Family," 321-323.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

### **3.0 THE LIGHT OF FAITH: RELIGION COMBATING INDIVIDUALISM**

As the Pope's first apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel* touched on a variety of contemporary concerns and how the Church may offer a moral counterweight to the individualism that has become rampant around the globe. *The Joy of the Gospel* highlighted the major themes of inclusion and care for the poor, themes that have defined his papacy since his election in March 2013. Following *The Joy of the Gospel's* publication, the Pope's first papal encyclical, *The Light of Faith*, was also issued. Unlike an apostolic exhortation, a less formal form of communication between a pope and a particular group of people, a papal encyclical specifically concerns Catholic doctrine. *The Light of Faith* defined faith as necessary for not only the individual believer, but for the community as a whole. Pope Francis presented faith as a way to overcome modernity's tendency to disinterest and relativism. He also suggested that faith has an integral part to play in a political community.

#### **3.1 FAITH VERSUS REASON**

The modern world, the Pope wrote, has been characterized by “a humanity come of age, proud of its rationality and anxious to explore the future in novel ways.”<sup>53</sup> This rationality comes in the form of technological and scientific advances, an occupation with data and analysis, and a belief that progress in the technological sphere is akin to human progress.

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<sup>53</sup> Pope Francis, *The Light of Faith*, 4.

Faith in religion, in a deity or a particular moral code, is in turn treated as an illusion, something that is holding back individuals from achieving these great advances that come through technological or scientific improvement. Faith is not compatible with reason, nor does it lead to knowledge. Thus adhering to a faith is akin to remaining in the dark and turning away from the guiding light that is reason.

This preference for reason is what Tocqueville identified as the closest thing to an American philosophy. Rather than caring for tradition or authority, Tocqueville wrote that “each American calls only on the individual effort of his own reason.”<sup>54</sup> This kind of a mindset has two main effects, according to Tocqueville: man becomes less invested in tradition; and he withdraws into himself and his own reason. This has a devastating effect on the bonds of society. Tocqueville wrote: “the bond that unites generations is relaxed or broken; each man easily loses track of the ideas of his ancestors or scarcely worries about them.”<sup>55</sup> Man is only interested in what is affecting him at that present moment, without regard for the past or for the future. Generations become disconnected, and it becomes harder for man to feel an obligation to his ancestors or to his descendants. Instead, man “withdraws narrowly into himself and claims to judge the world from there,” he wrote.<sup>56</sup> They “owe nothing to anyone, they expect so to speak nothing from anyone; they are in the habit of always considering themselves in isolation, and they willingly fancy that their whole destiny is in their hands.”<sup>57</sup>

Naturally, as a man of faith, the Pope does not see this retreat to reason as being of benefit to society. Pope Francis referred to this retreat into individual reason as the

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<sup>54</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 403.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 404.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 484.

renunciation of “a great light, Truth itself, in order to be content with smaller lights which illuminate the fleeting moment yet prove incapable of showing the way.”<sup>58</sup> It becomes harder to distinguish between good and evil when the only foundation for thinking is how one personally feels, or whether it can be considered a technological or scientific improvement. But it is impossible to live a communal life without having an understanding of what is right and what is wrong. Man, when he is caught in the darkness that is his own confusion, is in need of a guiding light. This guiding light, according to the Pope, is faith.

It is this light of faith he wants modern men to consider, for it brightens the present “at a time when mankind is particularly in need of light.”<sup>59</sup> The problem is, faith is complicated, and a faith like that of the Catholic Church can appear mystical compared to the American preference for reason and scientific knowledge. “Thus,” as Tocqueville wrote, Americans “willingly deny what they cannot comprehend: that gives them little faith in the extraordinary and an almost invincible distaste for the supernatural.”<sup>60</sup> While not uniquely American, this preference for scientific or technical knowledge over the knowledge that comes from faith has become a trademark of modernity, which places primacy on facts that appear to be applicable to all people and can be universally proved.

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<sup>58</sup> Pope Francis, *Light of Faith*, 5.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 404.

### 3.2 TRUTH AND AUTHORITY

As Tocqueville pointed out, when there is a general belief in equality of all, men can become very resistant to any claims of superiority or authority over other men.<sup>61</sup> But this fear does more harm than good, Pope Francis wrote. Contemporary man denies the existence of one common faith, especially one proclaimed to them on the authority of another man. “Yet at the other end of the scale we are willing to allow for subjective truths of the individual, which consist in fidelity to his or her deepest convictions, yet these are truths valid for that individual and not capable of being proposed to others in an effort to serve the common good,” the Pope said.<sup>62</sup> Instead, there must be some common standard to which all men can adhere.

It is possible that the Pope hopes to present this common standard to his audience, both the believers and the non-believers. But he did recognize in the encyclical that presenting himself as a moral authority might have its drawbacks, especially in such a modern world where individual reason is so highly valued. Truth with regard to morals or behaviors is regarded suspiciously, for it is associated with the totalitarian regimes of the last century, he acknowledged.<sup>63</sup> This includes the authoritarian demands of religious extremists, who present their religion as the one acceptable truth, and demand that all others bow to it. This is the kind of truth that is used solely to squash individuals. As members of a multicultural and democratic society, Americans as a whole are especially

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<sup>61</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 404.

<sup>62</sup> Pope Francis, *Light of Faith*, 31-32.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

wary of such claims to authority, which they view as infringing on their “rights” as members of this particular society.

While the contemporary world makes efforts to move away from such authoritarian regimes, it has fallen victim to another equally great evil: relativism. Relativism makes truth pointless believed the Pope.<sup>64</sup> When truth is reduced to the “subjective authenticity of the individual,” it becomes harder to find a common set of beliefs or goals.<sup>65</sup> Individuals no longer find the need to interact with one another, if each person’s opinions are accepted without question. A common truth, the Pope wrote, forces individuals to open up and interact with one another.<sup>66</sup> It is not stifling, but forces each person to grow and adapt in a way that makes him inclusive, since each person can then recognize that there is a common goal to be worked toward and a journey to be made.

Pope Francis put a lot of emphasis on the necessity of encountering others in the community. “The individual’s act of faith finds its place within a community, within the common ‘we’ of the people who, in faith, are like a single person,” he wrote.<sup>67</sup> Through encountering others, the individual can find his commonality with others. To encourage this encountering, a good mediator is important. Here he reminded his reader that in the Bible, Moses’s role was not only of a deliverer out of Egypt, but as a mediator between God and His people. Through Moses’s mediation, Israel is about to undertake its journey in unity.<sup>68</sup> In his speech to Congress, Pope Francis reminded his audience that, like Moses, they are responsible for delivering the law to the people. These individuals of the

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<sup>64</sup> Pope Francis, *Light of Faith*, 32.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

House and the Senate have the responsibility of understanding the higher truth and bringing it to the people, helping them understand what is for the common good. If Congress is to have such a lofty role, it must be able to identify this common good and act accordingly. This requires encountering with others, rejecting individualistic or partisan tendencies but instead searching for common ground. “On the basis of an individualistic and narrow conception of conscience one cannot appreciate the significance of mediation,” Pope Francis observed in the encyclical.<sup>69</sup> Only by having a desire for common ground can conflicting groups put aside their opposition and approach each other with the intent to find agreement. The Pope believed that it is faith that calls for men in a community to find their common truth.<sup>70</sup>

### 3.3 THE ROLE OF FAITH

Here, the Pope’s message might sound a little off to a multicultural, democratic, egalitarian American. “Faith is not a private matter, a completely individualistic notion or a personal opinion,” he wrote; “it comes from hearing, and it is meant to find expression in words and be proclaimed.”<sup>71</sup> While the modern man has attempted to form a community that is based on the principles of equality, “we gradually came to realize that this brotherhood, lacking a reference to a common Father, as its ultimate foundation, cannot endure.”<sup>72</sup> While it is a brotherhood that aims to realize a common good, it does

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<sup>69</sup> Pope Francis, *Light of Faith*, 17.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

not have a frame of reference of what might be that good. A common faith, like the belief in one Father, provides modern man with that reference point.

Christianity has offered some important principles that enable men to live in common, the Pope wrote. It is “thanks to faith we have come to understand the unique dignity of each person, something which was not clearly seen in antiquity.”<sup>73</sup> In addition, “Faith also helps us devise models of development which are based not simply on utility and profit, but consider creation as a gift for which we are all indebted; it teaches us to create just forms of government, in the realization that authority comes from God and is meant for the service of the common good.”<sup>74</sup> Tocqueville too wrote of the importance of the Christian faith in America: “It is religion that gave birth to the Anglo-American societies: one must never forget this; in the United States religion is therefore intermingled with all national habits and all the sentiments to which a native country gives birth; that gives it a particular strength.”<sup>75</sup> While individual sects of Christianity come and go, the faith itself remains. Its stability has resulted in it being the source of moral truths in America. Thus, embracing such dogmatic principles aides the society. In fact, “in order that there be a society, and all the more, that this society prosper, it is necessary that all the minds of the citizens always be brought and held together by some principal ideas,” believed Tocqueville.<sup>76</sup>

Of course, Tocqueville was writing of a different America than exists today, though it might even be fair to say that he was not casting the most accurate portrait of the America that he visited in the nineteenth century. But his reasons for arguing on

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<sup>73</sup> Pope Francis, *Light of Faith*, 73.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>75</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 406.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 407.

behalf of the continued importance of religion in American society are somewhat prophetic. He wrote:

“When religion is destroyed in a people, doubt takes hold of the highest portions of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others. Each becomes accustomed to having only confused and changing notions about matters that most interest those like him and himself; one defends one’s opinions badly or abandons them, and as one despairs of being able to resolve by oneself the greatest problems that human destiny presents, one is reduced, like a coward, to not thinking about them at all.”<sup>77</sup>

Tocqueville was concerned with the longevity of the American experiment with democracy. Without religion, the American man is uncertain of his basic principles and becomes even more restive. He continues to rely upon his own reasoning, and this forces him within himself. Man becomes isolated from others, separate from his community. This isolation and lack of faith also opens man to an excessive love of earthly goods, as both Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* and Pope Francis in *The Joy of the Gospel* observed. Religion inspires contrary instincts: according to Tocqueville, it provides man with something to focus on outside of earthly pleasures, for it offers the promise of a divine reward.<sup>78</sup> “Faith by its very nature demands renouncing the immediate possession which sight would appear to offer,” the Pope similarly wrote.<sup>79</sup>

Religion also encourages man to reconnect with his fellow men and feel some sort of responsibility to caring for the others in one’s community. As the Pope explained, the image of believers as “one body” does not imply man is not merely a part of an anonymous whole, or merely a “cog” in a giant machine.<sup>80</sup> Instead, believers are

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<sup>77</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 418.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 419.

<sup>79</sup> Pope Francis, *Light of Faith*, 15.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

individuals who are brought together as part of a common body. This coming together forces man to take notice of his neighbors. This encountering strengthens community bonds, and provides a motivation for neighbors to help one another. Scholars of contemporary America, like Robert Putnam, observe that there is a link between religiosity and increased charitable donations and volunteering in contemporary America.<sup>81</sup> Thus, Tocqueville's belief that "Religious people are therefore naturally strong in precisely the spot where democratic peoples are weak; this makes very visible how important it is that men keep their religion when becoming equal," holds some element of validity today.<sup>82</sup>

But does this mean Christianity is the answer to American societal ills? Or, as the Pope puts it: "Can Christian faith provide a service to the common good with regard to the right way of understanding truth?"<sup>83</sup> The likelihood of Christianity becoming the source of all common truth in such a multinational and religiously diverse country as the United States is safe to say very low. Americans struggle to accept dogmatic beliefs as unquestionably true, as Tocqueville also saw. This is true for American Catholics, who would be the most likely group in the United States to be influenced by the Pope's writings. Alan Wolfe observed that doctrine is of decreasing importance among American Catholics, especially those of the younger generation. "The younger the Catholic, the more likely he or she holds the view that individuals are the appropriate decision makers" regarding belief, he wrote.<sup>84</sup> They are less likely to be familiar with

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<sup>81</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 124.

<sup>82</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 419.

<sup>83</sup> Pope Francis, *Light of Faith*, 32.

<sup>84</sup> Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 88.

Catholic teachings on social justice issues or morality. This increasingly individualistic view is at odds with the emphasis on doctrinal teaching that many Catholic leaders have embraced.

Pope Francis is not unaware of this deepening rift. His message of inclusion extends to all those who find themselves at odds with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. But he is still holding fast to the idea that the Church offers society a common truth. His first encyclical, *The Light of Faith*, was in fact a continuation of a work started by his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. Before he was elected pope, Benedict – known then as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger – was a staunch critic of relativism, arguing that Catholicism was the one true faith.<sup>85</sup> As Wolfe observed, this put him at odds with his younger Catholic constituents, who were becoming more flexible with regards to their faith as the one “Truth” versus one of many possible “truths.”<sup>86</sup> While his broader message is one of inclusion, Pope Francis is not breaking with Catholic doctrine when he offers Christianity as an answer to the problems of relativism. He believes that at some point, people will become dissatisfied with such an inconclusive and isolated view of the world. As he wrote, “slowly but surely, however, it would become evident that the light of autonomous reason is not enough to illuminate the future.”<sup>87</sup> Perhaps it will be this Pope who is able to inspire that revelation among the modern world; as Tocqueville argued, it is “necessary, however it happens, that we encounter authority somewhere in the intellectual and moral world.”<sup>88</sup> But Pope Francis becoming that moral authority in America is impossible to predict. As Tocqueville also pointed out, it is very difficult to

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<sup>85</sup> Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion*, 90.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>87</sup> Pope Francis, *The Light of Faith*, 5.

<sup>88</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 408.

lead the democratic and egalitarian man to believe such an authority exists outside of himself. However, the Pope's message of inclusion and opening up to the common good is one that is essential for the success of a democratic country. "The most democratic country on earth is found to be, above all, the one where men in our day have most perfected the art of pursuing the object of their common desires in common and have applied this new science to the most objects," Tocqueville said.<sup>89</sup> Or, as Daniel J. Mahoney puts it, to achieve the common good, there must be participation at various levels, and this action must be willing to make their individual beliefs or opinions subordinate to the common good.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 490.

<sup>90</sup> Daniel J. Mahoney, "Liberty, Equality, Nobility," in *Democracy and Its Friendly Critics: Tocqueville and Political Life Today*, edited by Peter Augustine Lawler, (Washington, D.C.: Lexington Books, 2004), 18-19.

#### 4.0 ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME: THE EARTH AS A COMMON GOOD

Pope Francis's most recent encyclical, *On Care for Our Common Home*, caused much controversy when it was published in 2015. In the encyclical, the Pope argued that human beings are harming the environment through irresponsible use and abuse of its resources.<sup>91</sup> Repeating his message of inclusion and safeguarding against the tendency to exploitation, he connected showing love for one another with showing love for the environment. "If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs," he wrote.<sup>92</sup>

In the encyclical, the Pope addressed various issues related to environmental protection and climate change, including pollution, rising sea levels, deforestation, and how overproduction and development has impacted the accessibility of necessary resources, like clear water or fertile land. Such disregard and pollution of the environment is a result of this "throw-away culture" which justifies little acts such as throwing away paper rather than recycling it.<sup>93</sup> While contamination is of grave concern for all human beings inhabiting the planet, the poor are usually the most negatively

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<sup>91</sup> Pope Francis, *On Care of Our Common Home: Laudato Si*, edited and illustrated by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015), 1.

<sup>92</sup> Pope Francis, *On Care of Our Common Home*, 5.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

impacted, the Pope pointed out. As he observed, contamination of drinking water is especially hard on the poor who are unable to avoid contact with the contaminated water by buying bottled water or even relocating in dire circumstances.<sup>94</sup>

The Pope's concern for how a contaminated environment impacts the communities relying on its resources is an especially poignant message as current news continues to detail the level of contamination and harm in places like Flint, Michigan. *The New York Times* reported that in April 2014 the city of Flint switched its water supply as part of a cost-saving measure for the "struggling, majority-black city."<sup>95</sup> Despite complaints from the residents, the city official continued to assure the residents that the water was safe to drink for months. In August and September 2014, officials issued a boil-water advisory, acknowledging the presence of bacteria in the water. Still, city officials and the governor continued to deny that the water in Flint was a public health threat, while acknowledging that residents have continued to complain about the quality of water. In February 2015, lead was detected in the drinking water. Since then, both the federal and the state government have declared states of emergency in Flint, Michigan, as outrage has mounted against the governor and city government. Since then, reports of lead in the water supply of half of the schools in another struggling city, Newark, New Jersey.<sup>96</sup> While not at the same magnitude of the Flint crisis, school

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<sup>94</sup> Pope Francis, *On Care of Our Common Home*, 15.

<sup>95</sup> "Events that Led to Flint's Water Crisis," *The New York Times*, accessed April 22, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/01/21/us/flint-lead-water-timeline.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/01/21/us/flint-lead-water-timeline.html?_r=0).

<sup>96</sup> Dan Ivers. "Newark schools water crisis shines light on larger N.J. lead issues, advocates say," on *NJ.com*, published March 14, 2016, accessed April 22, 2016. [http://www.nj.com/esssex/index.ssf/2016/03/environmentalists\\_say\\_newark\\_water\\_crisis\\_shines\\_1.html](http://www.nj.com/esssex/index.ssf/2016/03/environmentalists_say_newark_water_crisis_shines_1.html)

officials have shut off the fountains and faucets in the affected schools, and calling for water bottle donations from residents to distribute to students and faculty members.

In the encyclical, Pope Francis said what many other critics of the Flint, Michigan crisis have argued: “Access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to the human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, addressing the issue is a task for the lawmakers, the Pope stressed. Lawmakers must recognize the social impact extreme individualism has on the environment. Since the Flint water crisis, there has been a renewed call for stricter standards for the amounts of lead in the drinking water in states like Michigan, including a proposal endorsed by the state’s governor Rick Snyder.<sup>98</sup> This proposal would require annual testing for lead in schools and a complete re-haul of the service lines implemented by local municipalities. While many continue to debate whether the proposals would be sufficient enough to prevent future lead contamination, it appears that there are beginning to be more efforts to address the issues of environmental contamination on the local and state-wide scale.

In this case, lawmakers have recognized their responsibility to handling the environment crisis affecting their community. But many others, including those in the Newark, New Jersey contamination case, have continued to ignore this responsibility; several environmental advocacy groups have pointed to the multiple instances in which

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<sup>97</sup> Pope Francis, *On Care of Our Common Home*, 15.

<sup>98</sup> Paul Egan and Matthew Dolan, “Snyder pushes for toughest lead test rules in U.S.,” in *The Detroit Free Press*, published April 15, 2016, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/flint-water-crisis/2016/04/15/stricter-michigan-rules-lead-water-proposed/83069036/>.

calls to address the issues were underfunded.<sup>99</sup> Some school districts, like those in Camden, have been distributing bottled water to its faculty and staff for years because they have lacked the funding to deal with lead issues in the district's water supply. These advocacy groups have accused lawmakers of focusing instead on partisan politics rather than the issue. They, like Pope Francis, charge that they are not interested in building a culture of inclusion if it threatens their interests or their positions in government. "The problem is that we still lack the culture needed to confront this crisis," the Pope said. "We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths and meeting the needs of the present with concern for all and without prejudice toward coming generations."<sup>100</sup> Instead, leaders offer superficial rhetoric and sporadic acts of philanthropy rather than identifying the problem extreme individualism poses for the environmental future of the country. The Pope wrote that countries need leaders who are willing to commit to developing policies with the aim to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, improve transportation practices, and invest in renewable energy resources.<sup>101</sup> Rather than advocating awareness, lawmakers must effect change in attitudes, habits, and objectives.<sup>102</sup> In short, "politics must pay greater attention to foreseeing new conflicts and addressing the causes which can lead to them," the Pope said.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Dan Ivers, "Newark schools water crisis shines light on larger N.J. lead issues, advocates say," on *NJ.com*, published March 14, 2016, accessed April 22, 2016, [http://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2016/03/environmentalists\\_say\\_newark\\_water\\_crisis\\_shines\\_1.html](http://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2016/03/environmentalists_say_newark_water_crisis_shines_1.html).

<sup>100</sup> Pope Francis, *On Care of our Common Home*, 26.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

## 4.1 PUBLIC REACTIONS

*On Care for Our Common Home* was received with a mix of praise and criticism. While some prominent American politicians like President Barack Obama praised the Pontiff's message, saying he "deeply admire[d] the Pope's decision to make the case – clearly, powerfully, and with the full moral authority of his position – for action on global climate change."<sup>104</sup> Not all responses by American politicians have been so favorable; Jeb Bush (at the time, the apparent frontrunner for the Republican nomination for president), explained that the encyclical would not change his position regarding climate change. "I don't get economic policy from my bishops or my cardinals, or from my Pope... I think religion ought to be about making us better as people, and less about things that end up getting into the political realm."<sup>105</sup> Others refused to attend the speech in protest of the Pope's perceived neglect in refusing to focus his papacy on denouncing abortion.

While controversial, Pope Francis is not the first Pontiff to address the issue of environmental protection and its effect on human beings. Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI wrote encyclicals or spoke on the impact that man has on the environment during their papacy. Paul VI, in 1977, commemorated the United Nations' World Environment Day by warning that it was more important than ever for the world to recognize the importance of environmental protection. John Paul II, in his papal

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<sup>104</sup> Danny Wiser, "Obama calls for world leaders to heed Pope Francis's message," in *The Catholic Herald*, published June 19, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2015/06/19/obama-calls-for-world-leaders-to-heed-pope-franciss-message/>

<sup>105</sup> Chris Mooney, "Top cardinal says Jeb Bush is wrong about the link between faith and politics," in *The Washington Post*, published June 18, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2015/06/18/top-cardinal-says-jeb-bush-is-wrong-about-the-link-between-faith-and-politics/>

encyclical *The Social Concern of the Church*, argued in language very similar to Pope Francis's: "The dominion granted to man by the creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to 'use and misuse,' or to dispose of things as one pleases."<sup>106</sup> Benedict XVI urged all in his *Charity in Truth* to respect creation, which he says is akin to the respect for human life and human dignity, two common themes of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>107</sup> Thus, the arguments presented by Pope Francis in his encyclical on climate change are continuations of Catholic doctrine as determined by previous leaders of the Church. This is something the Pope himself acknowledges as the beginning of the encyclical, adding that: "These sentiments of the Popes echo the reflections of numerous scientists, philosophers, theologians and civic groups, all of which have enriched the Church's thinking on these questions," Pope Francis wrote in the introduction to *On Care for Our Common Home*.<sup>108</sup>

Still, the divided response to the Pope's encyclical points to the fact climate change and the role of the government in protecting the environment remain contentious issues in American politics, and it is unlikely that *On Care for Our Common Home* will be the decisive last say in how American Catholics feel about climate change. Pew Research polling indicates that American Catholics are themselves divided along political lines regarding the causes and urgency of climate change.<sup>109</sup> The survey found that 68

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<sup>106</sup> The Associated Press, "Key quotes about the environment from past popes," in *Crux: Taking the Catholic Pulse*, published June 11, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2015/06/11/key-quotes-about-the-environment-from-past-popes/>.

<sup>107</sup> The Associated Press, "Key quotes about the environment from past popes."

<sup>108</sup> Pope Francis, *On Care of Our Common Home*, 3.

<sup>109</sup> Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Pope Francis's stern climate change encyclical faces deep political divides," in *The Washington Post*, published June 16, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/pope-francis-stern-climate-encyclical-faces-deep-political-divides/2015/06/16/d9646556-1456-11e5-8457-4b431bf7ed4c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/pope-francis-stern-climate-encyclical-faces-deep-political-divides/2015/06/16/d9646556-1456-11e5-8457-4b431bf7ed4c_story.html).

percent of Americans “believe the Earth is warming,” and of that larger group, the majority of Catholics (71 percent) agreed. Still, there was a significant gap (34 percentage points) between Catholics who identified as Democrats and acknowledged climate change as a fact (85 percent) and Catholic Republicans (51 percent). There is a further divide with regards to how much involvement the government should have in protecting the environment.<sup>110</sup> In addition, many Americans indicate that other issues – such as strengthening the economy and national security – are more of a priority than environmental matters.<sup>111</sup> For these reasons, it is unclear whether the Pope, regardless of his high favorability ratings among Catholics and the American public, can convince the public that environmental protection is an immediate priority. Pope Francis recognizes these difficulties as well. He wrote that he is encouraging all people – including the Catholic faithful – to “take a frank look at the facts” and recognize environmental protection as a pressing issue.<sup>112</sup> Still, human beings are prone to the sway of what he calls the “blind forces” of immediate needs, self-interest, or unconscious habits.<sup>113</sup> As long as there remains a culture of consumerism, profit, and isolation from others, it will be impossible to find an answer for the poor and for the environment.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Monica Anderson. “For Earth Day, here’s how Americans view environmental issues,” on Pew Research Center: Fact Tank: News in the Numbers website, published and accessed on April 22, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/22/for-earth-day-heres-how-americans-view-environmental-issues/>.

<sup>111</sup> Anderson, “For Earth Day, here’s how Americans view environmental issues.”

<sup>112</sup> Pope Francis, *On Care of Our Common Home*, 29.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

## 4.2 VIEW OF THE FUTURE

“There is also the fact that people no longer seem to believe in a happy future; they no longer have blind trust in a better tomorrow based on the present state of the world and our technical abilities,” the Pope observed.<sup>115</sup> Research out of the Institute of Politics at Harvard University agrees; a survey of 18- to 29-year-olds in the United States shows that about half of the respondents believed that the American Dream was no longer attainable.<sup>116</sup> The Institute’s report suggested that it is growing economic inequality that has caused such a divide among young Americans. This analysis is supported by a series of Pew Research Center studies which show that the American middle class is shrinking and income inequality gaps are growing.<sup>117</sup> And, as the Harvard Institute of Politics observes, younger Americans are more skeptical of the government’s ability to address this decline.<sup>118</sup>

This dissatisfaction is what Pope Francis identified as one of the most significant by product of the ills of modernity, ills that stem from a loss of faith in one another and in the government. This faith is essential to the survival of a democracy. As Robert Putnam pointed out, “Democracy does not require that citizens be selfless saints, but in many modest ways it does assume that most of us much of the time will resist the temptation to

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<sup>115</sup> Pope Francis, *On Care of Our Common Home*, 55.

<sup>116</sup> Richard Tong, “Youths Ambivalent Towards American Dream as Faith in Government Languishes,” in *Harvard Political Review Online*, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.iop.harvard.edu/youths-ambivalent-towards-american-dream-faith-government-languishes>.

<sup>117</sup> “The American Middle Class is Losing Ground,” Pew Research Center: Social and Demographic Trends, published December 9, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/09/the-american-middle-class-is-losing-ground/>.

<sup>118</sup> Tong, “Youths Ambivalent Towards American Dream as Faith in Government Languishes.”

cheat.”<sup>119</sup> It is important then that lawmakers and other holders of power find a way to find solutions to these problems, including those affecting the environment. “Many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest,” he wrote.<sup>120</sup> Lawmakers, he argued, must recognize that their simultaneous responsibilities as both leaders of a free people, and as their political representatives, require that they take a frank look at the fact. Strong individualism has distorted the way that politicians look at issues like the environment. But a leader is called to have a clear vision for his people, and like Moses, present them with their responsibilities in the form of laws or dialogue.

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<sup>119</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 349.

<sup>120</sup> Pope Francis, *On Care of Our Common Home*, 7.

## 5.0 A CALL TO ACTION

While his apostolic exhortation and encyclicals have been widely circulated and commentated on by a large global audience, the Pope's speech to Congress was unique because it is addressed to a particular nation. Still, it is important to remember that he acknowledged that there are multiple audiences for the Pope's speech; as he said in the beginning of his remarks, he was using this as an opportunity to speak to America's leaders and to the American people directly. While he identified two explicit groups, I would suggest there is a third audience for his message: the American Catholic Church. Perhaps it would be worth considering the speech from the perspective of these different audiences, and identifying what the Pope believes in the moral responsibility of the government, the people, and the Church in American politics.

## 5.1 THE LEGISLATORS

The Pope appeared to have a very particular idea of the purpose of politics. He reminds his Congressional audience:

“You are called to defend and preserve the dignity of your fellow citizens in the tireless and demanding pursuit of the common good, for this is the chief aim of all politics. A political society endures when it seeks, as a vocation, to satisfy common needs by simulating the growth of all its members, especially those in situations of greater vulnerability or risk. Legislative activity is always based on care for the people.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Pope Francis's speech.

He urged Congress to be willing to compromise, look beyond partisan positions and try to address the issues of the day with frankness and a willingness to find solutions. For several members of Congress, the Pope appeared to be participating in the very partisanship he warning against.

In contemporary America, many of the Church's positions do fall along certain party lines; while his statements regarding environmental protection and immigration have been popular with some liberal politicians, conservatives point to his positions on abortion, traditional marriage, and religious liberty as justifications for their own views of the issues. The Pope's position on climate change in particular solicited several partisan reactions, with some conservative lawmakers like Congressman Paul Gosar of Arizona boycotting the speech due to the Pope's emphasis on climate change. "[W]hen the pope chooses to act and talk like a leftist politician, then he can expect to be treated like one," the Roman Catholic congressman said in a statement.<sup>122</sup> Instead, he urged the Pope to address issues of religious liberty and Christian persecution by the Islamic State. In contrast, Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat and also a Roman Catholic, praised the Pope for his challenge to "rescue our planet from the climate crisis that threatens the future of our children and the health of God's creation."<sup>123</sup> But the Pope's explicit mention of climate change rather than the more traditional focus on abortion is not a sign of a preference for the Democratic Party. Instead, Pope Francis is recognizing that in the

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<sup>122</sup> Matthew Daly, "GOP lawmaker vows to boycott pope's speech to Congress," in *The Associated Press: The Big Story*, published September 18, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016. <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/b86e83d54bba4411b4c3fd2b55f3c92f/gop-lawmaker-vows-boycott-popes-speech-congress/>.

<sup>123</sup> Nancy Pelosi, "Pelosi Statement on Pope Francis' Address to Congress," issued September 24, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016. <http://www.democraticleader.gov/newsroom/pelosi-statement-on-pope-francis-address-to-congress/>.

past, too much emphasis has been placed on issues of sexual morality and abortion. Reverend James Martin, a Jesuit priest and editor-at-large at *America* magazine, explained that the Pope is merely acting in his capacity as a moral leader by addressing other issues of importance. “And like a good teacher, he understands that the church has, in teaching about the issue, that it was time to look at other issues that are equally important,” Martin said.<sup>124</sup>

And the Pope is urging other leaders, particularly the legislators in Congress, to follow suit. He called on Congress to stop looking at issues from behind party lines, and instead focus on finding solutions to the pressing problems of the present. He emphasized the importance of dialogue as a bridge to resolving historic and painful differences between people. “When countries which have been odds resume the path of dialogue – a dialogue which may have been interrupted for the most legitimate of reasons – new opportunities open up for all,” he said.<sup>125</sup> But this dialogue must come from a position of both open-minded and willing to at least try to come to a consensus. It cannot come from a place of malice or resentment, but instead from a place of optimism and faith.

How much room can this dialogue leave for ideology? At first glance, it seems like the Pope is disregarding ideology – particularly conservative ideology – in exchange for a more progressive agenda in American politics. This leads some to suggest that the Pope is an ideological liberal in contrast to his conservative predecessors. Others, like John Gehrig of Faith in Public Life, suggest that the Pope’s emphasis on the message of

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<sup>124</sup> Abby Ohlheiser, “Why some antiabortion groups were disappointed by Pope Francis’s speech to Congress,” in *The Washington Post*, published September 25, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/09/25/why-some-antiabortion-groups-were-disappointed-by-pope-franciss-speech-to-congress/>.

<sup>125</sup> Pope Francis’s speech.

the Gospel means he “consistently reminds the faithful, even if we find it tough to hear, that the Gospel leaves no room for ideology.”<sup>126</sup> I disagree with both positions for the sole reason that, as the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope is very ideological. His views are the views of the Church and Catholic social teaching. Pope Francis’s ideology is the message of the Gospels. He argued that the Gospel reveals God’s love for mankind, a love which encourages all people to encounter and feel responsibility for others.<sup>127</sup> Once this common responsibility is acknowledged, people can begin to work on establishing a set of shared principles and objectives. It is this belief in a shared responsibility that is capable of bringing both liberals and conservatives together and identify common issues, like caring for the poor and disadvantaged. It is a belief that calls for government’s involvement in achieving these ends.

## 5.2 THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

This shared responsibility extends not just to the members of government but to all individuals living as members of a community. “Each son or daughter of a country has a mission, a personal and social responsibility,” he said.<sup>128</sup> It is telling that this is how he began his speech to the American people. Much of Pope Francis’s message centers on the idea that all people, as members of a whole community, cannot be solely concerned with their own needs and become blinded to the needs of those around them. His concern for

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<sup>126</sup> John Gehrig, *The Francis Effect: A Radical Pope’s Challenge to the American Catholic Church*, (Washington, D.C.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 193.

<sup>127</sup> Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 10.

<sup>128</sup> Pope Francis’s speech.

the prevalence of individualism in the American mind is not new, as this paper has shown. However, he does present Americans with a new way of wrestling with this individualism. Rather than the Tocquevillian approach, where self-interest can be a motivator for community action, the Pope wants Americans to stop withdrawing into themselves. If Americans continue to work together out of self-interest, once that self-interest disappears, collaboration disappears as well. Instead, Pope Francis wants to provide individuals with another basis for communal activity – a common responsibility, once influenced by a common morality.

For the Pope, this common morality is closely linked to faith. It is clear from this speech and his multiple teachings that Pope Francis believes faith plays an important role in shaping political thought and policy. In *Light of Faith*, he argues that faith is itself a process of building something; the aim of faith is “the preparing of a place in which human beings can dwell together with one another.”<sup>129</sup> The stories of religious leaders like Abraham, Noah, and Moses are the stories of leading people in order to answer God’s call for a particular kind of life. These religious leaders used their faith to shape their own societies, imitating “the city which God is preparing for mankind.”<sup>130</sup> This too can be said of great American leaders like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr., whose faith in God and sense of common responsibility motivated them to make dramatic changes in their country in the name of justice and a more equitable society.

Each of the influential Americans that Pope Francis mentioned in his speech to Congress shared a common vision: building a more just country. This mission must continue with the present generation of leaders, the Pope reminded Congress. “You are

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<sup>129</sup> Pope Francis, *Light of Faith*, 69.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

called to defend and preserve the dignity of your fellow citizens in the tireless and demanding pursuit of the common good, for this is the chief aim of politics,” he said.<sup>131</sup> In *Light of Faith*, he reiterated this message: faith does not pull man away from the world or others in it. Instead, it is a unifier; it encourages man to build relationships on the basis of trustworthy love rather than utility.<sup>132</sup> Faith encourages people to appreciate each other not for their usefulness, but for the “goodness of living together.”<sup>133</sup> This goodness – the trustworthy love of one another – fosters further trust between people in the community, enabling the community to work as one. Thus, faith “becomes a service to the common good.”<sup>134</sup> It “helps us build our societies in such a way that they can journey towards a future of hope.”<sup>135</sup>

Pope Francis was calling on Americans to turn away from their individualistic tendencies, and instead refocus on building a more just community around them. The great Americans he referred to were not all presidents; many were ordinary Americans who saw it as their responsibility to bring attention to injustice in their world and demand change from their leaders and their neighbors. To accomplish these things, one must have the right mindset. They must be willing to recognize a good that is external to themselves and their individual needs or material wellbeing; they must see themselves as members of a collective whole, a whole which can be influenced by the actions of a single person. The Pope wanted Americans to shake their apathy, their materialism, their willingness to withdraw from the world and focus on what is theirs alone. Pope Francis wanted

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<sup>131</sup> Pope Francis’s speech.

<sup>132</sup> Pope Francis, *Light of Faith*, 70.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

Americans to have compassion for one another, and demand that same compassion from their government.

### 5.3 THE CHURCH IN AMERICA

While he is explicit about his wish to address the American people and their legislators, I suggest that there is a third group the Pope wished to address: the Catholic Church in America. Pope Francis's call to the faithful to be compassionate and transcend partisanship is particularly pertinent to many of the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. John Gehrig writes that a small but vocal minority of the Church in America has been shaping the political voice of the American Catholic Church over the last few decades, as the "culture wars" have continued to dominate conservative politics.<sup>136</sup> This vocal minority, comprised by both members of the Catholic clergy and the laity, has continue to point to traditional Church doctrine in defense of socially conservative principles. Gehrig gives many examples of these members of the Church in America using their religion as the justification for opposition to many issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. He writes of Father Richard Neuhaus, an advisor to George W. Bush, who argued that political involvement on the part of bishops should be limited to pro-life issues such as abortion, physician-assisted suicide, and stem cell research. Bishops lacked the competence to address any other issues, according to Father Neuhaus.<sup>137</sup> Some Catholic organizations, such as the Catholic League and the Knights of

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<sup>136</sup> Gehrig, *The Francis Effect*, 19.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Columbus, have taken conservative positions with regards to religious liberty and the pro-life movement.

The leaders of the Knights of Columbus, originally a predominately Irish-Catholic fraternal organization, have turned the organization into the political voice of the Catholic Church in America, primarily focusing on the issues of contraception and abortion. Gehrig writes that the organization has donated thousands of dollars to challenging the inclusion of contraception coverage in the Affordable Care Act.<sup>138</sup> The Knights and their leader, Carl Anderson, have focused heavily on using the organizations massive membership and financial resources to advocate a pro-life platform. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Anderson took out full-page advertisement in several newspapers challenging Catholic vice presidential candidate Joe Biden’s beliefs on abortion. “The fact that the Knights’ high-profile advertisement addressed no other issue bearing on human life and central to Catholic social teaching – war, torture, exploitation of migrants, environmental degradation – was also telling,” Gehrig writes.<sup>139</sup>

Gehrig blames these conservative bishops and politicians for marginalizing the Church to issues of sexual morality and the gradual disappearance of other issues from American Catholic political involvement.<sup>140</sup> The pro-life and religious liberty movements have become the “lynchpin of Catholic identity,” and this has had an effect on the Church in the United States. A study conducted by Benedictine University found that a good portion of Catholics leaving the Church do so because they disagreed with the Church’s

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<sup>138</sup> Gehrig, *The Francis Effect*, 38-40.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

teaching on contraception, and perceived themselves as being “judged” by the clergy, many of whom seem to be “wrapped up in themselves, much like politicians.”<sup>141</sup>

The Pope recognized that overcoming this history of partisanship will be difficult for the American Catholic Church, which continues to be defined by its challenges to the Affordable Care Act on the basis of religious liberty. Before he was elected pontiff, Pope Francis acknowledged in an interview that the Church as in the past crossed the line and engaged in “improper politicalization” around the world.<sup>142</sup> But when he calls for the faithful to become engaged in politics, he argues it is not a call to falling along party lines, but instead bringing the message of the Gospels and the Commandments to politics. “Denouncing human rights abuses, situations of exploitation or exclusion, or shortages in education or food, is not partisan,” he suggested. “Catholic social teaching is full of denunciations, yet it is not partisan.”<sup>143</sup> Feeding the hungry and healing the sick are not Democratic or Republican goals, but universal goals. While there might be differences in opinion of how to accomplish those goals, all who are bringing the message of the Gospel into their daily lives can at the least recognize them as common goals. This is a good first step, Pope Francis seemed to be suggesting.

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<sup>141</sup> Lilly Fowler, “Some Illinois Roman Catholics Weigh In on Why They Stopped Attending Mass,” in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, published September 23, 2014, accessed April 22, 2016, [http://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/faith-and-values/divine-dispatches/illinois-roman-catholics-weigh-in-on-why-have-they-stopped/article\\_2609ad20-180c-53ee-a76a-8fd9d2fld4ff.html](http://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/faith-and-values/divine-dispatches/illinois-roman-catholics-weigh-in-on-why-have-they-stopped/article_2609ad20-180c-53ee-a76a-8fd9d2fld4ff.html)

<sup>142</sup> Francesca Ambrogetti and Sergio Rubin, *Pope Francis: Conversations with Jorge Bergoglio: His Life in His Own Word*, (New York: New American Library, 2014), 94.

<sup>143</sup> Ambrogetti and Rubin, *Pope Francis*, 94-95.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION: “A GOOD CATHOLIC MEDDLES IN POLITICS”

In a 2013 homily, Pope Francis encouraged the attendees to pray for their political leaders, and when they were finished praying to go and become engaged in politics themselves. “It is not true that Catholics should not meddle in politics,” he told the faithful assembled. “A good Catholic meddles in politics, offering the best of himself, so that those who govern can govern.”<sup>144</sup> As long as the aim of politics is the common good, Catholics living in communities are responsible for contributing to this common good. That is the teaching of the Church, the Pope explained, and it is a teaching that must be embraced.

For Pope Francis, cooperation and solidarity are necessary elements for a fair and inclusive politics. He urged all to commit themselves to developing a culture of cooperation – something he recognizes is especially challenging to modern times.<sup>145</sup> The totalitarianism of the past has led to dramatic fragmentation, as modern countries attempt to prevent the fascism, communism, and Nazism of the past from reoccurring in their countries today. “Truth nowadays is often reduced to the subjective authenticity of the individual, valid only to the life of the individual,” he observed in the papal encyclical *Light of Faith*. “A common truth intimidates us for we identify it with the intransigent demands of the totalitarian systems.”<sup>146</sup> These totalitarian regimes denied their people the

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<sup>144</sup> Vatican Insider Staff, “Francis: ‘A good Catholic meddles in politics,’” in *The Vatican Insider*, published September 16, 2013, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.lastampa.it/2013/09/16/vaticaninsider/eng/the-vatican/francis-a-good-catholic-meddles-in-politics-zItEROWiDaSRq8k3OHYmTI/pagina.html>.

<sup>145</sup> Ambrogetti and Rubin, *Pope Francis*, 136.

<sup>146</sup> Pope Francis, *Light of Faith*, 8.

opportunities to recognize themselves as unique individuals, and many were maintained through brutal forms of coercion. This past, combined with the fragmenting effects of unbridled capitalism, result in a society hyperaware of its individualism.<sup>147</sup>

But the Pope believes there is an alternative to both rampant capitalism and absolutist totalitarianism: solidarity with one another, a culture of encountering and recognizing that each person is responsible for the good of all. Arriving to this third option will be a challenge for society, he acknowledged. It “presumes the creation of a new mind-set that thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few.”<sup>148</sup> While capitalism focuses on profits, and totalitarianism focuses on absolute power over all, solidarity is about creating a “culture of encounter,” a culture in which “we find brothers and sisters, in which we can also speak with those who think differently, as well as those who hold other beliefs.”<sup>149</sup>

In this speech to Congress, Pope Francis was offering the American public an opportunity to develop this new mindset, one based on faith. Pope Francis’s speech brought the message of his writings – the message of the Catholic Church – to an audience who has become so defined by its individualism and polarization that it has become incapable of addressing the issues at hand. He took the goal of the Church, the creation of an inclusive and just world, and reminded the United States that it has a history of trying to achieve the same goal. This is a moment to reflect for the American people and their political leaders, to examine whether America is capable of becoming

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<sup>147</sup> Ambrogetti and Rubin, *Pope Francis*, 138-139.

<sup>148</sup> Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 24.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

the just society that Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton believed in.

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