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## ANTHROPOLOGICAL ERRORS AS A THREAT TO MARRIAGE ACCORDING TO POPE FRANCIS

**Abstract.** Like St. John Paul II, Pope Francis identifies particular anthropological errors in his teaching that pose threats to marriage and to the family which it founds. This paper identifies and briefly examines three: the individualism which produces a “throwaway culture,” Pelagianism, and Gnosticism. These errors highlighted by Pope Francis parallel important aspects of the teaching of Saint Augustine of Hippo.

**Keywords:** throwaway culture; individualism; city of man; city of God; pelagianism; indissolubility; gnosticism; manicheanism; gender ideology; culture of the ephemeral.

When one hears the topic of anthropological errors which pose a threat to the family, one thinks immediately of the long and fruitful pontificate of Pope St. John Paul II. After all, “the pope of the family,”<sup>1</sup> might just as easily be known as the pope of the human person, given that the dignity of the human person and threats to that dignity were the lifelong subject of his study. Less easily perceived and less appreciated is the way that Pope Francis too identifies significant anthropological distortions as threats to marriage and the family. Some of these errors identified by the Holy Father are clearly stated and obvious; others are more subtle. This paper cannot hope to offer an exhaustive list of such errors or anything approaching of full analysis of any one of them, but it will briefly identify three of the most

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<sup>1</sup> This title was applied to him by Pope Francis at the mass celebrating the canonization of John XXIII and John Paul II. See “Homily of Pope Francis for the Holy Mass and Rite of Canonization for Blesseds John XXIII and John Paul II, Holy See, accessed February 21, 2022, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140427\\_omelia-canonizzazioni.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140427_omelia-canonizzazioni.html).

evident and important. In particular, it will argue that Pope Francis highlights the dangers of individualism which leads to a “throwaway culture,” Pelagianism, and Gnosticism as anthropological threats to marriage and further that his diagnosis of them shows some interesting connections to the teaching of the *Doctor gratiae* Saint Augustine. This paper will treat each of these in turn, highlighting some of the parallels between the Holy Father and the bishop of Hippo.

### INDIVIDUALISM AND THE THROWAWAY CULTURE

In the first major document of his pontificate of which he was the primary author,<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis speaks of the crisis of the family assaulted by the error of individualism:

The family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds. In the case of the family, the weakening of these bonds is particularly serious because the family is the fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another; it is also the place where parents pass on the faith to their children. Marriage now tends to be viewed as a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, contemporary individualism is a solvent which atomizes social bonds, including that within the most basic of human communities. This destabilization of the family spells disaster for human society as the family is the primary engine of human socialization and Christian formation. Distorted by individualism, marriage becomes an extension of individually conceived happiness with no intrinsic form or permanence.

The further result of this individualistic assault on marriage and the family is what Pope Francis calls a “throwaway culture.”<sup>4</sup> In *Amoris Laetitia* he describes the impact such a culture on interpersonal relationships such as marriage:

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<sup>2</sup> This is to distinguish it from the 2013 Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei* which Pope Francis notes that Benedict XVI had almost completed a draft of before his retirement to which he added “a few contributions” of his own. See Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, no. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 66. All citations of magisterial documents are from the translation on the Holy See’s website unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> This term appears in *Evangelii Gaudium* in the context of a protest against an economy of exclusion: “Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a ‘throw away’ culture which is now spreading. It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be

Here I think, for example, of the speed with which people move from one affective relationship to another. They believe, along the lines of social networks, that love can be connected or disconnected at the whim of the consumer, and the relationship quickly ‘blocked’. I think too of the fears associated with permanent commitment . . . We treat affective relationships the way we treat material objects and the environment: everything is disposable; everyone uses and throws away, takes and breaks, exploits and squeezes to the last drop. Then, goodbye. Narcissism makes people incapable of looking beyond themselves, beyond their own desires and needs.<sup>5</sup>

Warped by a focus on self and a consumer culture, people view others as things to be discarded when they are no longer pleasing or useful. The most obvious and grotesque example of this is the killing of vulnerable human beings in direct abortion or euthanasia.<sup>6</sup> This mentality devastates both our relationships to human beings and to the natural world—our common home—in which we are called to exercise responsible stewardship.

This affirmation of the basic sociality of human beings founded upon the friendship of man and woman in the family and way in which it can be disrupted by vice has interesting parallels in the teaching of Augustine of Hippo. For Augustine, marriage is a basic form of human friendship and its flourishing is essential to the wider human community.<sup>7</sup> The flourishing of his sociality the family and the city in right relationships bears fruit in peace:

Peace between a mortal man and his Maker consists in ordered obedience, guided by faith, under God’s eternal law; peace between man and man consists in regulated fellowship. The peace of a home lies in the ordered harmony of authority and obedience between the members of a family living together. The peace of the political community is an ordered harmony of authority and obedience between citizens. The peace of the heavenly City lies in a perfectly ordered and harmonious communion of those who find their joy in God and in one another in God.<sup>8</sup>

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a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised — they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the ‘exploited’ but the outcast, the ‘leftovers’” (no. 53). For a deeper look at the economic implications of this idea in Pope Francis’ teaching see Charles Clark and Helen Alford, “The Throwaway Culture in the Economy of Exclusion: Pope Francis and Economists on Waste,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 78, no. 4 (2019): 973–1008. This idea is a recurrent theme in Pope Francis’ magisterium.

<sup>5</sup> Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no.39. Cf. Francis, *Laudato Si*, no. 22 and *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 18.

<sup>6</sup> On the parallels between Pope Francis’s description of the throwaway culture and John Paul II’s analysis of the culture of death see Pedro Gabriel, “A Throwaway Culture Is a Culture of Death,” *Catholic Outlook* (Nov. 4, 2020), <https://catholicoutlook.org/a-throwaway-culture-is-a-culture-of-death/>. For Pope Francis’s teaching as the basis for a consistent ethic of life see Charles Camosy, *Resisting Throwaway Culture: How a Consistent Life Ethic Can Unite a Fractured People* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> See Saint Augustine, *De bono conjugali*, 1.1.

<sup>8</sup> Saint Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 19.13. The translation is from *City of God*, trans. Gerald

In contrast, the inhabitants of the City of Man, driven by pride and self-love lack a shared conception of justice, mutual recognition of rights, and pursuit of the common good.<sup>9</sup> In other words, this City becomes subject to the warring interests of what we moderns have come to call individualism.

### PELAGIANISM

A more easily recognizable parallel emerges when we compare Pope Francis and Augustine in regard to the danger of Pelagianism. Among the Latin Fathers of the Church, Augustine clearly emerges as the opponent of Pelagius *par excellence*. In a lifetime of theological and pastoral work this group offered an opponent equal to his formidable intellectual gifts.<sup>10</sup> Having recounted his own tortuous path into the Faith of the Church in the *Confessions*, Augustine reacted in horror to the challenge posed by a teaching which in his view ignored the effects of the Fall and minimized the role of grace in the Christian life. Having himself only been liberated from the “chain” and the “bondage” forged by his own sinful habits by the liberating effect of God’s grace in the Milanese garden,<sup>11</sup> the misplaced optimism about human nature and volition demonstrated by Pelagius and his disciples struck at the very heart of the gospel:

if human nature were an evil thing, it would not have to be saved; if it had not in it any evil, it would not have to be saved. He, therefore, who contends that nature is not good, says that the Maker of the creature is not good; while he who will have it, that nature has no evil in it, deprives it in its corrupted condition of a merciful Saviour.<sup>12</sup>

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Walsh, S.J., Demetrius Zema, S.J., Grace Monahan, O.S.U., and Daniel Honan (New York: Image, 1958), 456.

<sup>9</sup> Saint Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 19.21; cf. 19.25. For a more complete look at the political implications of Augustine’s account of the two cities and their anthropological ground see Ben Holland, *Self and City in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), esp. 37–102.

<sup>10</sup> As Peter Brown puts it: “For the first time in his career as a bishop, he was confronted by opponents of the same calibre as himself, before an audience capable of judging a case on purely intellectual merits: [and quoting Augustine] ‘These points are raised by great and shrewd minds: it would be a confession of failure on my part, to avoid them by not mentioning them, and a sign of intellectual conceit, to pass over them as not worth mentioning.’” *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 346, quoting *Ep.* 186, v. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.5.10; cf. 8.12.29.

<sup>12</sup> Saint Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, 2.36. The translation is from the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers edition, translation by Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis and revised by Benjamin B. Warfield, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/15072.htm>.

In one succinct declaration, Augustine repels both Manichean and Pelagian claims on human nature. Human nature, even after the Fall, remains good, but wounded by sin and in need of the healing which only the grace of Christ can provide it.<sup>13</sup>

In his Apostolic Exhortation on the call to holiness in today's world, Pope Francis too draws our attention to the dangers of this ancient heresy. This false teaching sees the human will as the primary engine of our salvation. Drawing explicitly on Augustine, the Holy Father notes: "in this life human weaknesses are not healed completely and once for all by grace. In every case, as Saint Augustine taught, God commands you to do what you can and to ask for what you cannot, and indeed to pray to him humbly: 'Grant what you command, and command what you will.'"<sup>14</sup> As it was for Augustine, the virtue of humility is the key to authentic virtue and growth in the Christian life: "Only on the basis of God's gift, freely accepted and humbly received, can we cooperate by our own efforts in our progressive transformation."<sup>15</sup>

How does this error distort the understanding of marriage according to Pope Francis? To so elevate the human will as to make it the primary agent in the Christian life, is to lose sight of the fact that, "What allows married couples to remain united in marriage is a love of mutual self-giving sustained by the grace of Christ."<sup>16</sup> That is, grace empowers the couple to live out and approach the tasks constitutive of marriage which he outlines in *Amoris laetitia*: communication (nos. 136–141), working through conflict (no. 236), giving and receiving forgiveness (no. 104), raising children (nos. 260–267), supporting each other through the struggle of sickness or other crises (nos.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Saint Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 19.12; 19.13.

<sup>14</sup> Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 49. He here alludes to Augustine's *De natura et gratia* 43.50 and cites his *Confessions* 10.29.40. Peter Brown notes that this latter prayerful refrain was one of the things that shocked Pelagius in his reading of the *Confessions*. See *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, 173.

<sup>15</sup> Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 56. Compare this to Augustine's famous advice in *Letter 118* (to Dioscorus): "I wish you to submit with complete devotion, and to construct no other way for yourself of grasping and holding the truth than the way constructed by Him who, as God, saw how faltering were our steps. This way is first humility, second humility, third humility, and however often you should ask me I would say the same." The translation is from Augustine's *Letters* (83–130), trans. Wilfrid Parsons, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, vol. 18, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 282. Cf. Saint Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 19.21. The humility of Christ in his Passion is also the means by which God has defeated the pride of the devil. See *De civitate Dei*, 18.14.

<sup>16</sup> Francis, Angelus Message, October 7, 2018, Holy See, accessed February 21, 2022, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2018/documents/papa-francesco\\_angelus\\_20181007.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2018/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20181007.html).

232–238), or the challenges of growing old (cf. nos. 48, 191). Above all, it can cause a couple to believe that faithfulness in living out their vows depends only on their own effort. When human resources fall short—as they always do—the indissolubility of marriage then appears as a crushing law instead of a gift of grace enabled by the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the couple:

The indissolubility of marriage — ‘what God has joined together, let no man put asunder’ (Matthew 19:6) — should not be viewed as a ‘yoke’ imposed on humanity, but as a ‘gift’ granted to those who are joined in marriage... God’s indulgent love always accompanies our human journey, it heals and transforms hardened hearts, leading them back to the beginning through the way of the cross.<sup>17</sup>

This ascetic path trod by the couple in their life is ordered to making their mutual love an image and participation in divine love. This is the primary aim of the grace at work in Christian marriage: the “grace of the sacrament of marriage is intended before all else ‘to perfect the couple’s love’.”<sup>18</sup>

If the Church is a “field hospital” as Pope Francis described it in the famous interview at the outset of his pontificate,<sup>19</sup> the Christian family founded in the sacraments of baptism and marriage and nourished by the Eucharist is the “nearest hospital.”<sup>20</sup> Saint Augustine uses strikingly similar language: “Let us, the wounded, entreat the physician, let us be carried to the inn to be healed ... therefore Brothers, in this time the Church too, in which the wounded man is healed, is the inn of the traveler.”<sup>21</sup> Through the life of grace Christ communicated sacramentally, the Great Physician treats the wounds of sin and enables our healing and restoration.<sup>22</sup> This path of “pro-

<sup>17</sup> Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 62; cf. nos. 124, 221.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 89; quoting the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1641.

<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis stated: “The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. . . . And you have to start from the ground up.” See Anthony Spadaro, S.J., “A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis,” *America* (September 30, 2013), <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>.

<sup>20</sup> Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 321.

<sup>21</sup> Saint Augustine *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 41.13.2. The citation is from Saint Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 28–54*, trans. John W. Rettig (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 148–49.

<sup>22</sup> Augustine writes: “The Lord, though, like an experienced doctor, knew better what was going on in the sick man, than the sick man himself. Doctors do for the indispositions of bodies what the Lord can also do for the indisposition of souls.” *Serm.*, 2290. The citation is from *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Sermons III/6 (184–229Z)*, trans.

gressive restoration” is trod by all of the members of Christ’s body and is walked in a distinctive way by those married in the Lord.

### GNOSTICISM

The third anthropological error identified by Pope Francis is also one against which Saint Augustine did battle—Gnosticism. For the bishop of Hippo, the struggle was personal. After his conversion he bitterly regretted the nine years he had spent as a Manichean auditor and those he had led away from the Faith to embrace this error.<sup>23</sup> Some of his earliest polemical works were aimed against this heretical sect by way of settling some of this debt.<sup>24</sup> Even in his later works aimed at Pelagianism, the distortions of the Manichees were never far from his mind. As noted above, for him, the doctrines of original sin and priority of grace to human effort provided an orthodox means between the distortions of Gnosticism and the falsehoods of Pelagianism. The former claimed that nature and the body were corrupt; the latter claimed that they were undamaged by the Fall.

Pope Francis too sees a connection between these ancient distortions of the truth. While Pelagianism sees the human will as the engine of salvation, Gnosticism immanentizes salvation within the human mind.<sup>25</sup> Gnostics “think of the intellect as separate from the flesh” and measure the person’s perfection through their possession of knowledge (*gnosis*) rather than “the depth of their charity.”<sup>26</sup> As such, Gnosticism offers a “disembodied spirituality” which seeks to “domesticate the mystery,” whether the mystery of God and his grace, or the mystery of others’ lives.<sup>27</sup> This hyper intellectualism and disdain for the body has immediate and detrimental implications for the family.

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Edmund Hill, O.P., ed. John Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York: New City, 1993), 323. For other instances in which Augustine describes salvation in medical terms, see Augustine’s *Serm.* 229E (*ibid.*, 283); *Confessions* VII, 7.20.26; 10.30. 42; *De doctrina Christiana* 1,27; 4, 95; *Enchiridion* 3.11; 22.81; 23. 92; 32.121; *De nuptiis*, 2, 9.

<sup>23</sup> See Saint Augustine, *Confessions* 4.15.26.

<sup>24</sup> See Henry Chadwick, *Augustine of Hippo: A Life* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 42.

<sup>25</sup> See Francis *Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 48. For a study of these heresies and their connection in the teaching of Pope Francis see Sławomir Zatwardnicki, “Antygnostycka krucjata Franciszka. Teologiczne wątki w napomnieniach papieża,” *Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny*, 26 no. 2 (2018): 215–242.

<sup>26</sup> Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 37.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 40. The quotations is from Pope Francis, *Letter to the Grand Chancellor of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina for the Centenary of the Founding of the Faculty of Theology* (3 March 2015): *L’Osservatore Romano*, 9–10 March 2015: 6.

One of the obvious manifestations of contemporary Gnosticism is what Pope Francis and his predecessors have called “gender ideology.”<sup>28</sup> In *Amoris laetitia* he catalogues some of its deleterious impact on the family:

Yet another challenge is posed by the various forms of an ideology of gender that “denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family. This ideology leads to educational programmes and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time”. It is a source of concern that some ideologies of this sort, which seek to respond to what are at times understandable aspirations, manage to assert themselves as absolute and unquestionable, even dictating how children should be raised.<sup>29</sup>

The same Gnostic impulse leads some to “replace the Creator” by manipulating procreation and seeking it apart from the bodily self-gift of man and woman in marriage or by depriving the conjugal act of its inherent fruitfulness.<sup>30</sup> The various gender transitioning procedures, assisted reproductive technologies, and contraceptive measures share a common impulse to intellectually dominate and reconfigure the body through technology offering once again a “disembodied spirituality” in which the individual is the primary agent of his or her salvation or happiness.

## CONCLUSION

Like his predecessor Pope John Paul II, Pope Francis sees contemporary anthropological distortions as posing a threat to marriage and the family. Modern individualism leads people to view others—even spouses and children—as potentially disposable when they fail to contribute to personal happiness. The result is a “throwaway culture” or a “culture of the ephemeral.” Other contemporary anthropological errors have a more ancient pedigree. Pelagianism exaggerates the power of the human will and thereby sidelines the centrality of grace in the Christian life and in Christian mar-

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<sup>28</sup> For a treatment of gender ideology as contemporary Gnosticism see John S. Grabowski, *Unraveling Gender: The Battle over Sexual Difference* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2022).

<sup>29</sup> Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 56, quoting the *Relatio finalis* of the 2015 Synod, no. 8.

<sup>30</sup> See Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, nos. 56, 80.



riage. Gnosticism exults the power of the mind at the expense of the body and, when joined to modern technology, becomes a vehicle for distorting or remaking the body or human sexuality.

These three errors identified by Pope Francis have striking parallels in the teaching of Saint Augustine of Hippo. Augustine too knows the atomizing effects of self-love on human community—whether the *domus* or the *polis*. Augustine was the great opponent of Pelagius and his disciples in the ancient world. To their attempts to paint him as an unregenerate Manichean, he positioned his teaching on sin, grace, and human nature as an orthodox mean between Gnostic pessimism and Pelagian optimism. Pope Francis explicitly cites and draws on the teaching of the Doctor of Grace in describing the role of grace in the Christian life and shares with him a fondness for the image of Christ as the Great Physician and the Church as a hospital for convalescent sinners. And, like most of the Fathers, Augustine gives no quarter to the most ancient and persistent heresy in the history of the Church—Gnosticism. In his case the feud was personal because of his misspent years as Manichean auditor.

The Augustinian underpinnings of Pope Francis’s diagnosis of these anthropological errors is underappreciated and often unrecognized altogether. This may be in part because while Augustine has a well-deserved reputation as a polemicist, the Holy Father has called for a more pastoral tone on the part of the Church toward the people addressed in Her teaching.<sup>31</sup> Yet when it comes to calling out attitudes and ideologies which he sees as antithetical to the gospel, he pulls no punches and explicitly draws on the teaching of the great North African bishop. Like Augustine, Pope Francis recognizes that charity must be grounded in the truth about the human person, human nature, sin and salvation, and marriage. Only on this basis can the Christian family founded in marriage fulfill its mission to be the “nearest hospital” in communicating the life of grace.

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<sup>31</sup> “. . . the Church must be particularly concerned to offer understanding, comfort and acceptance, rather than imposing straightaway a set of rules that only lead people to feel judged and abandoned by the very Mother called to show them God’s mercy. Rather than offering the healing power of grace and the light of the Gospel message, some would ‘indoctrinate’ that message, turning it into ‘dead stones to be hurled at others.’” Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 49. Cf. no. 38 in the same document.

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BŁĘDY ANTROPOLOGICZNE  
JAKO ZAGROŻENIE DLA MAŁŻEŃSTWA  
WEDŁUG PAPIEŻA FRANCISZKA

Streszczenie

Papież Franciszek – podobnie jak św. Jan Paweł II – identyfikuje w swoim nauczaniu szczególne błędy antropologiczne, które zagrażają małżeństwu i opartej na nim rodzinie. Artykuł ten wyróżnia i krótko analizuje trzy: indywidualizm, który tworzy „kulturę odrzucenia”, pelagianizm i gnostycyzm. Te błędy, na które zwraca uwagę papież Franciszek, odpowiadają ważnym aspektom nauczania św. Augustyna z Hippony.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kultura odrzucenia; indywidualizm; Miasto Człowieka; Miasto Boga; pelagianizm; nierozzerwalność ; gnostycyzm; manicheizm; ideologia gender; kultura efemeryczności.