

### 3

.....

## **A Canticle of Praise against the Logic of Babel**

*The Papal Trio's Liturgical Ontology over  
and against the Culture Wars*

INSTEAD OF LINING UP with the battle lines of conservatives versus liberals, Pope Francis's position on the cultural battlefield is defined by the *liturgical ontology of praise* that defined the location of JP2 and Benedict in their fight for truth, justice, and love against *the exploitative logic of Babel*, as we'll begin exploring in this chapter. Francis criticizes market liberalism and sexual liberalism in the same breath, because he sees these two ideological distortions of reality as two expressions of the same problem. Indeed, he regards the mentality of market liberalism as largely responsible for the spread of sexual liberalism globally, in what he criticizes as neocolonialism. Liberal capitalism and sexual liberalism are deeply connected, for Francis, as part of the technocratic paradigm and throwaway culture. The liberal market has been the main force contributing to the disintegration of family households throughout the global household. It has played a key role in deforming hearts, severely weakening their capacity for developing a sense of commitment, solidarity, responsibility, and stewardship. It forms our hearts according to the market's own rules—rules that take little interest in the laws written into the fabric of human nature and the nature of the cosmos.

Francis's singular advocacy for human ecology—a singular and deep pro-family environmentalism—bursts through the confines of the

categories of the culture wars. Francis's critique of neoliberal capitalism and neocolonialism, which the radical left likewise critiques, are integral to his high view of sexuality, marriage, and family.

## **Against the Logic of Babel**

Pope Francis's alternative to market liberalism and sexual liberalism is found in his call to the reverential awe and wonder that characterized St. Francis's posture before the mystery of creation as *a gift of the outstretched hand of God*.<sup>1</sup> This is what Pope Francis has on offer as an alternative to the culture wars, playing by the rules of neither left nor right.

We see this singular "Francis option" at play in the last third of his book *LUD*, where the Pope makes reference to a "twelfth-century midrash, or commentary, on the story of the Tower of Babel in chapter 11 of the Book of Genesis."<sup>2</sup> According to the medieval rabbi who authored this commentary, "If a brick fell it was" perceived to be "a great tragedy," Francis recounts. "Work stopped and the negligent worker was beaten severely as an example. But if a worker fell to his death? The work went on. One of the surplus laborers—slaves waiting in line for work—stepped forward to take his place so that the tower could continue to rise." Here arises the key question for Francis and for the JP2-B16 inheritance of social teaching: "Which was more valuable, the brick or the worker?" Thus Francis articulates the fundamental rhetorical economic query asked of society by the Church-as-gadfly since Leo XIII: "Which was considered an expendable surplus in the pursuit of endless growth?"<sup>3</sup>

The worker, in the logic of Babel, was expendable, whereas the brick was highly prized as a means to an inhumane end. Francis proceeds then to bring the question home to our present era: "And nowadays? When shares of major corporations fall a few percent, the news makes headlines. Experts endlessly discuss what it might mean. But when a homeless person is found frozen in the streets behind empty hotels, or a whole population goes hungry, few notice; and if it makes the news at all, we just shake our heads sadly and carry on, believing there is no solution."<sup>4</sup> Francis employs the rabbinic reading of the Babel story as an image for

1. *LS*, sec. 76.

2. *LUD*, 116. See also Francis, "Healing the World," paras. 5–6.

3. *LUD*, 117.

4. *LUD*, 117.

*development gone wrong* from the perspective of the Church's inheritance of theological reflection on social justice.<sup>5</sup>

The papal trio's critique of the logic of the market focuses on the ways in which the logic of the market misidentifies the *means* and *ends* in economic life. For JP2, as he recounts in the opening sentence of SRS, "the social concern of the Church" is "directed towards an authentic development of man and society which would respect and promote all the dimensions of the human person,"<sup>6</sup> especially those dimensions having to do with labor and sexuality—perennial human concerns that are front, center, and intertwined in the human drama since Eden. The well-being of the human person, communities, and society as a whole is the end of all development, including economic development, and of the economy itself. The economy is called by the demands of justice and charity to honor human dignity.<sup>7</sup>

## Babel and the Question of St. James Today

Ours is a society to which JP2 addresses the biting question posed by St. James: "What causes wars, and what causes fighting among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have."<sup>8</sup> Is this not what Johannine language calls *lust in its three forms*, by which our hearts become obsessively set upon possessing what is not ours to possess, or possessing in a manner in which we are not meant to possess? For the hope-filled JP2, "in a different world, ruled by concern for the common good of all humanity, or by concern for the 'spiritual and human development of all' instead of by the quest for individual profit, peace would be possible as the result of a 'more perfect justice among

5. For JP2, authentic development is not about "merely satisfying material necessities through an increase of goods, while ignoring the sufferings of the many and making the selfishness of individuals and nations the principal motivation" for development (SRS, sec. 10).

6. SRS, sec. 1.

7. All integral development is directed toward this end. Development does not have the amassment of capital as its end, nor does it have production as its end. Rather, any humanely made profit or any humane method of production needs to be a means to the end of human flourishing on a collective and individual level, and can never come at its expense.

8. SRS, sec. 10, citing Jas 4:1–2.

people.”<sup>9</sup> JP2’s appropriation of St. James’s prophetic query is at the core of his economic critique. JP2 roots his economic critique of the logic of the market in a deep theological anthropology that takes seriously the reality of our captivity to sin—in particular, our lust, avarice, and hunger for power—the reality of our desires for what we “do not have.”<sup>10</sup>

Francis offers a diagnosis of what’s *off* in society today similar to that offered by JP2. It’s what’s off in our economics, in our household management practices as a society. It’s what’s off in historical humanity since the fall. As Francis observes, “in our lives, just as in our societies, if you put money at the center, you enter the pattern of” idolatrous “sacrifice: whatever the human cost or the damage to the environment, the tower” of Babel “must go higher and higher. But when you put people’s dignity at the center, you create a new logic of mercy and of care. Then what is truly of value is restored to its rightful place.”<sup>11</sup> Here, Francis urges us to choose what is at the center, people or capital, “people or bricks,” “the triumph of the fittest and the throwaway culture” or “mercy and care.”<sup>12</sup> Here Francis builds explicitly upon the social critique proper to JP2 and Benedict. As Francis recounts,

When the accumulation of wealth becomes our chief goal, whether as individuals or as an economy, we practice a form of idolatry that puts us in chains. It is inconceivable that so many women and children are being exploited for power, pleasure, or profit. Our brothers and sisters are being enslaved in clandestine warehouses, exploited as undocumented migrants in prostitution rings, and the situation is even worse when it is children subject to such injustices, all for profit and the greed of a few.<sup>13</sup>

For Francis, Catholic social commentary is not a matter of checking off all the hot-button issues, from one disconnected issue to the next, akin to establishing a campaign platform that might gain a popular vote. Nor is Francis’s approach a matter of bipartisan collaboration, as though he were reaching “across the aisle” in savvy political attempts to arrive at compromises we can all agree on. For Francis, Catholic social commentary is a matter of identifying where the end has been mistaken as

9. SRS, sec. 10, citing *PP*, sec. 76.

10. SRS, sec. 10, citing Jas 4:2.

11. *LUD*, 116–17.

12. *LUD*, 117.

13. *LUD*, 113–14.

a means, and vice versa. *Where in our social life have human beings been treated as mere capital, and where has amassing capital been treated as an end, to which human persons are subjected as a means?* That is the crux of the matter, in the social commentary of Francis. These questions are to be applied at the level of the global household and the micro domestic household, and at every level between. The culprit for Francis is what he identifies as “the neo-Darwinist ideology of the survival of the fittest, underpinned by an unfettered market obsessed with profit and individual sovereignty” that has “penetrated our culture and hardened our hearts.”<sup>14</sup>

The Pope Francis body of social commentary—particularly by way of its critique of technocracy and its articulation of its positive alternative, namely, an integral human development that honors the human person whole and entire, each person and humanity-at-large as a social entity—is true to the heritage of JP2 and Benedict in its adherence to the intellectual framework of Paul VI’s *HV*, in its critique of technocracy, particularly its critique of contraception. As Francis observes, “Paul VI warned in his 1968 encyclical *HV* of the temptation to view human life as one more object over which the powerful and educated should exercise mastery. How prophetic his message now looks!”<sup>15</sup> Technocracy manifests itself today in myriad ways, offending the meaning of human life at its core. Francis identifies some key examples in addition to that of contraception: “These days prenatal diagnosis is commonly used to filter out those deemed weak or inferior, while at the other end of life, euthanasia is becoming normal: either overtly, through assisted suicide laws in some countries or states, or covertly, through neglect of the elderly.”<sup>16</sup>

What Francis identifies as the “causes of this erosion of the value of life”—causes which “have to be faced”—is the exclusion “from public policymaking any consideration of the common good,” such that we end up “promoting individual autonomy to the exclusion of all other values and reference points,” for, “without a vision for society rooted in the dignity of all people, the logic of the unfettered market ends up turning life from a gift into a product.”<sup>17</sup> Here, we see how Francis, by way of the rationale of JP2 and Benedict, pushes back against the logic of the

14. *LUD*, 116.

15. *LUD*, 116.

16. *LUD*, 116.

17. *LUD*, 116.

market<sup>18</sup> on the basis of a theology of givenness. It is in the context of this discussion that Francis states, “While many will be irritated to hear a pope return to the topic, I cannot stay silent over 30 to 40 million unborn lives cast aside every year through abortion. It is painful to behold how in many regions that see themselves as developed the practice is often urged because the children to come are disabled, or unplanned.”<sup>19</sup>

The papal trio pushes back against the liberal market’s culture of death, condemning its commodification of human lives, and condemning how it renders human life disposable. The papal trio’s integral pro-life, pro-family logic is the alternative to the logic of so-called economic “freedom” in our technocratic context.

For Francis, because human life and human flourishing constitute the end, and human beings are not meant to be a mere means to other ends, “human life is never” to be considered merely as “a burden.”<sup>20</sup> Rather, human life

demands we make space for it, not cast it off. Of course the arrival of a new human life in need—whether the unborn child in the womb or the migrant at our border—challenges and changes our priorities. With abortion and closed borders we refuse that readjustment of our priorities, sacrificing human life to defend our economic security or to assuage our fear that parenthood will upend our lives. Abortion is a grave injustice. It can never be a legitimate expression of autonomy and power. If our autonomy demands the death of another, it is none other than an iron cage.<sup>21</sup>

Francis, as a global Socrates in the shoes of the fisherman, asks his audience, in view of the controversial issue of abortion: “Is it right to eliminate a human life to resolve a problem? Is it right to hire an assassin to resolve a problem?”<sup>22</sup> There’s no mincing of words here. For this postmodern papal Socrates corrupting the youth of a global Athens, a physician who performs abortions is a hired assassin. This global Socrates has indeed committed a crime of impiety against the city’s gods—particularly the

18. See West, “Politics of the Gospel,” 17, and *LUD*, 116, for Francis’s critique of “the logic of the unfettered market,” parallel to that of West.

19. *LUD*, 115.

20. *LUD*, 115.

21. *LUD*, 115.

22. *LUD*, 115.

god of freedom, individualistically conceived and divorced from a notion of responsibility.

## **Safeguarding the Dignity of Human Life against Development Gone Wrong**

In the papal trio's alternative to the culture wars, advocating for the sanctity of human life in a culture of death, and taking responsibility as individuals and collectively for the stewardship of life, is a concern of economics. In his review of economic circumstances as they've developed since the publication of *PP*, Benedict expressed the concern that "from the social point of view, systems of protection and welfare, already present in many countries in Paul VI's day, are finding it hard and could find it even harder in the future to pursue their goals of true social justice in today's profoundly changed environment."<sup>23</sup> What has transpired, in Benedict's account, is that

the global market has stimulated first and foremost, on the part of rich countries, a search for areas in which to outsource production at low cost with a view to reducing the prices of many goods, increasing purchasing power and thus accelerating the rate of development in terms of greater availability of consumer goods for the domestic market.<sup>24</sup>

The result of this is that "the market has prompted new forms of competition between States as they seek to attract foreign businesses to set up production centres, by means of a variety of instruments, including favourable fiscal regimes and deregulation of the labour market."<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, as B16 recounts, "these processes have led to a downsizing of social security systems as the price to be paid for seeking greater competitive advantage in the global market, with consequent grave danger for the rights of workers, for fundamental human rights and for the solidarity associated with the traditional forms of the social State."<sup>26</sup> In these circumstances,

23. CV, sec. 25.

24. CV, sec. 25.

25. CV, sec. 25.

26. CV, sec. 25.