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THE PERIPHERIES AND THE EUCHARIST: POPE FRANCIS, THE *TEOLOGÍA DEL PUEBLO*, AND THE CONVERSION OF CATHOLIC BIOETHICS

As periferias e a Eucaristia: Papa Francisco, a Teología del Pueblo e a conversão da bioética católica

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ABSTRACT: Moral theologians in the US have been engaged in an ongoing conversation that attempts to predict what effect — if any — the papacy of Pope Francis will have on the field of Catholic bioethics. The many predictions fail to appreciate the full power of Francis' deeply sacramental and ecclesial vision. Informed by Vatican II and the Argentinian *teología del pueblo*, Pope Francis locates the sacramental work of Christ in two constantly interacting poles — the Eucharist and the peripheries. Via Pope Francis, these poles become recursively interactive twin starting points for the conversion of Catholic bioethics.

KEYWORDS: Pope Francis. Catholic bioethics. Eucharist. The poor. *Teología del pueblo*.

RESUMO: Os teólogos moralistas dos EUA estão engajados em um contínuo diálogo que busca prever o efeito — se houver — que o pontificado do Papa Francisco terá no campo da bioética católica. As muitas previsões não conseguem apreciar o grande poder de sua visão profundamente sacramental e eclesial. Influenciado pelo Vaticano II e pela *teología do povo* argentino, Francisco situa a obra sacramental de Cristo em dois pólos que estão em constante interação — a Eucaristia e as periferias. Através do papa Francisco, esses polos se tornam pontos de partida gêmeos recursivamente interativos para a conversão da bioética católica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Papa Francisco. Bioética católica. Eucaristia. Os pobres. *Teología del pueblo*.

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Introduction

"I dream of a 'missionary option,' that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation" (EG, n. 27).

Moral theologians in the US have been engaged in an ongoing conversation that attempts to predict what effect — if any — the papacy of Pope Francis will have on the field of Catholic bioethics. As I outline in the first section below, opinions range from fears that he is wrecking disaster on Catholic bioethics to the position that 'he is changing nothing essential' to those who appreciate his new pastoral directions. Yet all of these predictions, I believe, fail to appreciate the full power of Francis' deeply sacramental and ecclesial vision, a vision that is informed by the Argentinian *teología del pueblo*, and the ways that it could and should transform Catholic bioethics.

To capture the gestalt of his vision, I invite you to recall three images:

The first hails from July 2013, when Francis, in his first pastoral visit as Pope, visited the tiny island of Lampedusa. You no doubt recall the poignant images of him meeting with refugees from Africa and North Africa — many of them Muslim — who had made it to this entry point into Europe. Face-to-face, hand-to-hand, he stands garbed in white, surrounded by throngs of men, women, and children who had survived the perilous sea crossing, losing not only home and life savings but friends and family members, both at home and to the unforgiving surf. We see him as he touches them, listens to them, laughs with them, cries with them. The media follows him from the docks, to an open-air Mass to commemorate the thousands of migrants who had died enroute, and then to refugee camps in a dizzying and off-script introduction to his papacy.

A second image may be less well known though not less significant: here Pope Francis holds aloft an enormous, radiant monstrance, leading a service of Eucharistic adoration. Elsewhere we see him kneeling in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, as Adoration is one of his common practices. As at Lampedusa, Francis signaled from the beginning of his papacy the centrality of the Eucharist, inviting the whole Church to join in simultaneous Eucharistic Adoration on the Feast of Corpus Christi on June 2, 2013 (PAPROCKI, 2013). As he has stated: "One cannot know the Lord without the habit of adoring, of adoring in silence. I believe — if I am not mistaken — that this prayer of adoration is the least known among us; it is the one we engage in the least. To waste time — if I may say it — before the Lord, before the mystery of Jesus Christ. To adore, there in the silence, in the silence of adoration. He is the Lord and I adore Him" (MONTAGNA, 2016).

The final image is the one that continues to gobsmack the world the most — Catholic and non-Catholic alike: Here, each Holy Thursday, Francis kneels

before, first, a dozen prisoners (in 2013) and then in later years, before Muslims, women, disabled persons, and more — tenderly, individually, and sacramentally washing, kissing, and drying their feet (GLATZ, 2013).

These images capture iconically Francis' powerful and nuanced theological understanding of the Church. It is one rooted in the sacraments. But as I discuss in the second section of this paper, deeply informed by the Latin American church's *teología del pueblo*, Pope Francis locates the sacramental work of Christ in two constantly interacting poles — the Eucharist and the peripheries. His practice of footwashing captures this most powerfully. For here, he brings the two poles together — enacting the practice that John's gospel narrates in place of the Eucharist with the poorest and most outcast in church and society. Here the real presence of the Christ whose risen body still bears his wounds encounters the Christ who promised to be truly present in those who bear the wounds of the world.

With this vision, Pope Francis builds on the work of his predecessors to implement a long overdue transformation of “everything” in the Church — its customs, its ways of doing things, its language and structures — so that the Gospel can be heard in its fullness and newness for “the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.” As we will see in the final section, Francis singles out Catholic moral theology, with gestures toward Catholic bioethics, as an ecclesial structure that cries out for renewal. Infused by a sacramental logic, Francis reorients the church to its sacramentally-mediated Christological heart which lives its identity by recursively celebrating the Eucharist and kenotically but joyfully immersing itself in the day-to-day realities of real people, especially those on the peripheries. These poles — *las periferias y el pan* — become recursively interactive twin starting points for the conversion of Catholic bioethics.

1 Pope Francis and Catholic Bioethics: a US Conversation

Six years into his papacy, Pope Francis's remarks on Catholic bioethics have been few and brief, especially relative to issues of social, political, and economic morality (BOYLE, 2015, p. 35-36; KAVENY, 2019, p. 186-187). Regardless, a small but growing literature has begun to emerge in the US, prognosticating how he might impact Catholic bioethics. Commentary falls into roughly three camps: (1) strident critiques that Pope Francis will undermine Catholic bioethics; (2) calming affirmations that, despite some critiques, his papacy will bring no essential changes; and (3) those who see his work gesturing in powerful but not entirely clear new directions. Let me briefly outline each of these.

The first group is clearly no fan of Pope Francis. The late H. Tristram Engelhardt, former editor of the journal *Christian Bioethics*, articulates this perspective in a particularly harsh manner:

Pope Francis has introduced a new moral discourse for Roman Catholic moral theology, and therefore the framework that nests its bioethics has been subtly but importantly altered. Weak thought, or more precisely weak theology, marks Pope Francis' moral vision, save for areas bearing on economics and traditional Roman Catholicism. At stake is a change in the character of Roman Catholic theological discourse that can promote substantive changes in its bioethics (ENGELHARDT, 2015, p. 130).

For Engelhardt, Pope Francis is a wily "Argentine populist" who has exchanged calls for repentance with attitudes of mercy. He has also initiated a shift from "a doctrinal to a conciliatory pastoral discourse [which] radically changes the character of Roman Catholicism's moral discourse." And he attends to economics, youth, and marginalized persons "without a doctrinal emphasis on prohibitions against abortion, homosexual acts, and physician-assisted suicide, major battlegrounds in the culture wars" (ENGELHARDT, 2015, p. 131).¹ Engelhardt never defines what he means by weak thought or weak theology. Rather, he appears to simply equate 'strong' arguments with authoritarian, "confrontational discourse," and "in-your-face Christianity" (ENGELHARDT, 2015, p. 132). He confuses strong and weak arguments and content with authoritarian versus pastoral, Gospel-informed modes of expression.²

Such *ad hominem* critiques are adopted by others who similarly scathe the pontiff.³ These critics, again, accuse Pope Francis of weak theology (CHERRY, 2015), weak theology and misunderstanding of revelation and Christian morality (HONEYCUTT, 2015), being a deceptive agent of

¹ Rafael Luciani counters this charge of populism: "It is not surprising that some analysts, unable to comprehend the world of specific meanings that inspire his vision of society, the Church, and God, portray the pope as a populist or demagogue....The theology of the people is not negative 'populism' with rabble; rather, it "means regarding the poor not merely as the object of liberation or education, but as individuals capable of thinking in their own categories, capable of living the faith legitimately in their own manner, capable of forging paths based on their popular culture," (LUCIANI, 2017, p. 149, 357). As Carlos Galli further notes: "His respectful attitude toward both individuals and communities is contrary to ecclesiastical and political populism which reduces people to mere objects for the purpose of manipulating them on behalf of some personal or collective interest" (GALLI, 2016, p. 839).

² M. Cathleen Kaveny has noted this trend as well elsewhere. As she states: "Some commentators have also disparaged the sophistication of Francis's ethical writings by charging that they are merely pastoral applications of the conceptual heavy-lifting performed by John Paul II and Benedict XVI," a disparagement that she views as "deeply misguided" (2019, p. 191).

³ Some are less direct in their criticisms but often use dog whistles such as "confusion," "distortion," and other terms designed to raise questions about the Pope's orthodoxy or rationality. See, e.g., TOLLEFSON, 2015, p. 56; similarly, SMITH, 2018, p. 653-654; BEDFORD; STEPHENS; McCARTHY, 2018, p. 662-663.

double-truth (FOLTZ; SCHWEITZER, 2015),⁴ doctrinal mistakes (MORI, 2015), and more (ILTIS, 2015).⁵

A second group paints a very different picture. Largely traditional Catholic moralists, these find Francis' positions to entail no "substantive" change in doctrine (MOONEY, 2015, p. 69) and "no rejection of the received bioethical teachings of the Church" (BOYLE, 2015, p. 37, 40, 41-2; TOLLEFSON, 2015, p. 56; McTAVISH, 2016, p. 3-4; see also MOONEY, 2015, p. 69; GALLAGHER, 2015, p. 12, 24)), even regarding abortion (TOLLEFSON, 2015, p. 56, *contra* MORI). *Contra* the naysayers, they hold that Francis does not traffic in the realm of doctrine or theology proper. As Joseph Boyle notes, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) as a pastoral exhortation "is just that, encouraging and guiding, not instructing doctrinally, and surely not providing a natural-law-based moral analysis" (BOYLE, 2015 p. 38; 44).

Seeking to soothe frazzled Catholic nerves, these commentators maintain that any changes Francis brings to bioethical discourse lie more in style and emphasis than substance, that is in "the conduct of...[the] interface between Catholic moral teaching and modern life" (BOYLE, 2015, p. p. 35; see also MOONEY, 2015, p. 69). These changes pertain to motivational style, insofar as he contextualizes moral teaching and emphasizes themes of mercy, accompaniment, and the poor (TOLLEFSON, 2015, p. 63). These gestures are but a shift "toward a gentle and merciful engagement with people and away from strong prescriptions and condemnations" (BOYLE, 2015, p. 36; see also MOONEY, 2015, p. 69). Some note positively that "his insistence on respect for the poor and on fair distribution of resources has ramifications for issues in bioethics" by opening up a wider range of issues for bioethics to engage (MOONEY, 2015, p. 69; see also HAMEL 2014; LYSAUGHT; McCARTHY, 2018; LYSAUGHT; MCCARTHY, 2019). But what is most important for this group is that he does not change Catholic teaching.

A third group finds in Francis positive, substantive implications for Catholic bioethics. Two of the most insightful analyses of his work come from John Gallagher and M. Cathleen Kaveny. Gallagher keys into three critical facets of Francis's work: his emphases on evangelization, culture, and decentralization of church structures. Evangelization, one of Francis' signal themes from the beginning of his papacy, does not consist in simply proclaiming truths; rather, the truths of the Christian faith must be articulated in ways that those from diverse cultures can hear and incorporate into their lives (GALLAGHER, 2015, p. 13). Gallagher explores in detail the implications of this focus on culture, emphasizing the ways that effective evangelization

⁴ This critique echoes long-standing broadsides against Jesuits.

⁵ Intriguingly, most of these critics hail — like Engelhardt — from the Antiochean Orthodox Church.

requires immersive engagement with particular cultures, each of which is a proper subject of evangelization in and of itself (GALLAGHER, 2015, p. 14).⁶ Culture here is a dynamic, multiform aspect of reality, changing as quickly as generations, as diverse as the cultures of science and the urban poor.

M. Cathleen Kaveny highlights Francis' continuity with traditional moral theology and foregrounds his concerns about globalized technocratic capitalism, especially as it translates into a "throw-away culture." She helpfully underscores his engagement with the Thomistic virtue tradition. As she notes:

Substantively...Francis tacitly operates within the general teleological framework characteristic of Thomistic thought. For Francis, the key concept is *joy*, which, along with its conceptual corollary *praise*, are explicit themes of his most important magisterial documents...Francis uses the word *joy* as a less technical and more vivid way of communicating what the tradition has talked about as *happiness* or *flourishing*... On the individual level, the essence of joy is to be graciously touched by God's love. In grace, we respond to that love by serving other people and binding their wounds, because other people bear the image of God — and the face of Christ (KAVENY, 2019, p. 189).⁷

Further, she continues: "the cardinal virtue that equips us to rejoice is *mercy*" (KAVENY, 2019, p. 189).⁸ Mercy — practiced as forgiveness and tenderness — "infuses the necessary care for vulnerable and wounded persons — whether their wounds are physical, spiritual, or moral. Strikingly, Francis does not draw sharp distinctions between these various kinds of wounds. They exacerbate each other...and they all need to be healed" (KAVENY, 2019, p. 190).

⁶ Gallagher helpfully traces the continuities between Francis' emphases on evangelization and culture and their roots in Vatican II and his predecessor pontiffs. He does not note, however, the critical role played by the *teología del pueblo* in both Francis' emphasis on culture and the ways that culture is configured in his theology.

⁷ Kaveny's insight into Francis' engagement with the virtues is important and deserves a much more extensive analysis. I might suggest that joy is not simply less technical language than happiness or flourishing but may instead function as the infused form of that end, parallel to the infused cardinal virtues. This would follow from Aquinas' account of joy as a fruit of the theological virtue of charity (STh II-II, Q. 28, a. 1). Likewise, Francis' refrain of praise not only reflects his own deep liturgical formation but that his method is grounded in the central action of liturgy and worship — which lies at the heart of the church.

⁸ Again, for Aquinas, mercy is both a fruit of the infused theological virtue of charity as well as the greatest of all the attributes of God *vis a vis* humanity (STh II-II, Q. 30, a. 4). Likewise, mercy is the supreme virtue of persons in relation to one another; but this implies the superiority of one person over another, which Francis would likely reject. Francis' account of mercy is more Christological — as we are recipients of God's mercy, we are thereby enabled to be merciful to others, not because of our superiority but because we recognize our shared deficiencies.

Kaveny further keys into Francis' consistent critique of economic practices that play out in the diminishment and destruction of human life across the board. Gaping economic inequalities, abject poverty, and corruption in the developing world is fueled by "an insatiable and fruitless materialism" which consumes the rest. This latter plays out as a "throw-away culture" that assails the dignity of human persons, the environment, and fundamental human relationships. While Francis is as strident about the throw-away culture as John Paul II was about the "culture of death," his commitment to a "culture of encounter" fosters an environment of engagement with those who may disagree with official Catholic teaching, a process of dialogue aimed at evangelization and conversion.

For both Kaveny and Gallagher, one of Francis' key methodological is his move to *integrate* all levels of Catholic moral thought. For Kaveny, Francis advances the anthropology that serves as the starting point of the Catholic moral tradition by clarifying that "*individuals themselves are essentially social...*" (KAVENY, 2019, p. 192, emphasis in original).⁹ For Gallagher, the integration is even more thorough-going. Francis' emphases on economics, the poor, and culture point for him toward "an inductive theology [that] should provide the basis for a theological ethic that is primarily a social ethic, more clearly related to Catholic social teaching than classical moral theology" (GALLAGER, 2015, p. 11).¹⁰ This integration reorients Catholic bioethics, by either reconceptualizing traditional bioethical questions (Gallagher) or opening up a new array of issues (Kaveny). Kaveny echoes Ron Hamel in asking: "How much time do we spend reflecting ethically on disparities, on health care for immigrants, on the care of those with Alzheimer's and their families, on the homeless, the mentally ill and addicts, just to name a few?"¹¹

Gallagher and Kaveny grasp that Francis' papacy potentially portends significant changes for Catholic bioethics. But I would push their analyses further to appreciate the powerful *theological* vision he forwards and how it connects all these pieces together. Kaveny rightly identifies his

⁹ She continues here a theme that many who analyze his engagement with Catholic moral theology appear to miss — his Ignatian method. As she notes: "A key concept for Francis is 'discernment' — it describes an Ignatian understanding prudence, which holds the general and the particular together in making decisions. As Francis noted, 'According to St. Ignatius, great principles must be embodied in the circumstances of place, time, and people'" (p. 192). The implications for the influence of Ignatian discernment and spiritual direction for his approach to moral theology deserves further study.

¹⁰ Boyle discusses Francis' economic commentary and attention to the poor at length, but largely confines those comments to the realm of social ethics, ignoring the implications of his focus on economics and the poor for Catholic bioethics; see p. 43-50.

¹¹ Kaveny graciously points to my recent book, with Michael McCarthy, *Catholic Bioethics and Social Justice* as an example of this broader approach recommended by Hamel. (KAVENY, 2019, p. 194).

Thomism, but she also echoes the claim made by many that his work is more pastoral or stylistic than theological. As she notes:

Francis shifts the mode of ethical reflection... [H]is method and style resonate more with the less systematic preaching and teaching of the Fathers of the early church. Francis's home is not philosophy or theology; it is homiletics. His understanding of the prophetic function of the papal office is not primarily didactic but rather kerygmatic...The transmission of more detailed points of doctrine is both secondary and in service of [a] primary personal witness [to the saving activity of Jesus]... According to Francis, "We must not think that in catechesis the kerygma gives way to a supposedly more 'solid' formation" (KAVENY, 2019, p. 193).¹²

Gallagher likewise finds Francis' *theology* of evangelization and culture tacit. He therefore seeks to flesh out Francis' theology via Bernard Lonergan.¹³ For the rest, Francis' fundamental theological challenge for bioethics and moral theology remains largely invisible.

Rather, I would argue that throughout his work, Francis embodies — at times, literally — a powerful and nuanced theological vision that provides an overarching substrate that connects all these pieces and provides the real challenge to Catholic bioethics. His vision pivots on a sacramental-ecclesial logic that holds the potential for upending long-standing contractual approaches to morality. Thus, here I must agree with Engelhardt on one point. As he saw clearly: "Pope Francis has introduced a new moral discourse for Roman Catholic moral theology, and therefore the framework that nests its bioethics has been subtly but importantly altered..." Let us consider Francis' theological framework.

2 Pope Francis' Sacramental Logic: The Eucharist and the Peripheries

Evangelization, economics, the virtues, the poor, fundamental teachings upheld, mercy, joy, accompaniment, integration — as yet Pope Francis'

¹² I remain intrigued by the constant refrain that Pope Francis is not a theologian or 'only' doing 'pastoral' theology. At issue here, perhaps, is our understanding of theology. I would suggest that rather than being a wily Argentinian populist, he is instead a wily Argentinian Jesuit. Drawing deeply from his formation in Ignatian spirituality, he is performing — via his gestures, comments, and public actions — a sort of Wittgenstinian therapy on contemporary theological and ecclesial problems seeking to dissolve them — bit-by-bit — so as to unleash the full evangelical power of the Gospel.

¹³ Gallagher also suggests that Rahner could be used to flesh out Francis' theology. There are a number of issues with these suggestions. Francis never cites Lonergan or Rahner, and his work is significantly at odds with the Kantian metaphysics that lie behind the work of these two Jesuit theologians. Rather, a clearer line of influence can be traced both from St. Ignatius, learned through a lifetime of immersion in the Spiritual Exercises, and from the *teología del pueblo*. In addition, Massimo Borghesi convincingly demonstrates the direct influence on Pope Francis of Jesuit Gaston Fessard and Romano Guardini. See BORGHESI, 2019; and IVEREIGH, 2015.

interventions have been grasped by Catholic bioethicists as fragments. Yet *contra* those who comfort themselves that Francis is ‘merely’ pastoral or who disparage his theology as ‘weak,’ Francis has presented since March 13, 2013 a profound theological vision. In order to trace this vision, we must step back from his occasional, *ad hoc* remarks on bioethical topics and attend carefully to his actions and writings from *Aparecida* and *Lumen Fidei* through *Gaudate et Exsultate*. Rafael Luciani rightly notes that Francis “takes the praxis of Jesus as the primary reference point for all theologico-pastoral activity” (LUCIANI, 2017, p. 149). This is an essential hermeneutical key.

With the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis’ vision of ecclesiological renewal springs from the Eucharist. From its opening words, the Council grounds its renewed vision of the Church in the liturgy, particularly the Eucharist, the endlessly generative “fount of the Church” (Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 10-11). For Francis, the Eucharist is the primary encounter, the first moment in his “culture of encounter” — the place where God in Christ encounters us.¹⁴ This claim resonates throughout his first apostolic exhortation, *Lumen Fidei* (n. 44, 31, 4, 5, 13, *passim*). Per *Lumen Fidei* (LF) in the sacraments, Christ — who is the Light — encounters us, transforms us, enabling us to see all things anew (n. 4, 13, 44). Faith — which is the fruit of a necessarily personal encounter with the God who is a God of persons — is not about propositions or moral norms (LF, n. 39). Rather, as light, such faith illuminates hidden aspects of reality, enabling Christians to see all things in a new way, not as the world sees them but through the love and joy and peace of the trinitarian God in Christ.

In other words, one outcome of the sacramental encounter with Christ is a new epistemological lens. Through our union with or participation in the Christ who encounters us in the sacraments, we come to see and know reality in new ways. As Francis notes:

In faith, Christ is not simply the one in whom we believe, the supreme manifestation of God’s love; he is also the one with whom we are united precisely in order to believe. Faith does not merely gaze at Jesus, but sees things as Jesus himself sees them, with his own eyes: it is a participation in his way of seeing (LF, n. 18).

The word ‘participation’ here is key. In encountering the Christ who is always already there, waiting to encounter us, Christ capacitates us to see and to encounter others. “Transformed by the love to which [we] have

¹⁴ This claim, that resounds throughout Francis’ corpus, he explicitly connects to his predecessor: “I never tire of repeating those words of Benedict XVI which take us to the very heart of the Gospel: “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (EG, n. 7, citing *Aparecida*, 2007, n. 12).

opened [our] hearts in faith,” (LF, n. 21) we are enabled in subsequent encounters to see them as Christ sees them and to share with them Christ’s love, mercy, joy, peace. But this is not our work — rather, Christ works in, with, and through us: “Faith in Christ brings salvation because in him our lives become radically open to a love that precedes us, a love that transforms us from within, acting in us and through us” (LF, n. 20). Via the redemptive encounter with Christ here and now, we begin to enter into the Kingdom, to participate in salvation, here and now. And experiencing Christ’s unmerited compassion, mercy, forgiveness and love, we naturally move from gift to witness and mission: If we have received this truth and love, as we participate in it in an ongoing way, we must share it! We are impelled! As Francis says: “Those who have opened their hearts to God’s love, heard his voice and received his light, cannot keep this gift to themselves. Since faith is hearing and seeing, it is also handed on as word and light” (LF, n. 37). We are sent — as individuals and as a church — out into the world, to bring the presence of the Christ who has encountered and transformed us to persons, to cultures, to the peripheries.

Here we come to a point that many commentators miss — at least among Catholic bioethicists. “The peripheries,” looming large in Francis’ prophetic witness, are not solely an object of our missionary activity. The poor are not merely recipients of evangelization, not only a ‘pastoral’ focus. It is not simply a matter of “our” ministering to or protecting the poor, the voiceless, the thrown-away, although these actions are important. The vector is not unidirectional. Rather, by going to the peripheries, we not only bring God’s grace — as importantly, we are encountered by God in Christ again, this time among God’s wounded people.

For Pope Francis, Christ is encountered not only in the liturgy, but among the poor — the poor become a second *locus theologicus* (EG, n. 126).¹⁵ This, of course, is a central commitment of liberation theology nurtured in Francis through his journey with the Argentinian *teología del pueblo*. Fran-

¹⁵ This term resounds from Gustavo Gutierrez forward. Especially for the *teología del pueblo*, popular religiosity, often dismissed as simply pastoral or benighted — is a necessary source of revelation, of the living and active presence of God’s grace, necessary for strengthening and deepening the church’s grasp and articulation of theological and doctrinal insight. As Juan Carlos Scannone notes, for liberation theology and the subsequently the *teología del pueblo*, the option for the poor and popular piety are “the prime locus of interpretation” (2016, p. 133). Paul VI articulated this relationship well in his homily opening the 1968 CELAM session in Bogota: “We remind you of what was said by a great and wise bishop, Bossuet, on the ‘eminent dignity of the poor’ (Cf. J.-B. Bossuet *De l’éminente dignité des Pauvres*). The entire tradition of the churches recognizes in the poor the sacrament of Christ, certainly not identical to the reality of the Eucharist, but indeed *in perfect analogical and mystical correspondence with it.*” Paul VI, Apostolic pilgrimage to Bogota on the occasion of the 39th International Eucharistic Congress; homily during the Mass for Colombian peasants, August 23, 1968. Cited in LUCIANI, 2017, p. 901 (emphasis added).

cis signals this throughout his corpus. As he notes in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “God’s heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself “became poor” (2Cor 8,9)... This divine preference,” which marks the entire history of redemption, he notes “has consequences for the faith life of all Christians, since we are called to have ‘this mind... which was in Jesus Christ’ (Phil 2,5)” (EG, n. 198). Carlos Galli highlights the importance of this incarnational kenosis in Francis’ thought:

A Christology of incarnation and kenosis contemplates and serves the God who became small because “the smallest and most forgotten God has the most recent and lively memory.” The poor are those who are last and whom God does not forget in his memory. A Christ made small on the cross gives himself to *the smallest* (2016, p. 842).

This is why Francis “wants a Church which is poor and for the poor” and for those on the peripheries.¹⁶ Because *they evangelize us*. As he notes:

[The poor] have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church’s pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them (EG, n. 198).

We find Christ in them. By entering into the material conditions of their reality, by touching their wounds and allowing their wounds to become our own, we also are invited again by Christ to touch his wounds, to continue to participate in his ongoing presence in the world. Christ encounters us again. In this way, the peripheries are sacramental — perhaps, we could call them, a *locus sacramentum*. They are a place where the suffering, wounded body of Christ is truly present. For Francis, “our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation for each of us” (EG, n. 179),¹⁷ and by ‘abasing ourselves’ to share life with the poor, we “[touch] the suffering

¹⁶ Luciani notes the longer history of this vision, starting with Dom Helder Câmara and the Pact of the Catacombs signed in Rome on November 16, 1965. Here “a group of bishops... affirmed the need to return to the praxis of the Jesus of history by being ‘a servant and poor Church. The pact proposed renouncing ‘the wealth, property, titles, privileges, and honors of the ecclesiastical institution,’ and urged living ‘according to the ordinary manner of our people’” (LUCIANI, 2017, p. 901).

¹⁷ He continues beautifully: “‘As you did it to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me’ (Mt 25:40). The way we treat others has a transcendent dimension: ‘The measure you give will be the measure you get’ (Mt 7:2). It corresponds to the mercy which God has shown us: ‘Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you... For the measure you give will be the measure you get back’ (Lk 6,36-38).”

flesh of Christ in others” (EG, n. 24). Here he continues a line of affirmations from *Aparecida* back to Paul VI’s homily in Bogotá opening the 1968 CELAM conference, where he said to the peasants gathered for Mass: “You are a sign, a likeness, a mystery of Christ’s presence...The sacrament of the Eucharist offers us his hidden presence, living and real; you too are a sacrament, that is, a holy image of the Lord in the world, a reflection that is a representation and does not hide his human and divine face” (Cited in LUCIANI, 2017, p. 1427).

Via participation in the Eucharist, Christ transforms our vision with his light, enabling us to see the peripheries through his own eyes, to see and therefore encounter him there. In the same way, the peripheries are epistemological.¹⁸ Transformed by our participation in God’s presence among the poor, we come to see things anew. Not only do the poor, per Clodovis Boff, “‘know’ much more about poverty than does any economist. Or rather, they know it in another way, and more concretely” (BOFF, 1993, p. 78). The peripheries are also sites of theological knowledge. The option for the poor, as Francis notes “is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one” (EG, n. 198).

These are, however, deeply interconnected. Recently canonized Saint Oscar Romero, whose work resonates with that of Francis in significant ways, articulates these connections. Speaking at Louvain of his experience with the Salvadoran church prior to his assassination, he noted: “It is the poor who tell us what the world is and what the church’s service to the world should be... [T]he world of the poor is the key to understanding the Christian faith, to understanding the activity of the church” (ROMERO, 1980, p. 2). Elsewhere he states that turning to “the real, concrete world of the poor... has given us new eyes to see what has always been the case among us, but which so often has been hidden, even from the eyes of the church (ROMERO, 1980, p. 3).

For when — after the assassination of his friend Rutilio Grande — Romero immersed himself in the lives of the Salvadoran poor in a new way, and came to see Salvadoran reality with the poor, what did he see? He certainly gained new insight into the economic, historic, political and international dynamics of the interlocked systems of oppression, destruction and dehumanization that were (and remain) the day-to-day realities of the

¹⁸ As Galli notes for Pope Francis: “He sees the world situation from the perspective of the poor peoples and the poor of those peoples. For him the peripheries are not just privileged places for mission but also hermeneutical horizons that facilitate knowing all reality” (2016, p. 841). As Francis stated to Antonio Spadaro: “It is a hermeneutical question: reality is understood only if it is looked at from the periphery, and not when our viewpoint is equidistant from everything” (SPADARO, 2014, cited in LUCIANI, 2017, p. 995).

poor. But that concrete, material knowledge transformed his theological understandings. A primary effect of his turn to the poor was the conversion of the Salvadoran church itself. As he recounts:

Experiencing these realities, and letting ourselves be affected by them, far from separating us from our faith, has sent us back to the world of the poor, our true home...[T]his coming closer to the world of the poor is what we understand both by incarnation and by conversion. The changes that were needed in the church...which we had not brought about simply by looking inward upon the church, we are now carrying out by turning ourselves outward toward the world of the poor. Our encounter with the poor has regained for us the central truth of the gospel, through the word of God which urges us to conversion (ROMERO, 1980, p. 3).¹⁹

This conversion of the Salvadoran church further opened for them “the hidden riches of the gospel” (ROMERO, 1980, p. 6), catalyzing more theologically adequate understandings of sin, incarnation, redemption, hope, God, Jesus Christ, human dignity, and the church itself.

With Pope Francis, then, we see a powerful ecclesiological claim seeded in Vatican II and maturing under his predecessors come fully into view, namely that that the peripheries — with the Eucharist — serve as two founts of the church, recursively related to each other through the missionary discipleship of those transformed by Christ’s love in both encounters, mutually mediating, constituting, and renewing the Body of Christ, alive and active in the world. This fundamental ecclesiological framework provides the broader context for situating other aspects of Francis’ thought identified earlier. With Francis, this framework becomes the lever for prying open those pre-Conciliar vestiges in the church that tenaciously resist conversion. Is Catholic bioethics one of those areas?

3 Incarnational Reversal: Converting Catholic Bioethics to a Sacramental Logic

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis does not mince words when it comes to areas in the church that need renewal or conversion in order that the church and her members might more adequately and effectively embody our vocation and identity as missionary disciples. He castigates those trapped by a “self-absorbed promethean neopelagianism... who ultimately trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style

¹⁹ Romero’s experience of ecclesial conversion is articulated as well by key figures within the *teologia del pueblo*; see LUCIANI, 2017, p. 317.

from the past.”²⁰ He refers to “rules or precepts which may have been quite effective in their time, but no longer have the same usefulness for directing and shaping people’s lives” (EG, n. 43). In his interview with Antonio Spadaro, after offering the image of the church as a field hospital, he almost immediately turns — as a counterexample — to the canon of Catholic bioethics. “We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage, and the use of contraception. This is not possible.”²¹ He makes clear in *Evangelii Gaudium*, that the church’s approach to morality is one of the things that needs transforming: “Christian morality [is not simply] a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults” (EG, n. 39).

From these and other comments, we can sense that the state of Catholic moral theology concerns the pope. If that’s the case, how might we start thinking anew about our practice of bioethics? As Lucio Gera notes with regard to pastoral conversion: “In conversion, things...are reinterpreted, they are re-felt — felt in a new way — they are re-done, somewhat like being recreated in their paschal newness; *another starting point is used* to reconstruct the meaning of the world...” (LUCIANI, 2017, p. 391, emphasis added). Another starting point. What might be a new and more theologically robust starting point for Catholic moral theology and Catholic bioethics?

Francis is forwarding a vision of the church and all its activities — which would include Catholic bioethics and theology — as springing from a sacramentally-mediated Christological heart which lives its identity by kenotically but joyfully immersing itself in the day-to-day realities of real people, especially those on the peripheries, where it encounters God anew. If such an ecclesiology is to shape all the church’s actions, it should shape and inform Catholic bioethics as well. It points toward twin starting points for theology and bioethics — the Eucharist and the peripheries, or more specifically, the sacraments and the poor. Put differently, this would simply mean taking “the praxis of Jesus as the primary reference point” for the particular “theologico-pastoral activity” of Catholic bioethics.

Tracing the full implications of this shift for a Catholic bioethics — which currently starts from a truncated notion of the natural law — is well

²⁰ He continues particularly scathing: “A supposed soundness of doctrine or discipline leads instead to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying. In neither case is one really concerned about Jesus Christ or others. These are manifestations of an anthropocentric immanentism. It is impossible to think that a genuine evangelizing thrust could emerge from these adulterated forms of Christianity” (EG, n. 94).

²¹ As he has now famously said to Spadaro: “The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church’s pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently...We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel” (SPADARO, 2013, p. 12).

beyond the scope of this essay. Allow me, then, to close with a few brief thoughts. First: some have begun to reenvision Catholic moral theology and Catholic bioethics via these starting points, particularly in the US and Latin American contexts. A small cadre of Catholic moral theologians in the US has begun trying to build a new conversation in Catholic moral theology centered in the liturgy and sacraments (see e.g., LYSAUGHT; MCCARTHY, 2007). Much of my own work has involved attempting to approach questions in Catholic bioethics through a sacramental lens (see LYSAUGHT, 2007; 2009; 2016; 2018). Similarly, Catholic bioethicists in Latin American have done significant and important work rethinking bioethics from the perspective of the poor, especially Márcio Fabri dos Anjos and Alexandre Martins (see e.g., DOS ANJOS, 1994; MARTINS, 2014; 2019). Along these lines, my newest book analyzes issues in Catholic health care ethics through the lens of Catholic social doctrine (LYSAUGHT; MCCARTHY, 2019).²²

But as yet, to my knowledge, no one has sought to bring these starting points together. Within the US conversation on liturgy and ethics there has been little, if any, attention to the poor, and little if any engagement with the Eucharist or sacraments more broadly among those who seek to contextualize Catholic bioethics via the peripheries. Likewise, while base communities have proven central in the development of the Latin American conversation, sacramentality, when mentioned, is envisaged primarily as located *in* the poor. Even more, there may be a subtle resistance within the Latin American context to the Eucharistic pole. Luciani captures this: “the path of conversion [is] not mediated by the liturgy but by everyday dealing with persons and their life stories. It is in this shared everyday life where the beauty of a humanity that has been touched by the divine mystery is revealed to us” (LUCIANI, 2017, p. 415). Perhaps Latin American or liberation theologians bristle against a contractual understanding of the liturgy correlated with a pre-Vatican II ecclesiology that played out in problematic ways in Latin American history. Overagainst this history, Francis (and before him Oscar Romero) supplies a corrective on this point to liberation theology, in that the prime locus of interpretation becomes a more participative Christological account of the liturgy which is necessarily and integrally connected to the sacramentality of the poor.

What might this portend for Catholic bioethics? Certainly, as Kaveny and Gallagher note, it would helpfully expand the range of questions engaged — both within clinical settings and beyond. Beyond this, I would argue that in Francis we find the infrastructure for a thorough-going Vatican II

²² For a review of other scholars who seek to wed Catholic bioethics and social ethics, see my essay with LYSAUGHT, M.T.; MCCARTHY, M. “A Catholic Social Praxis for US Health Care” (2018).

revision toward an *ecclesial and sacramental* moral theology and bioethics. As is well known, moral theology and bioethics prior to Vatican II was rooted in the confessional, the Sacrament of Penance, and their correlate ecclesiology and sacramental theology. This context produced a moral theology and bioethics focused almost exclusively on the sinful nature of particular acts of individual agents.²³ The questions here were “is this particular act licit?” “has this particular person sinned?” A moral theology rooted in the always integrally-related sacramental loci of Eucharist and the poor will ask primarily different questions; it will ask: how ought the church respond — *as church* — as the Body of Christ alive and active in the world to the myriad of social structures and practices that devalue, dehumanize, oppress, and kill human persons. How might the church embody a counter-politics to the powers, principalities, and idols that hold so many in spiritual and material bondage? “Morality” or even the Christian life here is not a matter of individual adherence to moral norms or even individual pursuit of virtue; although these never go away, the Christian life here becomes a matter of participation in the corporate agency and witness of the Body of Christ of which we are members. This was one of Romero’s great insights: that the violence perpetrated on the Salvadoran people by their own government required a response *as church*. How might this approach be embodied with regard to other social and bioethical practices?

This transformed approach may well serve as a powerful vehicle for evangelization by bringing the voice of the church to bear on a myriad of points of the world’s pain and brokenness, witnessing to Christ’s compassionate, critical, and constructive presence. It would also evangelize Catholics, helping them to see more clearly the deep connections between our liturgical life and our life in the world. As Benedict XVI said in *Deus Caritas Est*:

Faith, worship and *ethos* are interwoven as a single reality which takes shape in our encounter with God’s *agape*. Here the usual contraposition between worship and ethics simply falls apart. “Worship” itself, Eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn. A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented. (DCE, n. 15)

How might the fact that we participate week after week in the sacramental practices of the church — encountering Christ again and again — help us think differently about why and how we live and act as Christians? It certainly might shift our language, from general principles of natural law to Christological convictions regarding self-emptying, reconciliation,

²³ For a thorough account of the nominalist deformation of Catholic moral theology after Trent, see PINCKAERS, 1995, p. 217-279.

brokenness, interdependence, hospitality, compassion, solidarity, and accompaniment.²⁴

If, indeed, the church — and therefore its theology — springs from the twin sacramental founts of the liturgy and the poor (making Jesus Christ the method) Catholic bioethicists and Catholic moral theologians more broadly will be challenged to more explicitly attend to practices that shape our lives and work. It would require moral theology across the board — from Catholic bioethics to Catholic social ethics — to become much more theological. On an intellectual level, it would press us to break down the rigid and unhelpful silos between systematic, moral, liturgical, and pastoral theology that fragment so much of our work and witness. On a practical level, it asks how we as theologians, participate in sacramentality of the church? Long before Pope Francis, Gavin D’Costa argued that a life of prayer is epistemologically necessary for the practice of theology (D’COSTA, 1998). Such participation in the sacramental life of the church not only promises to advance our personal and intellectual knowledge of God; it also promises to build the connections between theology and the church, connections which, at least in the US, are currently quite tenuous.

It would also press academic theologians to examine our social locations. Over and again, Pope Francis enjoins Catholics — and specifically academic theologians — “to go and be with the poor,” to immerse themselves in “milieus of exclusion.”²⁵ Kaveny notes that this raises real practical

²⁴ Some might be concerned at this proposal to decenter natural law as the starting point for a Catholic bioethics. However, it is largely the case that natural law, as it is currently embodied within Catholic bioethics, is an extraordinarily narrow, reductive and de-theologized version of Thomas Aquinas himself located natural law as one component within a much more philosophically and theologically robust account of our participation in God’s ongoing presence, framed within a teleological structure that moves from God to the sacraments. Thus, within a thoroughly Thomistic account, natural law becomes but a tool within an overarching sacramental framework. What would it mean to re-center natural law within its proper sacramental and theological home?

²⁵ Per Francis: “Both academic and pastoral theologians, along with intellectuals in general, are called to recognize and become inculturated — cognitively and socially — in their own poor people, in those milieus of exclusion, in order to really know their life-world, their culture. It is this option for the poor that makes it possible to build the true common good and achieve the momentum needed to arrive at a higher unity, that of the nation. At that level it will be possible to overcome the influence of outside ideologies, whether Marxist or liberal, socialist or capitalist, which seek only to destroy memory and identity and to level societies without taking into account the diverse cultures within them and the role of these cultures in promoting true values of humanization and development” (EG, n. 220). Luciani agrees: “the most appropriate place of ecclesial presence — both pastoral and academic — is that of being in the midst of *poor peoples*, serving them and taking a stand with them in their struggles and hopes”... [W]e cannot be Christian without reestablishing our bonds — personal, academic, or professional — in close encounter with the poor, with their way of being, in a closeness that humanizes our life and endows with transcendence the complex web of our relationships. Otherwise, our gaze will be reduced to an ethicist, academic, and trivializing deception, guided by the spirit of superficial individualism that permeates hypermodern contemporary society” (2017, p. 558, 590).

questions for moral theology. She asks: “how will we ensure the next generation of Catholic healthcare ethicists receive the necessary broad training to practice their vocation in a ‘Franciscan’ key? ‘Going to the peripheries’ entails moving beyond disciplinary comfort zones” (KAVENY, 2019, p. 196).²⁶ Luciani responds: “The cultural shock that this will produce in both the ecclesiastical institution and educated elite society can be overcome only by a process of pastoral conversion or incarnational reversal. We [as theologians] need to ask ourselves: what is the space in which I move, who are those in my circle of friends, what is the sociocultural place out of which I live and think?” (LUCIANI, 2017, p. 369).²⁷

Incarnational reversal. Is Catholic bioethics ready to experience incarnational reversal? This is the question Catholic bioethics — and, indeed, Catholic moral theology — is called by Pope Francis and the Holy Spirit to contemplate. Indeed, “at stake is a change in the character of Roman Catholic theological discourse.” Such a shift will, no doubt, “promote substantive changes in its bioethics.” But rather than offering us ‘weak theology,’ Pope Francis — in his witness and work, deeply informed by the Second Vatican Council and the *teología del pueblo* — points the

²⁶ Pope Francis responds: “No one must say that they cannot be close to the poor because their own lifestyle demands more attention to other areas. This is an excuse commonly heard in academic, business or professional, and even ecclesial circles. While it is quite true that the essential vocation and mission of the lay faithful is to strive that earthly realities and all human activity may be transformed by the Gospel, none of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice: ‘Spiritual conversion, the intensity of the love of God and neighbour, zeal for justice and peace, the Gospel meaning of the poor and of poverty, are required of everyone.’ I fear that these words too may give rise to commentary or discussion with no real practical effect. That being said, I trust in the openness and readiness of all Christians, and I ask you to seek, as a community, creative ways of accepting this renewed call” (EG, n. 201).

²⁷ Just as this approach challenges those who work from a natural law methodology, it will also challenge many who identify as ‘contextual theologians,’ and in two ways. First, as noted earlier, it prioritizes, with the poor, ecclesially-embodied sacramental practice. Here, *contra* the ‘sacramental principle’ which expands sacramentality to encompass every aspect of creation, this account presumes an understanding of sacrament as those practices and realities by which Christ constitutes the Church as Christ’s body so that it can embody Christ’s presence in the world. (See further, LYSAUGHT, “That Jagged Little Pill,” 2018: 258-259). On this account, to name the poor as a specific sacramental locus is to claim that the poor are constitutive of the Church, a point Francis makes repeatedly. Per this account, the presence of Christ in the poor differs from God’s general presence in creation.

Further, per such an account, all ‘contexts’ and all forms of ‘poverty’ are not equally sacramental loci. Francis works with a very specific understanding of the poor drawn from the *teología del pueblo* — those who are excluded to the point of physical, material oppression, brokenness, and death: those with insufficient food, no shelter, completely excluded or ‘thrown-away’ by economic and political structures of sin and violence. Pope Francis does appear to perhaps expand his understanding of ‘the peripheries’ to encompass other instances of exclusion — those in prison, refugees, the sick, and those whose lives are in peril from euthanasia and abortion. The poor, in other words, align closely with Matthew 25 and other scriptural witness. I thank Alan Ruguero for this insight.

way forward for a moral theology and Catholic bioethics that is made perfect through weakness. Only as Catholic bioethics encounters the kenotic Christ at the altar and learns to wash his feet in the poor, will its own conversion begin.

Abbreviations

DCE = *Deus Caritas Est*

EG = *Evangelii Gaudium*

STh = *Summa Theologiae*

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