Care for the poor, Laudato si' and the Catholic education mission. A philosophical reimagination.

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Abstract

The Papal document *Laudato, si',* is, rightly associated with a call to protect the planet and serve the poor. Yet, it will be argued, it is primarily a call for interdependency and care, proper to the tradition of almsgiving in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae,* and, as such, it builds on, and is partly dependent on, the distinctive Catholic view of education, contributing to a deeply-held sense of inter-connectedness and 'catholicity'. Drawing on the twin identities of the author as a Catholic school leader and also as philosopher, this paper reads *Laudato si'* through the lens of the Church's most recent document on Catholic education, *The Identity of the Catholic School,* to reveal the significance of *mattering,* beginning with an awareness of *self,* the experience of *love* and the awareness of *the other*. In assessing *the* other and the idea of *othering* we suggest the need to ensure the young are formed with an alertness to the danger of falling into a 'Master-Slave' mentality with respect to 'charity' and, instead, embrace the traditional Catholic understanding of (alms-) giving, rooted not in personal prestige or emotion, but in service to justice.

Introduction

L*audato si'* (Francis, Pope 2015, henceforward, LS) challenges us to reconsider our relationships with the environment, with each other, and, ultimately with God. Pope Francis addresses "every person living on this planet" (LS, 3), calling for an inclusive dialogue. In its key three themes, it first identifies creation as a gift that is, in its very being, meant for sharing; the world is a gift which we have freely received and must share with others, [such that] ... solidarity is not optional but is, rather, a basic question of justice" (LS, 159). LS has captured the imagination of the young not least because 'care for the planet' has become a powerful meme in a meme-ridden popular culture, driven – though also fragmented by – instant, if often wholly inadequate, 'communication'. In seeking to deconstruct from whence comes the desire to *help the poor*, little has been written on the direct relationship with Catholic education. Yet, as will be argued, the proper desire to *give* requires, to meet the integrity of LS, not a random emotional response, but a deep-seated, systematic belief that one's identity and that of the other is inextricably linked through a fabric of commonality, predicated on dignity and, for the Christian at least, divinely mandated.

Returning to Aquinas is instructive, as is the Church's latest pronouncement on Catholic education, *The Identity of the Catholic School* (2022), henceforth ICS.

In illustrating the limitations, if not dangers, of the alternative, more emotionally based or media-driven campaigns, we will employ the notion of *othering* as a dramatic illustration of how, using Hegel's image, the 'objects' of charity can be stripped of their humanity through the very act of giving, akin to Hegel's 'Master-Slave'. Conversely, and here we will see the relevance to education, if giving becomes the application of emotion to an object – the recipient / agency – as against the person, this can have the effect of inculcating, in the young, the belief that generosity not only can, but *should*, be 'contracted out', with the resulting effect of further *othering*, random, emotion-driven charitable action and the loss of the ancient Christian belief that giving to the poor is intrinsic, indeed *a priori*,[1] to the Christian life.

1. LS, ICS, and other scholarship: Service to the poor as a function of self-identity and a place in a community

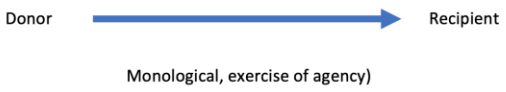
Our unique role, given to us by God, is primarily that as stewards rather than owners (see LS, 67), where each person is given freedom that comes with a responsibility (i.e. a duty) of "caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving" (LS, 67). Once again, the idea of care – which begins with the experience of the (value of) interdependence over independence, is privileged.

Clearly, motivations for charitable activity can be varied. Durkheim, for instance, argued that social bonds in intermediary groups such as the family, the village, religion, and politics, create feelings of belonging (Durkheim, 1897). Homans and Gouldner studied reciprocity in social interactions at the micro-level (Homans, 1958; Gouldner, 1960). Many social relations can be seen as a form of direct or indirect exchange.

In LS, however, a line of sight is drawn from the recipient, through the action to the very identity of the person *qua* benefactor/donor. God's loving plan involves a particular role for human persons, who possess a "uniqueness which transcends the sphere of physics and biology" (LS, 81), as "each of us has his or her own personal identity and is capable of entering into dialogue with others and with God himself" (LS, 81), giving each human person a certain "pre-eminence" in creation, with

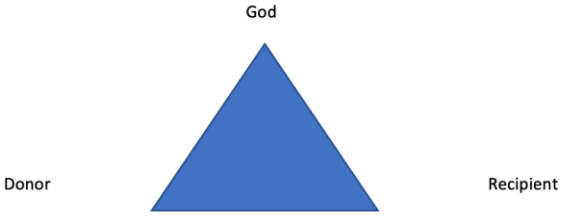
[1] *A priori*, in the sense that the idea of the Christian life contains within it, axiomatically, the idea of giving to those who need it responsibly, but as a normal and ongoing part of life.

a basic and fundamental dignity "which all human beings share in equal measure" (LS, 90). It is easy to skip over the relationship with God which is co-extensive with the act of giving, but this triangle immediately disrupts a linear, secular model to create a unity – a true dialogical approach.



Monological, exercise of agency)

Fig. 1



Dialogical, disrupted, continuous, multiple agencies

Fig. 2

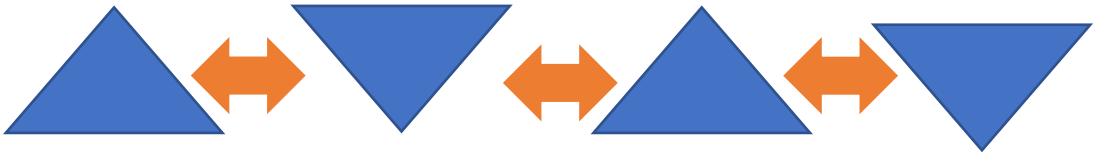


Fig.3 The authentic Christian life, 'tessellated' towards interconnectedness

(Uttley, 2022)

2. <u>Parent as first educator in *mattering* and (Catholic) school as educator in *others mattering.*</u>

But where is an *aliveness* to one's responsibilities, before God, to the other person, to come from without education, first from the parent[2] and second from Catholic education itself which is, at its heart, part of the Church's mission to draw together and evangelise? '[S]chools cannot be

[2] ICS reminds us of the primacy of the parent in Catholic education, ICS42

reduced to mere philanthropic work aimed at responding to a social need, but represents an essential part of her identity and mission' (ICS, 10).

Of course, at the level of the individual – believing Catholic or otherwise -this is highly dependent on the experience in the home when we first learn that 'we matter' – the reflexive experience of care[3]. The experience of love is an essential factor that stimulates personal development and takes on particular dimensions in the scope of the love of child and parent in the child-raising interaction. For Dowling, writing on child development:

> 'After about 18 months old a toddler will have a pretty good idea that the reflection shown in a mirror is a representation of herself. Shortly after that an in fact will move from…' (their first name} 'do it' to 'I do it'. This heralds the early recognition of self. And even before that, babies will build a picture of themselves from the way in which they are regarded and treated, particularly by those people who are closest to them. Young babies will start to form this picture from their mothers, whose loving acceptance of them is the first signal that they are a person who matters." (Dowling, M. 2014:10).

ICS identifies what it calls a culture of care as a core element in an authentic Catholic education. This ability to adapt finds its *raison d'être* in the culture of care. It is born within the *family*, the natural and fundamental nucleus of society, in which we learn how to live and relate to others in a spirit of mutual respect…[T] he family relationship extends to educational institutions, which are called upon:

> to pass on a system of values based on the recognition of the dignity of each person, each linguistic, ethnic and religious community and each people, as well as the fundamental rights arising from that recognition. …(ICS, 36).

[3] With due regard to the significant number of children whose experience of home life is deficient in this regard

This introduces the idea which could be termed orbits of care; first that learnt at home, and then, perhaps for the first time ever, and crucially for LS, the orbit extends to what I call the entitled unknown – those we first meet at school to whom we owe care based on their inalienable dignity before God.

Pedagogically, therefore we have

[1] teaching, over time, that there is an *I* [baby in family]

[2] teaching that *I* matter, because my parent/carer affirms this, in love, again over time [young child in family]

[3] I learn – over time - interdependence and mutuality in the school where I am no longer the centre of attention and am meeting others entitled to my care [growing child in school]

[4] I learn, over time, that this care extends to *entitled others* – who are *all* who need help and who I can reasonably be expected to help with due regard to the resource needs of myself and those reliant on me [school and beyond].

What is significant throughout is 'over time'. Not an object to be (cognitively) grasped at once and for all time, but rather a textured constitution of our humanity which, in Aristotelian terms, inculcates the traits, attitudes and relationships which enable persons to live a good life. (James, D., 1986:1).

3. <u>Care as tending to justice – LS, ICS insights from Aquinas (henceforth S.T.)</u>

So, in recognising the nature of 'mattering' – of being the object of care - from one's first experience, the pedagogical chain moves to providing for the 'other' and Aquinas is clear that 'almsgiving is an act of justice and not of charity' (S.T. I-II Q32 Art. 2 Obj. 2). Having clearly established that alms-giving is not a 'nice to do' but is, rather, intrinsic with our Christian identity, Aquinas goes further, to ensure we see almsgiving as deeply embedded in the practice of faith

where he says: ''almsgiving is offering a sacrifice to God…not an act of charity but of religion". (ibid. Obj. 3). It is intrinsic and cannot be left to others to do.

The word alms can be traced back to the Greek word λεημοσύνη (pity), or mercy (S.T. I-II Q.32 Art. 2 Obj. 3). This word is found in the Septuagint, a fact of importance since it is especially in scripture that the divine perspective on alms can be seen. From this point of view, the Christian is led to reflect on his duties in regard to those less favoured than himself by virtue of his interconnectedness, referencing ICS 36, and especially on the responsibilities of his Christian stewardship over material goods, directly linking to LS 67.

Aquinas held, with Aristotle, and against individualism, that humans are essentially and ideally social creatures (Q. 96 Art.4) St. Thomas, most critically, was willing, on the one hand, to agree with Aristotle that reason alone can guide us in our relations with each other, both ethical and political, (S.T. I-II 91 art. 4 ,) even as he insisted, on the other hand, that, unaided, it could not bring us to a saving knowledge of God. (S.T. *1 id. Q.* I art. 1, *in* 1 basic writings, *supra* note 28, at 6. This relationship with God involves and requires (what I call) a culture of almsgiving.

Aquinas is clear that ownership exists and is a good, on the understanding that our use of what we own must have clear and immediate regard for how we *steward* our excess. (S.T. I-II Q. 32,Art. 6). Private ownership is often seen as problematic by a secular analysis of Catholic Social Teaching, as it ignores that fact that the principal victims of governmental systems, where private ownership is not recognised are, often, the poor themselves – not the rich who can hedge, offset, flee and so on (Booth, P. 2022).

Aquinas sees almsgiving as providing relief for our neighbour, (S.Y. I-II Q. 23 Art. 2) with the Christian understanding that neighbour is not limited to close geography or kinship. Here is a fundamental way LS reaches beyond 'charitable giving' in its requirement that, to give in the Christian tradition is to scope in the widest (most Catholic) sense, who we define by *our neighbour.* Certainly where the recipient has real need that cannot be alleviated locally – hence a nod towards what would become subsidiarity in the tradition of Catholic social teaching (Leo XIII, Pope, 1892:101-2) . Here, again, is a line of sight between LS16 and ICS36: we need the experience of mattering, then of caring for those who love us, then of caring for the 'entitled other'.

Significantly, Aquinas uses the expression "ransom of captives" to describe helping another who is suffering from an extrinsic threat) S/T. I-II Q.32 Art. 2 Reply Obj. 2). This eloquently illustrates the scope of the Christian responsibility to the poor, in equating poverty as captivity (slavery?) and,

by implication, our complicity, or acquiescence, should we allow *any* of it to continue when we have the facility to help and others, more closely associated, are unable or unwilling to do so.

Alms giving is also not an added extra, from the excess one enjoys, nor a one-time gesture, but is hardwired into the Christian vocation. In quoting 1John 3:18 “Let us not love in word, not in tongue, but in deed, and in truth. And in order to be a person’s well-wisher and well-doer, we ought to succour his needs; this is done by almsgiving. Therefore, almsgiving is a matter of precept.” (S.T. I-II Q32 Art. 5).

There is no shortage of scriptural evidence that alms giving is good for the donor, for example”

"Prayer is good with fasting and alms more than to lay up treasures of gold, for alms delivers from death, and the same is that which purges away sin, and makes to find mercy and life everlasting" (Tb 12.8–9).

At the same time, Aquinas points out that almsgiving as detached *pro bono* or even, to use a modern notion, corporate social responsibility *may* fall foul of 1 Corinthians 13:3, ‘If I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor…and have not charity, if profits me nothing’ [Pt II-II Q. 32 Art 1]. This would also pick up on those who offset tax liabilities against donations, though it remains a fair comeback from such donors to say *surely better than nothing*.

The notion that, in rendering grace to the donor, this somehow diminishes its authenticity, is challenged by Paul. Human alms become a divine revelation since God both inspires the good action and is glorified by it.

> He … will increase the growth of the fruits of your justice that, being enriched in all things, you may contribute with simplicity of heart, and thus through us evoke thanksgiving to God; for the administration of this service not only supplies the wants of the saints, but overflows also in much gratitude to the Lord. The evidence furnished by this service makes them glorify God for your obedient profession of Christ's gospel and for the sincere generosity of your contributions to them and to all; while they themselves, in their prayers for you, yearn for you, because of the excellent grace God has given you (2 Cor 9.11–14).

The key expression here is “makes them glorify *God*” (my italics) Therefore, alms giving is inextricably linked to the interior life, not in terms of status or approbation, but to one’s own human flourishing and to the ongoing relationship with the divine.

The second theme of LS builds on sharing to identify the world as intrinsically connected (LS16), but suffering where these connections are broken, requiring that "strategies for a solution [to our complex crisis] demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded and at the same time protecting nature" (LS, 139). Crucially, "creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other" (LS, 86). Again, ICS is instructive:

> The culture of care becomes the compass at local and international level to form people dedicated to patient listening, constructive dialogue and mutual understanding …""…In this way, a… "fabric of relationships for the sake of a humanity capable of speaking the language of fraternity (ICS, 36).

Again, it is easy to see 'dialogue' and 'fraternity' as supplements, as desirable manifestations or add-ons which we would hope to see manifested in the Christian. What is clear, however, is the Church, (and Aquinas), regard these, essentially, as *a priori* elements of the Christian life, axiomatically deductive from what it is to be Christian. So, care is seen as cultural (lived, prior to but co-extensive with, reason) over and above any (deontological) *duty of care*; as grounded in our interdependence as human beings created by God. As cultural and fabric-like, therefore, care is not the preserve of reason but is, to an extent, in what I term the 'muscle memory' of those formed (educated) within principles of Christian interdependence. This is in no way to undermine the importance of the (deontological) *duty* of care, which lies at the heart of our jurisprudence as much as it does our State-level programmes of giving *ad hoc* or sustainable aid – but it reminds us that such (Statal) duties are necessary but not sufficient for the Christian.

The final theme of LS is a call for conversion: "it is we human beings above all who need to change" (LS, 202), arguing that "the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion" (LS, 217). Pope Francis identifies the main cause of our social and environmental problems as our lack of living according to this connectedness, arguing that "human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour, and with the earth itself, [where each of] these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us" (LS, 66). The form of life is not limited to self and other but requires implicit social capital. "social capital: the network of relationships of trust, dependability, and respect for rules, all of which are indispensable for any form of civil coexistence" (LS, 128). As the diagram (page 3) illustrated, the ability to engage as humans formed as children of God begins (represented by the

tessellating triangles) with another *a priori* – namely the in-built facility towards engaging with the other which, in faith, reaches its zenith in communion.

Again, stressing interdependence, any conversion should include a social change or "community conversion" (LS, 219), in order to facilitate a different social awareness that can only be achieved within a likeminded community. Once again, cross referring to ICS, we can see how the conversion might look in practice:

> At the same time, education unleashes an *ecological movement*, since it contributes to the recovery of different levels of balance: inner balance with oneself, solidarity with others, natural balance with all living beings, spiritual balance with God. It also gives rise to an important *inclusive movement.* Inclusion, which "is an integral part of the Christian salvific message", is not only a property, but also a method of education that brings the excluded and vulnerable closer. Through it, education nurtures a *peace-making movement* that generates harmony and peace[45] (ICS, 32).

This reading of these two important, and recent Church documents has located a relationship with the poor [1] in the lived experience of *care* from the family home [2] in the formation in interdependence that is the experience of school with the encounter with the *entitled other* [3] a view of solidarity which sets a default trajectory towards inclusion, collaboration and cohesion, as against isolation and competitiveness.

4. *Othering*

In his writing, Francis is speaking the diametric opposite of the approach known as *Othering*, which is worth considering by way of counterfactual illumination.

Othering is the construction and identification of the self/group and the other/group in mutual, unequal opposition by attributing relative inferiority and/or radical alienness to the other. The idea spread from feminist theory and post-colonial studies to other areas of the humanities and social sciences but is rooted in Hegel's dialectic of identification and distantiation in the encounter of the self with some other in his "Master-Slave dialectic" (Hegel, G.W.F. 1998:121).

The passage describes, in narrative form, the development of self-consciousness as such in an encounter between what are two distinct, self-conscious beings. The essence of the dialectic is the movement or motion of recognizing, in which the two self-consciousnesses are constituted in being each recognized as self-conscious by the other. This movement, *in extremis,* takes the form of a "struggle to the death" in which one masters [*beherrscht*] the other, only to find that such lordship makes the very recognition he had sought impossible, since the other, in this state, is not free to offer it.

The wider significance is the need, in this analysis, to identify the other, and to self-identify, in a state of power asymmetry, notwithstanding that it may lead to a sub-optimal outcome (the non-availability of the slave/servant). However, less extreme than destroying the 'slave/servant' is eroding all elements of her identity. Now while it may seem extreme to apply this to a form of charitable giving, commentators such as Hanson remind us of the dangers within:

> Modern elite charity is class-centred and exclusionary, employing charitable exchange ritual, like the primitive potlatch, for structured loss and exchange, both affirming and concealing status and power, obfuscating yet illuminating privilege. Traditional models of charitable giving are often Eurocentric and monocultural, employing a market model-based 'exchange theory' assuming that giving is a series of dyadic, reciprocated 'purchases' by donors seeking maximum utility. Looking at modern charitable giving as a 'total social fact' (Mauss) we can detect patterns behind elite charitable giving that make seeming relinquishment of wealth a declaration of power. Non-profits are embedded in these dynamics as the elite gift economy expresses itself through modern charitable giving (Hanson, J. 2015:501).

An extreme and pessimistic analysis or not, Hanson alerts us to the asymmetric nature of 'charity' such that the contrast with Aquinas and Francis could not be starker. Whereas the former is a one-way direction of asymmetric power from one to the other, accruing clearly defined benefit to the donor as a condition precedent to reception by the recipient, the latter emphasises giving as part of (my expression) the very respiratory system of the Christian life. As justice manifest; as prayer in action.

This paper has positioned the centrality of *caring for the other* as not a desirable *attribute* for a Christian, but, in fact, *a priori* to the ontology of the Christian. The development of a fabric of

'mattering' which starts with my sense of 'me' and extends, through (Catholic) education, to the known other, and, thereafter, unknown other, is by no means automatic and begins, ideally, on the parent's lap. In reaching out to the other this is both an act of justice *and* religion, involving the dialogical triangle of donor, God and recipient as shorthand for a relationship of perfect justice and dignity. This is brought into relief when set against the idea known as 'othering' which, though often expressed in dramatic terms such as Master-Slave, or used to explain the 'rationale' for the atrocities such as the Holocaust, is, in fact, a reality to which we call, inadvertently or otherwise, contribute. Objectifying the poor as a concept, rather than people is one way, contracting out charitable purposes to avoid being genuinely aligned with the experience of the poor is another .

Conclusion

That LS is enriched by and enriches ICS should come as no surprise in that the Catholic anthropology which renders LS both possible, but also desirable, is one grounded in the kind of educational formation which has been, and continues to be at the heart of the Church's mission. LS is powerful in that it calls out the clear and present dangers facing the planet and asks for action, not based on party or fringe politics, not based on hatred, but from a place of faith, love and goodwill. But the other power of LS is that it is evangelical. It speaks to those of no faith, to those who believe and yet do not belong and to everyone in between.

LS, as a tool of evangelism, renders the Gospel alive and vibrant to young people who are caught up in the white noise of competing voices as they attempt to navigate the echo chambers of social media, the vitriol of weaponised relativism and the uncertainties associated with everyday 'growing up'. Equally, adults too, are caught up in the self-preserving exercise of power which includes the contracting-out of generosity and – in the United Kingdom at least – a growing fear of, and antagonism towards – the other, manifest in discourses around migrancy.

To return to our faith, we are called to *act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly.* LS reminds us that tomorrow is too late – it must be now; ICS reminds us that a proper relationship with the poor and marginalised begins with the formation of the young.

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Biographical notes

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