

# INTRODUCTION

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## Introducing Cosmic Chastity

*Why Interpreting the Popes from within the Culture Wars  
Doesn't Work, and an Alternative Hermeneutic That Does*

THE PROBLEM WITH PAPAL HERMENEUTICS in North America today is that we easily fall into the trap of reading the popes as if they're players in a game they're not actually playing. Or, to return to the metaphor of music: Reno, as a papal music critic representative of many a faithful Catholic, thinks that Francis is singing from a dated 1970s hymnbook.<sup>1</sup> I am proposing an alternative reading of the Francis soundtrack. Francis is singing, I am convinced, from the perennial prophetic hymnbook of Catholic social teaching. The song of Francis's papal message, which has a particular resonance in this progressive millennial moment, is structured by the philosophical and dogmatic pattern of the social teaching of JP2 and Benedict, and has no resemblance to the shallow moral relativism

1. In 2013, Reno was still presenting Francis as merely *perceived* by *National Catholic Reporter* and *Huffington Post* as singing from their hymnal. See Reno, "How to Limit Government," sec. "Popes and Interviews," paras. 9–13. By the time of "Crisis of Solidarity" (November 2015), "Francis's Improv Theology" (June 2016), para. 10, "A Militant Church" (July 2017), "Building Bridges," (November 2017), "Failing Papacy" (February 2019), and "Francis Stands Firm" (February 2020), Reno has become more direct in characterizing Francis as a cliché-laden ally of the liberal elite. Reno's reflection on Francis's alleged defense of "Bourgeois Religion" in December 2017 is particularly biting. If there's one article in response to which I seek to offer an alternative hermeneutic of the Francis message, it's this one (Reno, "Liberal Tradition, Yes; Ideology, No," sec. "Bourgeois Religion," paras. 6–8).

of old liberal Catholics who get a kick out of distributing condoms and celebrating mass around a coffee table with pita bread and wine in a mug.

Whereas the words of JP2 and Benedict were regularly mined for ammunition on the part of the right against the left, Francis leaves very little ammo for the right, providing arms, it seems, for the right's most rabid opponents. Indeed, from the perspective of those most worried about Francis, it seems that he is driven by the very impulses that drive those popularly derided as "social justice warriors" in their "neo-Marxist" fight for truth and justice. For many Francis critics, it is taken for granted that those are accurate descriptions for the important social dynamics at play in our world, and therefore, it is taken for granted that the bishop of Rome is "categorizable" in relation to those very dynamics—either for or against millennial "social justice warriors" (SJWs) and the boomer Woodstock idealists.<sup>2</sup> Francis is indeed dismissed as an ally of today's "SJWs" by many of North American Catholicism's ardent defenders of orthodoxy, who likewise take it for granted that this is a legitimate label for progressives and not just a polemical slur at the ready in the auto-suggest ammo magazine of online conservative social commentators. Francis sounds like one of these radical leftist democratic socialists and Black Lives Matter activists, or like one of their boomer predecessors at Woodstock, according to the categories appealed to on a popular level on the "conservative" side of the culture wars. For much of his papacy, Francis has been portrayed by both sides of the culture wars as something of a Bernie Sanders of Rome. And depending on whether Bernie is a symbol of progress or regress, Francis, too, is a symbol of the same. During his first presidential campaign (for the 2016 election), Bernie even found it expedient to make regular appeal to the figure of Francis, and made a point of shaking his hand in the Vatican during the height of the campaign season. And that's what worries the "conservative" culture warriors. Francis seems a little too cozy with the left.

What is needed is a more serious and attentive theological engagement of Francis's teaching in direct interaction with that of JP2 and B16, in view of the thoughtful concerns of Francis's sharpest critics. It is the aim of this book to begin taking some steps toward meeting that need. This student in the back row of Reno's class raises his hand to speak, concerned that many of his classmates are ill-equipped to receive—in the message of Francis—the best transmission on offer of the JP2-B16

2. See Reno, "Failing Papacy," para. 12.

message into this present cultural moment. This student's classmates are ill-equipped to receive a message that he thinks is very important for us to be hearing at this moment in history, a message that stands up boldly against the forces of technocracy, relativism, and the commercial logic.<sup>3</sup>

I'm making a distinction here between my *conversation partners* (represented primarily by Professor Reno) on the one hand and my *audience* on the other, my fellow "classmates" in the lecture hall of North American Catholicism, listening in, as it were, as I respond to the professor's commentary on the current pontificate. It is for this audience of faithful Catholics who are ambivalent about Francis that I want to articulate the theological social vision at the core of the papacies of JP2, Benedict, and Francis, and which, when identified, brings to light the profundity of the message of the Francis pontificate.

My audience for this book, whom, as I have said, I envision as "classmates" listening in on my response to Professor Reno, are devoted Catholics who have a beautiful culturally formed "instinct" for sexual chastity, formed as they have been by JP2's theology of the body. Their hearts have been formed to cherish various key aspects of the message of JP2. These young Catholics have an innate fidelity to B16, given his obvious connection and continuity with JP2. They are now left with very little to say about Francis, with an ambivalence toward him, with a big question mark regarding this papacy, and lacking an appetite for the culture wars and for the spats in the press and on online platforms. They are unequipped to navigate the varying claims about the meaning and message of this pontificate. They feel the bite of an aggressive anti-Christian culture, and they want a pontiff who stands up for the truth of the faith in the face of aggressive secularization.

A primary question for this student in Reno's "course" on Catholicism and society today is whether the content of Francis's message is to be dismissed as strung-together dated clichés from the seventies,<sup>4</sup> contribut-

3. As Benedict states, "Economic activity cannot solve all social problems through the simple application of *commercial logic*." Economic activity, Benedict insists, "needs to be *directed towards the pursuit of the common good*, for which the political community in particular must also take responsibility . . . [G]rave imbalances are produced when economic action conceived merely as an engine for wealth creation, is detached from political action" (CV, sec. 36). Emphasis in quotes are original, unless indicated otherwise.

4. See Reno, "Francis Stands Firm," para. 4, where Reno identifies in JP2 and Benedict the same weakness for dialogue that characterizes Francis. For Reno's take on why Francis's appeals to dialogue and bridge-building are untimely, see also Reno,

ing to a process of liberalization and secularization in the Church by way of a confusing refusal of precision (like the project of the loosey-goosey rule-breaking Jesuits at Creighton University with whom Reno has come to associate Francis),<sup>5</sup> or if Francis's message is to be embraced as belonging to the same genre of robustly orthodox prophetic social criticism proper to JP2 and B16.<sup>6</sup> To which intellectual family tree does Francis's message belong? Reno associates Francis's message with the former, while his student in the back row associates it with the latter. Part of what I'm hoping readers of this book will come to see is that connecting Francis with the two previous popes gets him right in a way that connecting him with loosey-goosey liberalizers gets him wrong.

If we take it for granted that JP2 and B16 more or less had an alliance with the cause of the religious right in North America, and if the religious right is under fire in the Francis pontificate, then we take it for granted that Francis is an enemy of the very causes for which JP2 and B16 fought. This is a taken-for-granted story line with which many of my Catholic classmates are familiar. It's precisely this story line that I seek to deconstruct in this book, and in opposition to which I seek to tell the narrative in an alternative manner, in a manner truer to the categories that matter to the Church's social doctrine. In the assessment of some of my classmates, however, the story of the popes since the opening of Vatican II can be told in the following way: we had a Democrat in the Chair of Peter in the person of John XXIII, followed by the Republican Paul VI (whose Republican platform was particularly clear in his preemptive strike against the HHS mandate in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*), followed by a movie star Republican JP2 (who with Ronald Reagan smashed the left, the communist regime, and the pro-choice caucus in one fell swoop), followed by the alt-right Republican B16, who in turn was followed by the return of the Democratic Party—with a socialistic vengeance!—to the Throne of Saint Peter in the person of Jorge Bergoglio.

Associating John XXIII and Francis with the Left in today's culture wars and Paul VI, JP2, and B16 with the Right is a caricature of what I take to be a popular narrative to which many of my *classmates* are susceptible, not the professor. But Reno is not clarifying for my classmates the distinction between the wars fought between Left and Right on the

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"Building Bridges," para. 4, and Reno, "Crisis of Solidarity," para. 2.

5. See Reno, "Failing Papacy," para. 10, for the ambiguous "pastoral approach" of the Jesuits whom Reno knew at Creighton.

6. See Reno, "Francis's Improv Theology," para. 10.

one hand and, on the other hand, the war that John XXIII, Paul VI, JP2, B16, and Francis have each been fighting together as a singular force, joined as they are against a common opposition. And for what are these warriors fighting, from the perspective of Reno's back-row student? And against what do they stand in opposition? They're fighting on behalf of *cosmic chastity* over and against the *technocratic lust* that reigns supreme in society today.

This book arises from the conviction that the ways in which JP2 and B16 were confused as allies with American conservatism is as misleading, unclear, and confusing as any misapprehension of Francis's orthodoxy. As I don't have a stake in reacting against a liberal Catholicism that is dying out anyway, the bigger threat, in my view, sociologically, for the North American Church, is that we fall into a right-wing tribalism—and I love that Francis resists precisely that, all the while offering a viable and robustly Catholic alternative to the liberal and conservative sides of the culture wars.

Reno, highly critical of Francis, has called for a redemption of hints and suggestions of a cogent argument in the Francis message.<sup>7</sup> I reappropriate Reno's call as a call for me to draw out or highlight what I take to be the underlying rationale of the Francis message. That underlying rationale is strikingly similar to that of the two previous popes, and I'm surprised that Reno is missing it. This one student of Reno is in fact inspired by Francis's call and teaching, and it is the aim of this book to draw out what inspires me, and to identify what I hope Reno and my classmates don't miss in the Francis message. But as things stand, I think Reno is missing it, and is telling the Francis story in a false and misleading manner.

The Francis story as I perceive it and as I tell it in these pages is a story of proclaiming the message of cosmic chastity. "Cosmic chastity" is a name I assign to a theological perspective to which Francis subscribes and which precedes him. In accordance with this all-encompassing theology of creation-as-gift, if creaturely existence means existence-as-gift (mirroring the trinitarian interpersonal Existence-as-Gift), then my relationship to the gift and the dignity inherent to the gift has to be safeguarded by chastity, so as to honor the meaning of creaturely existence in relation to the Creator, and so as not to dishonor the meaning

7. Reno identifies a need for theologians to "apply themselves to redeem the hints and suggestions of a cogent argument" in *LS* specifically (Reno, "Weakness of *Laudato Si*," para. 30).

of creaturely existence, and thereby dishonor the Creator. Technocratic unchastity, or lust, refers to a posture that does not safeguard the dignity of creation-as-gift. Such unchastity, or lust, expresses itself across every sector of social life. It is precisely an all-encompassing technocratic *lust* that JP2, Benedict, and Francis have together opposed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Cosmic chastity calls us to overcome what is derived from what JP2 refers to as *lust in its three forms*.<sup>8</sup> That is, cosmic chastity stands over and against the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life. A chastity that is cosmic, I propose, can be spoken of in terms of *chastity in its three forms*—chastity of the eyes, chastity of the flesh, and the humility of life, by which I mean a posture of love informed by an understanding of the truth of the meaning of our own creaturely status in relation to the Creator and in relation to the rest of creation. Cosmic chastity, i.e., chastity in its three forms, stands in corollary distinction from lust in its three forms. The posture of chaste love is the posture proper to the true, just, and loving humility of grateful creatures who know themselves to be the recipients of the gifts of the Creator who bestows gifts upon us in utter gratuity. The call to cosmic chastity in society is a call to overcome, in particular, aspects of human behavior arising from lust in its three forms as lust in its three forms manifests itself by way of what Pope Francis calls *the technocratic paradigm*. The technocratic paradigm fuels lust, and lust fuels the technocratic paradigm. Cosmic chastity, on the other hand, gets at the splendor of truth as perceived in every aspect of life in the light of the gospel.<sup>9</sup>

8. TOB, 10.29.1980. This *L'Osservatore Romano* English translation of the Italian word *concupiscenza* as “lust” is translated by Waldstein as “concupiscence.” Whereas Waldstein, for good reason, establishes a technical distinction between concupiscence and lust, for the purposes of this book I use the word “lust” more broadly in reference to both the notion of *concupiscenza* as well as the notion of *lussuria* and *lussurioso* (Waldstein consistently translates the latter two words as “lust”). For an explanation of Waldstein’s nuanced translation of these words in comparison with the *L'Osservatore* translation, see Waldstein, introduction to *Man and Woman*, 13. “Lust in its three forms” is translated by Waldstein as “*the threefold concupiscence*” (MW, 46:1).

9. My use of the word “chastity” here is akin to that of Walker and Caldecott. Walker explains Caldecott’s contextual understanding of chastity thus: “By setting chastity within the solemn play of conjugal communion, Caldecott recovers the true splendor of sexual purity” (Walker, foreword to *Not as the World Gives*, xvi). For Caldecott, Walker explains, “chastity . . . both shapes and reflects the luminous pattern of all truly human polity” (Walker, foreword to *Not as the World Gives*, xvi). For Caldecott, “personal purity, social justice, and worship coinhere” (Walker, foreword to *Not as the World Gives*, xvi).

Presenting a snapshot of Catholic social teaching as articulated by the papal trio is the fundamental goal of this book. It is my hope that the theologically rooted social vision promoted by the papal trio will find a more prominent place in the hearts of some of my fellow “JP2 Catholics” who read this book, as it has begun to find a more prominent place within my own heart, thanks to the papal trio’s teaching. This book, then, can be conceived of as an introduction to Catholic social teaching at large, as it draws upon JP2, Benedict, and Francis as primary sources for presenting that teaching, by way of engaging some of their encyclicals, exhortations, books, homilies, audiences, addresses, and interviews.

This book arises from a conviction that the JP2-B16 social message is inherently and fundamentally an *ecological* message. The ecological context of every facet of JP2’s and B16’s message is something we’re not paying enough attention to in North America, I think. And this is a big part of why we’re not perceiving what Francis is fundamentally up to in his pontificate. The real social project of the Francis pontificate, I contend, is to present the Christian moral vision with the cosmic backdrop of a theology of creation, as JP2 and Benedict had done. This theology of creation, we shall see, is integral to an eschatology, cosmology, and anthropology to which the Church testifies “in order to help people to live their lives in the dimension of authentic meaning,” as we shall explore in the coming pages (to reappropriate Renato Martino’s description of the aim of articulating the Church’s social teaching).<sup>10</sup> This holistic theology of creation demands of us a posture of *cosmic chastity*, a posture whose meaning will become clearer as we engage the social vision of the papal trio. It’s a vision that includes within its purview the demands of truth, justice, and love. Central to this posture of cosmic chastity is a posture that honors the dignity of the human person, the dignity of humanity as a whole, and the dignity of creation at large, by way of adhering to the demands of truth, which include the demands of justice and love.

The vision of cosmic chastity espoused by Francis and the two previous popes is an extension of JP2’s theology of the body to the whole material creation. JP2 provides a grammar for this extension in his all-encompassing theology of creation-as-gift, which serves as the cosmic backdrop for his anthropology and theology of the human body. A theology of creation is the presupposed context for a theological anthropology of the human body and sexuality.

10. Martino and Crepaldi, “Presentation,” para. 3.



It is in the context of reverence proper to an authentic integral ecology that JP2 spoke of environmental stewardship. He consistently spoke of environmental stewardship in terms of the truth of the meaning of creation, and in terms of the imperative of just and charitable relations among human beings and on the part of humanity in relation to the cosmos at large. In his “Meditation on Givenness,” JP2 observes that

nowadays, we often speak of “ecology,” i.e., concern for the natural environment. The foundational basis for such ecology, however, is the mystery of creation, which is a great and incessant stream of giving all the goods of the cosmos to man—both those goods he encounters directly as well as those he only discovers through research and experiments utilizing the various methods of science. Man knows more and more about the riches of the cosmos, but at the same time he sometimes fails to recognize that these come from the hand of the Creator. However, there are times when all men, even nonbelievers, glimpse the truth of the givenness of creation and begin to pray, to acknowledge that all is a gift from God.<sup>11</sup>

The *truth of the givenness of creation* is the fundamental truth of cosmic chastity, at the center of the ethos, spirituality, and theology of cosmic chastity. The recognition of this truth is a recognition required for the development of an ethos of cosmic chastity in human hearts and in the heart of society. The truth of the givenness of creation is the foundational truth underlying an ethos of chastity, and is very much the underlying truth for an anthropology and ethos of sexual chastity in particular, which is at the heart of a theological ecology. This truth of the givenness of creation is what demands of us an ethos of chaste love. In what I’m calling JP2’s critique of technocratic lust, he lamented the tendency of members of society today “to see no other meaning in their natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption”<sup>12</sup>—and this applies to human bodies, to the fruits of the land, to the work of our hands, and to every facet of the earth’s ecosystems and the universe at large. JP2’s “call for a global ecological conversion”<sup>13</sup> is based upon his theology of creation, and upon his understanding of humanity within creation. For JP2, our relationship with the rest of the cosmos must be determined by an anthropology and cosmology rooted in truth.

11. JP2, “Meditation on Givenness,” 872–73.

12. *RH*, sec. 15; quoted in *LS*, sec. 5.

13. *LS*, sec. 5, citing JP2, “God Made Man,” sec. 4.