

# Pope Francis and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Work in Catholic Higher Education

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## Abstract

Efforts to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion challenge Catholic ministries, especially in higher education. Pope Francis's pastoral witness to the gospel offers a mission-forward approach to DEI that can untangle the knots, ease much resistance, and ground initiatives related to dialogue, race, LGBTQ+, and the experience of inclusion. This paper will explicate the years of the pope's ministry as the bishop of Rome as a grounding force for DEI efforts in Catholic higher education. Finally, attention will be given to the transition from a heretofore defensive and closed Catholic approach to one of encounter and openness with Pope Francis.

## Introduction

The ministry of diversity, equity, and inclusion<sup>1</sup> (hereafter, DEI) in Catholic higher education differs from the parallel work done in non-Catholic institutions for one central, essential, mission-based reason: Catholic colleges and universities<sup>2</sup> seek to ground all DEI initiatives in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Catholic social teaching as these continue to be developed by the magisterium. This is especially true during the first 11 years of Francis's papacy where his writings and

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<sup>1</sup> I recognize that DEI work is framed differently at institutions, where some refer to this work as diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging; others, justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion; etc.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter, college and colleges will be used to reference institutions in higher education.

pastoral action as the bishop of Rome provide examples, an impetus, and even a mandate for DEI ministry in Catholic higher education. The following pages will focus on the contributions of Pope Francis to four specific DEI areas, namely dialogue, race, LGBTQ+-related issues, and the experience of inclusion grounded in a Gospel ethic. Additionally, this article will explore how this pope marks a transition from his predecessors in terms of DEI.

Before examining Pope Francis's approach to these four issues, a brief consideration of diversity, equity, and inclusion is necessary. Diversity in the context of higher education "refers to the empirical existence of 'difference,' and, in particular, two kinds of difference: inherent and acquired."<sup>3</sup> The former refers to features of persons over which they have no control; the latter, to features where some freedom of choice is present.<sup>4</sup> Inclusion is the position and response of the institution to the aforementioned diversity. Emerging from an educational context, equity is the commitment to justice that advances a "fair distribution of access and opportunity," with a special emphasis on resources.<sup>5</sup> Many Catholic colleges have taken on this DEI work. Petrussek asserts "inclusivity has achieved the status of moral obviousness in [Catholic] academia: It is difficult to imagine any institution claiming to be 'against' it."<sup>6</sup> But Catholic institutions vary in how they understand, and/or express and operationalize DEI work, perhaps not unlike the diversity of all ministries in the Church.<sup>7</sup>

Two distinctly contrasting perspectives abide in society at large and in academic institutions. One approach is offered by the chief diversity officer of the University of Michigan, whose investment in DEI cost more than \$30 million for a staff of 241 employees to implement a five-year plan: "Diversity is where everyone is invited to the party, inclusion means that everyone gets to contribute to the playlist, and

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Petrussek, "Dialoguing from a Fixed Point: How Aristotle and Pope Francis Illuminate the Promise—and Limits—of Inclusion in Catholic Higher Education," *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* 36:2 (2017), 149.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Paul C. Gorski, *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2018), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Petrussek, 146.

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Duran, Zachary Hooten & Musbah Shaheen, "Dignity for Whom? How 4-year Catholic Institutions Display Commitments to Diversity on Institutional Websites," *Christian Higher Education* 21:4 (2022), 281-299. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2021.1978902>

equity means that everyone has the opportunity to dance.”<sup>8</sup> Michigan’s enthusiastic embrace of DEI stands as an example of an approach that seeks maximized efforts and resources that advance DEI-related initiatives.

The counter-approach would have few, if any, personnel and financial resources for such work. Steven McGuire argues that the strategy of the Ann Arbor school and other like institutions “does not work and frequently makes matters worse. DEI trainings not only fail to achieve their purposes but often exacerbate grievances and divisions.”<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that McGuire and many of those who share his beliefs on DEI are not opposed to diversity, equity, and inclusion as values. “Why not use all that money to give students a much-needed tuition break” or “fund need-based scholarships for promising students?” he asks in response to Michigan’s vast expenditure after the school saw a drop in enrollment of Black students “from 4.3% in 2016 to 3.9% in 2021.”<sup>10</sup>

The polarity of these two approaches is evident in Catholic higher education. In April 2022, St. Joseph’s University’s Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion hosted, like many other Catholic colleges, a drag show, drawing harsh criticism suggesting that such a decision weakens Catholic identity. An official at the Newman Society argued that “[w]hen worldly views that counter Church teaching are given ‘center stage’ by a Catholic institution, whether just for entertainment or political positioning, Catholic identity is harmed, thus requiring reinforcement of authentic Church teaching for the sake of the souls of students in its care,”<sup>11</sup> The Newman Society recognizes 23 Catholic colleges it judges to be, among other things, “advocating and supporting fidelity to the teaching of the Catholic Church across all levels and methods of Catholic education.” None of these schools hosts a DEI office.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> University of Michigan, “Defining DEI: Diversity, Equity & Inclusion,” (2021). In Dawn M. Angel, Michael Schatz, Robert S. Zeiger, Scott H. Sicherer, & David A. Khan. “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: What Can a Journal Do?” *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* 9:11 (November 2021), 3853. Available at [https://www.jaci-inpractice.org/article/S2213-2198\(21\)01011-4/fulltext](https://www.jaci-inpractice.org/article/S2213-2198(21)01011-4/fulltext)

<sup>9</sup> Association of Trustees and Alumni, “Costly DEI Programs Yield Little Return,” *In Academe* 23:2 (2023-2024), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Joe Bukuras, “Drag Show at Saint Joseph’s University? Catholic Education Expert Sounds Alarm,” *National Catholic Register*, April 28, 2022. Available at <https://www.ncregister.com/cna/drag-show-at-saint-joseph-s-university-catholic-education-expert-sounds-alarm>

<sup>12</sup> The Newman Society. Available at <https://cardinalnewmansociety.org/about/#top>

However, it would be erroneous to hold that a Catholic sensibility and identity that inform a Catholic college could not advance DEI work. Justin Anderson, senior fellow of the Principium Institute and theologian at Seton Hall University, asserts:

[F]ew people argue against diversity as a fact of modern occidental liberal societies, though more become wary of embracing diversity as a normative ideal, as something to be pursued. Diversity as an ideal is typically where the debate rages and how scholars working on diversity and associated concepts (e.g., multiculturalism, affirmative action, etc.) engage the issue today. Typically, these debates are the province of socio-political studies, and thereby often focus on policies within a particular social body.<sup>13</sup>

He argues for a Creator-centered approach to diversity from within the Catholic intellectual tradition grounded in Thomistic thought. Anderson cautions that approaches to diversity—and, consequently DEI itself—not rise to the level of “a normative ideal” and these approaches should eschew “the province of socio-political studies within a particular body.” Anderson’s approach can illuminate how to address the dilemma of either wholesale acceptance or rejection to DEI initiatives, especially within Catholic contexts. If Catholic colleges advance their DEI work within the purview of Catholic social teaching and without any socio-political tethering, they can more confidently resist a critique that such initiatives are fueled by the whims or trends of current socially liberal movements, frequently characterized as politically correct or woke. Conversely, efforts to quell or close DEI offices in Catholic higher education cannot themselves take on politically conservative or radically traditional camps that often, *prima facie*, balk at the pastoral vision of Pope Francis or any sort of social justice program or position that is grounded in the church’s social teaching.

The neuralgia surrounding DEI centers, in large measure, around Catholic identity, as evidenced by Newman Society’s response to the drag show at a Jesuit university. DEI opponents see such initiatives as weakening Catholic identity. Proponents assert that DEI efforts align with the expanse of Catholic social teaching’s call for solidarity, respect for the dignity of the human person, and the option for the poor and the vulnerable, as opening a campus to marginalized peoples through equity. Catholic identity and Catholic social teaching are inextricably linked and indispensably foundational to Catholic higher education.

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<sup>13</sup> Justin Anderson, “Diversity: A Catholic Understanding,” *Logos* 25:3 (Summer 2022): 27. Available at <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/82/article/858231/pdf>

They are also expressed uniquely by schools that advocate for DEI and those that do not. In light of the urgent need for Catholic higher education to actively educate students about and eradicate social evils such as racism, homophobia, ableism, and inequity, DEI work ought to play a key role on the Catholic campus. More importantly, the pastoral leadership of Pope Francis affirms and intersects with essential elements of DEI, specifically dialogue, race, LGBTQ+-related issues, and the experience of inclusion as constituents of a Gospel ethic. To be clear, Pope Francis has not called for any sort of DEI office to be established at Catholic colleges. However, he has placed before the church clear statements, a pastoral example, and a vision that articulate responsibilities which fall within the realm of Catholic higher education and beckons its leaders to action in DEI work.

As noted above, Catholic colleges will continue to approach DEI work in various ways, with proponents likely to suggest that the delivery of programming is reflected by Catholic social teaching; opponents may argue from a position of fidelity to Catholic identity reflecting “a culture steeped in the Catholic tradition and in association with a community of faculty and fellow students who have similar goals.”<sup>14</sup> Morey and Pederit’s four models of Catholic colleges offer apt descriptors of the various approaches to this dynamic. For example, immersion schools might not champion DEI work, favoring a strong, traditional Catholic identity, while cohort schools might understand DEI programming as clear evidence of its Catholicity. Persuasion and diaspora schools would not be as binary, but most likely would provide varying degrees of attention to Catholic values at different levels. Indeed, all approaches must be sensitive to the importance of both a robust Catholic identity, as mandated by *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, and the constitutive Catholic social teaching.<sup>15</sup> Catholic colleges would be wise to take note of how professional employment in many contexts in the United States presumes some education and formation in the values and practices related to DEI.<sup>16</sup> Very simply, DEI programming and focused attention to Catholic

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<sup>14</sup> Melanie M. Morey & John J. Piderit, *Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 54.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> For example, certain healthcare professions require DEI training for board verification. See David J. Skorton & Alison J. Whelan, “AAMC Statement on Medical School Curriculum,” March 18, 2024. Available at <https://www.aamc.org/news/press-releases/aamc-statement-medical-school-curriculum>. Likewise in the business professions, where job interviewers assume some DEI training. See Bola Grace & Colleen Ammerman, “How Business Schools Are Really Doing With Diversity,” February 18, 2022.

identity are essential for Catholic colleges. DEI work in Catholic colleges can be legitimately efficacious when it can be expressed as intrinsically related to Catholic social teaching.

## Dialogue

The art of and skill to dialogue rank among the most essential elements in achieving DEI goals. Efforts to diversify a community, to increase equity among its members, and to include marginalized and excluded groups require clear, healthy, and robust conversations. Ramsey and Latting advanced a theoretically and empirically grounded typology that articulates fourteen competencies for successful intergroup dialogue, which is “the most rigorously researched and refined model of dialogue practiced in higher education”<sup>17</sup>; this model stands as a clear foundation for requisite skills for DEI work. Among these fourteen, more than half align directly with behaviors necessary for dialogue: empathizing with multiple perspectives, engaging in inquiry and openness; engaging in responsible feedback; connecting the personal to the societal, addressing dominant and nondominant group dynamics, identifying systemic processes and patterns, surfacing undiscussables, and advocating and engaging in systemic change.

Archbishop Roberto Gonzales Nieves of San Juan writes that “dialogue is one of the most frequent words” used by Pope Francis in his preaching and writings.<sup>18</sup> The pope challenges all people, seemingly at every turn, to dialogue. Whether he is discussing world peace,<sup>19</sup> family life,<sup>20</sup> ecumenism and interreligious relations,<sup>21</sup> care for creation and

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Available at <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/how-business-schools-are-really-doing-with-diversity>.

<sup>17</sup> V. Jean Ramsey & Jean Kantambu Latting, “A Typology of Intergroup Competencies,” *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 41:3 (September 2005), 265-284. The other competencies are becoming aware of one’s own cultural values and assumptions, committing to personal change, processing emotions, reframing mental models, and identifying one’s own role in perpetuating patterns.

<sup>18</sup> Roberto O. Gonzalez Nieves, “Dialogue,” *A Pope Francis Lexicon*, ed. Joshua J. McElwee & Cindy Wooden (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 40.

<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis, *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Celebration of the 55<sup>th</sup> World Day of Peace*, January 1, 2022. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/20211208-messaggio-55giornatamondiale-pace2022.html>

<sup>20</sup> Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 2016, nos. 137, 138, 139, and 141. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia\\_en.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Pope Francis, *Address of Pope Francis to Diplomatic Corps*, March 22, 2013. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130322\\_corpo-diplomatico.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco_20130322_corpo-diplomatico.html)



the environment,<sup>22</sup> Catholic higher education,<sup>23</sup> or evangelization,<sup>24</sup> he regularly raises dialogue as central to the topic at hand. He was perhaps most clear about the centrality of dialogue in 2016 upon receiving the Charlemagne Prize:

If there is one word that we should never tire of repeating, it is this: dialogue. We are called to promote a culture of dialogue by every possible means and thus to rebuild the fabric of society. The culture of dialogue entails a true apprenticeship and a discipline that enables us to view others as valid dialogue partners, to respect the foreigner, the immigrant and people from different cultures as worthy of being listened to. Today we urgently need to engage all the members of society in building “a culture which privileges dialogue as a form of encounter” and in creating “a means for building consensus and agreement while seeking the goal of a just, responsive, and inclusive society.” Peace will be lasting in the measure that we arm our children with the weapons of dialogue, that we teach them to fight the good fight of encounter and negotiation. In this way, we will bequeath to them a culture capable of devising strategies of life, not death, and of inclusion, not exclusion.<sup>25</sup>

The call for dialogue, which the pope takes from his 2013 meeting in Rio de Janeiro with Brazilian political, economic, and cultural leaders, is a dominant theme in *Fratelli Tutti*:

Dialogue between generations; dialogue among our people, for we are that people; readiness to give and receive, while remaining open to the truth. A country flourishes when constructive dialogue occurs between its many rich cultural components: popular culture, *university culture* (emphasis added), youth culture, artistic culture, technological culture, economic culture, family culture and media culture.<sup>26</sup>

Here, the pope appeals to university culture to lead and participate in such life-affirming, human-family strengthening dialogue that embraces diversity, an obvious pillar to any DEI work:

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<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2015, no. 163. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium*, 2017, nos. 2, 3, 4, and 5. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco\\_constituzione-ap\\_20171208\\_veritatis-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_constituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html)

<sup>24</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, nos. 28, 29, 31, 70, and 72. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) (Accessed 04/15/2024)

<sup>25</sup> Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis at the Conferral of the Charlemagne Prize*, May 6, 2016. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160506\\_premio-carlo-magno.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/may/documents/papa-francesco_20160506_premio-carlo-magno.html)

<sup>26</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, no. 199. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html) (Accessed April 15, 2024)

[O]ur own cultural identity is strengthened and enriched as a result of dialogue with those unlike ourselves. Nor is our authentic identity preserved by an impoverished isolation. The world grows and is filled with new beauty, thanks to the successive syntheses produced between cultures that are open and free of any form of cultural imposition.<sup>27</sup>

Prior this exhortation for widespread dialogue, the pope offers a definition that also provides behaviors that comprise dialogue: “Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground”;<sup>28</sup> and creating “processes of encounter, processes that build a people that can accept differences.”<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere, he defines social dialogue as the “ability to respect the other’s point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns.”<sup>30</sup> In this context, Pope Francis is integrating dialogue into his theological anthropology: “For the Catholic tradition, then, the call to dialogue is ultimately a response to God’s extension of grace to human beings...the truth of the human being.”<sup>31</sup> This is expressed in his own words in *Lumen Fidei*, his first encyclical, in a consideration on the faith of the baptized: “Our belief is expressed in response to an invitation, to a word which must be heard and which is not my own; it exists as part of a dialogue and cannot merely be a profession originating in an individual.”<sup>32</sup> Later, he recalls the human interaction, implicit in dialogue and its defining behaviors, as revelatory: “Faith teaches us to see that every man and woman represents a blessing for me, that the light of God’s face shines on me through the faces of my brothers and sisters.”<sup>33</sup> At the same time, breakdown in and threats to dialogue, a dynamic the magisterium acknowledges, are ubiquitous. The recent document from the Vatican’s Dicastery for Communication offers an assessment: “We may be failing to provide

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., no. 148.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., no. 198.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., no. 217.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., no. 203.

<sup>31</sup> Anna Bonta Moreland & Mark Shiffman, “Educating for What? Liberal Arts in a Preprofessional World,” *Catholic Higher Education and Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Bernard G. Prusak & Jennifer Reed-Bouley, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 2023), 99-125.

<sup>32</sup> Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 2013, no. 39. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130629\\_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html) (Accessed April 15, 2024)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., no. 54.



space for those seeking to engage in dialogue and find support without experiencing judgmental or defensive attitudes.”<sup>34</sup>

Pope Francis’s paradigmatic-shifting synodal initiative, which Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, called “the new way of being the Church at every level,”<sup>35</sup> is grounded in dialogue. In his address to open the Synod itself, the pope highlighted the value of dialogue with clarity and deliberation: “If we want to speak of a synodal Church, we cannot remain satisfied with appearances alone; we need content, means, and structures that can facilitate *dialogue* (emphasis added) and interaction within the People of God, especially between priests and laity.”<sup>36</sup> As well, Cardinal Robert McElroy sees an inseparable link between synodality and dialogue. First, he claims that synodality which requires a true listening spirit can lead to “the repair of our culture of dialogue in the United States.”<sup>37</sup> Second, he identifies a “synodal imperative that can help to heal the corrosion of genuine dialogue within the United States is the call to speak honestly and forthrightly in dialogue.”<sup>38</sup> Here, he echoes that call of the Dicastery for Communication who claims listening as “an essential step in engaging others; it is a first indispensable ingredient for communication and a condition for genuine dialogue.”<sup>39</sup>

Apart from the centrality of dialogue in *Fratelli Tutti* and its constitutive role in synodality, dialogue remains essential to Catholic higher education, as well as DEI ministry. In *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, Saint Pope John Paul II uses the word “dialogue” 22 times, in the first half of the document alone.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Pope Francis in *Veritatis Gaudium*

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<sup>34</sup> Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media*, 2023, no. 54. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/dpc/documents/20230528\\_dpc-verso-piena-presenza\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/dpc/documents/20230528_dpc-verso-piena-presenza_en.html)

<sup>35</sup> John Stowe, “Pope Francis’ Vision for the Church,” *Commonweal*, July 5, 2023. Available at <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/aggiornamento-synodality-bishop-stowe-francis-pope-church>

<sup>36</sup> Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synod*, October 9, 2021. Available at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html>

<sup>37</sup> Robert W. McElroy, “Synodality and Dialogue: Fostering a Culture of Encounter,” *Angelus*, May 31, 2022. Available at <https://angelusnews.com/faith/synodality-and-dialogue-fostering-a-culture-of-encounter>

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Dicastery for Communication, no. 25.

<sup>40</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 1990. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apc\\_15081990\\_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html)

employs the same word 10 times.<sup>41</sup> Additionally *Educating for Fraternal Humanism: Building a Civilization of Love* marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pope Paul's encyclical *Populorum Progressio*<sup>42</sup> discusses themes in a nascent manner that came to full bloom in the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* and *Fratelli Tutti*. The congregation asserts that humanizing education, where the human person is placed at the center of all education, is the goal of education itself, relying on four structures: a culture of dialogue, cooperating networks, true inclusion, and globalizing hope.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, dialogue is central to both Catholic higher education and DEI efforts. Moreover, dialogue, as articulated by Pope Francis, aligns readily with the values of Catholic higher education. Specifically, he asserts that dialogue requires meekness, hope, empathy, openness, hospitality, welcome, acceptance, and charity.<sup>44</sup>

## Race

The United States boiled with racial turmoil after the May 2020 death of George Floyd. Riots ensued, calls for wholesale policing reform mounted, and national conversations on race heated. This tragic event prompted the pope himself to pray, by name, for Floyd and “all those others who have lost their lives as a result of the sin of racism.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the pope personally telephoned the leader of the U.S. Bishops Conference and another bishop, an active supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement, to encourage church leaders to continue to support efforts to end racism.<sup>46</sup>

The strength of the pope's words speaks to his urgent appeal to a distant country, that is nonetheless close to his heart. He was not commenting merely on the death of one man he never met; rather, he was

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<sup>41</sup> Pope Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium*.

<sup>42</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educating for Fraternal Humanism: Building a Civilization of Love*, no. 1. 2015. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20170416\\_educare-umanesimo-solidale\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20170416_educare-umanesimo-solidale_en.html) (Accessed 04/15/2024)

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Gonzalez Nieves, 41-43.

<sup>45</sup> Bill Chappell, “Pope Francis Prays for George Floyd, Decries ‘Sin of Racism,’” *NPR.org*, June 3, 2020. Available at <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/03/868503678/pope-francis-prays-for-george-floyd-decries-the-sin-of-racism>.

<sup>46</sup> Michael J. O'Loughlin, “Pope Francis Calls U.S. Bishops to Offer Prayers Amid George Floyd Protests,” *America*, June 3, 2020. Available at <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/06/03/pope-francis-bishops-george-floyd-protests-black-lives-matter>.

crying out against the sin of racism when he said “we cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life.”<sup>47</sup> Again, in October 2021 in his address at the Fourth World Meeting of Popular Movements, Pope Francis referenced the protests over the death of George Floyd, and called out abuses of power that violate human dignity. In that address, Francis suggested that “popular movements are not only social poets but also collective Samaritans.”<sup>48</sup>

While not citing nor fully endorsing the Black Lives Matter movement, one could argue that Pope Francis sees this movement akin to other popular movements discussed at various conferences and symposia at the Vatican. This highlights the pope’s commitment to call out the sin of racism as a violation of human dignity and requires a full-throated response from church’s pastors and lay faithful as well as those working in Catholic higher education. To this end, the pope provides a laser focus on Catholic colleges in the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* which he cosigned with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb. The range of issues covered in this statement is vast, including a call to end war, hateful ideologies, and the oppression of women; to respect all human life; and to use dialogue to deepen relationships of unity. A clear call is extended to higher education:

Al-Azhar and the Catholic Church ask that this Document become the object of research and reflection in all schools, *universities* (emphasis added) and institutes of formation, thus helping to educate new generations to bring goodness and peace to others, and to be defenders everywhere of the rights of the oppressed and of the least of our brothers and sisters.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, the text states that “each individual enjoys the freedom of belief, thought, expression and action. The pluralism and the diversity of religions, color, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings.”<sup>50</sup> Such declarations, coupled

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Pope Francis, *Video Message of the Holy Father Francis on the Occasion of the Fourth World Meeting of Popular Movements*, October 16, 2021, no. 3. Available at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2021/documents/20211016-videomessaggio-movimentipopolari.html>. (Accessed 04/15/2024)

<sup>49</sup> Pope Francis and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, *A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, February 4, 2019. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_documento-fratellanza-umana.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html). (Accessed 04/15/2024)

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

with *Ex corde Ecclesiae's* admonition that any question or issue is a legitimate “object of research and reflection...in all universities,” support the view that Catholic higher education has a privileged place for such inquiry, and its DEI offices are natural centers to host and advance this work.

Pope Francis views those values which undergird DEI work in Catholic higher education as normative for his magisterial teaching. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, and in his most recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, he asserts the centrality of the Church’s work for justice. He calls all people to a reoriented way of living with others with a “love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance,”<sup>51</sup> and says “the social dimension is the Gospel’s inner reality and is fully intrinsic, no longer an addendum to the Gospel.”<sup>52</sup> For Pope Francis, the Gospel message “has a clear social content: at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others.”<sup>53</sup>

His focus on fraternity and social friendship relocates each disciple into the network of human relationships as members of the one human family. In *Fratelli Tutti* he lays out a bold exegesis on the parable of the Good Samaritan, providing an elasticity to his sense of fraternity. Fraternity here does not refer to the North American use denoting a set of exclusively male relationships, as in a college fraternity house. No, fraternity for the pope in this encyclical is kinship and family, as in the one family of humanity, which is a theme he also discussed in his book *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*:

Fraternity, the sense of belonging to each other and to the whole of humanity, is the capacity to come together and work together against a shared horizon of possibility. It’s a unity that allows people to serve as a body despite differences of viewpoint, physical separation, and human ego.<sup>54</sup>

## LBGTQ+

From the moment that Pope Francis uttered the now-famous words “Who am I to judge” in response to a question about gay priests,

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<sup>51</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Czerny & Christian Barone, *Siblings All, Sign of the Times: The Social Teaching of Pope Francis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022), 3.

<sup>53</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 177.

<sup>54</sup> Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 68.

it became reasonable to expect that the pope would pave a different path from his two immediate predecessors on LGBTQ+ issues. A former leader of Quest, a 50-year-old LGBTQ+ Catholic ministry in Great Britain, marked the change with Pope Francis as going “from banishment to blessing.”<sup>55</sup> While not changing church teaching on sexual morality, the pope has substantially changed his pastoral outreach to and engagement with people in this community. Just a few examples are his

- Meeting, during a pastoral visit to the United States, with a former student and his same-sex partner at the Vatican Embassy in Washington, DC;
- Encouraging a South American nun working with transgender community;
- Sending two hand-written letters to and hosting official meetings with Jim Martin, SJ, founder of Outreach, a LGBTQ+ ministry in the United States;
- Instructing Jesuits in Slovakia to reach out pastorally to “homosexual couples,” which acknowledged that gay and lesbian people live together in unions;
- Appointing an openly gay man to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, a Vatican post;<sup>56</sup>
- Speaking to parents of LGBTQ+ children: “Don’t condemn. Give your children the space to express themselves”;<sup>57</sup>
- Embracing a young transgender person, offering the words: “God loves us as we are.”<sup>58</sup>

The pope’s pastoral choices are difficult to hear for some who may fear that he is embarking on a slippery slope to undercutting the church’s teachings. For others, these gestures feel insufficient because the formal teachings of the church continue to use language that offends and alienates. Yet here, the pope is not disregarding teachings of the church; rather, he is advancing its Catholic social teaching and modeling a new

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<sup>55</sup> Mark Dowd, “From Banishment to Blessing: Quest at 50,” *The Tablet*, August 3, 2023. Available at <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/23393/from-banishment-to-a-blessing-quest-at-50>

<sup>56</sup> New Ways Ministry, “The Many Faces of Pope Francis: A Timeline of His LGBTQ Record,” n.d. Available at <https://www.newwaysministry.org/resources/pope-francis-lgbtq-issues/>.

<sup>57</sup> Associated Press, “The Latest: Pope: Parents of Gay Kids Should Not Condemn Them,” August 26, 2018. Available at <https://apnews.com/article/74ae03806df24f44b3afbc789b1aa251>

<sup>58</sup> Alvis Armellini, “Pope Tells Transgender Person: ‘God Loves Us as We Are,’” Reuters, July 25, 2023, Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/pope-tells-transgender-person-god-loves-us-we-are-2023-07-25/?s=31>.

style of pastoral engagement as the bishop of Rome. His words and actions focus on a key element of the Church's social teaching, namely a preferential option for the poor.<sup>59</sup> The pope's repeated calls to go to the margins of the church and society, again, with a "love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance" includes those in the LGBTQ+ community, especially those who feel alienated by a Church that lacked charity and pastoral care.<sup>60</sup> As a corrective, in *Amoris Laetitia*, the pope provides a model for true human relationships when he states:

We would like *before all else* (emphasis added) to reaffirm that every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while 'every sign of unjust discrimination' is to be carefully avoided, particularly any form of aggression and violence.<sup>61</sup>

While *Fratelli Tutti* does not directly address the LGBTQ+ community, the pope includes a strong warning to believers who misuse religious teachings to alienate and marginalize. The misuse and weaponization of religion was a major theme in the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, which he references at the beginning and end of *Fratelli Tutti*:

Still, there are those who appear to feel encouraged or at least permitted by their faith to support varieties of narrow and violent nationalism, xenophobia and contempt, and even the mistreatment of those who are different. For this reason, it is important that catechesis and preaching speak more directly and clearly about the social meaning of existence, the fraternal dimension of spirituality, our conviction of the inalienable dignity of each person, and our reasons for loving and accepting all our brothers and sisters (no. 86).<sup>62</sup>

These exhortations against aggression, violence, and mistreatment stand alongside the clear and persistent teaching of the church that does not permit same-sex marriage or sex changing medical interventions.

People in the LGBTQ+ community are frequently mistreated in society, on college campuses, and sometimes in the church. Pope Francis's declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*, which permitted ordained ministers to bless couples in irregular situations, either heterosexual couples

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<sup>59</sup> USCCB, "Themes of Catholic Social Teaching." Available at <https://www.usccb.org/about/excerpt>.

<sup>60</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 1.

<sup>61</sup> Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 2016, no. 250.

<sup>62</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 86.



living together outside of a sacramental marriage or homosexuals living together as spouses or romantic partners, can be seen as a papal effort to redress a pastoral mistreatment of people in these contexts. In the accompanying letter announcing the declaration, the Vatican was clear to state that the reflection was “based on the pastoral vision of Pope Francis.”<sup>63</sup> In light of the negative reaction to this declaration, a question emerges whether the pope was trying to follow his own papal teachings: From *Fratelli Tutti* and *Amoris Laetitia*, he spoke “more directly about loving and accepting all our brothers and sisters.” Indeed, such love and acceptance must occur “before all else.”

## Inclusion

Inclusion in higher education “promotes and fosters student engagement in all its forms” and stands as an essential dimension to providing equity in education.<sup>64</sup> Accomplishing engagement in all its forms is a true parallel to the ecclesiology of Pope Francis where synodality is the prevailing culture that gives life to the church. Amplifying the ecclesiology of Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium* where the church is defined as the People of God, Francis is clear:

Either there is a pyramidal church, in which what Peter says is done, or there is a synodal church, in which Peter is Peter, but he accompanies the church, he lets her grow, he listens to her, he learns from this reality and goes about harmonizing it, discerning what comes from the church and restoring it to her.<sup>65</sup>

This theme is clarified further in the Vatican’s document for the Synod on Synodality, named poignantly “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” when it states “the vision of a church capable of radical inclusion, shared belonging, and deep hospitality according to the teachings of Jesus is at

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<sup>63</sup> Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Fiducia Supplicans*, 2023. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_ddd\\_doc\\_20231218\\_fiducia-supplicans\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddd_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html) (Accessed 04/15/2024)

<sup>64</sup> Jaimie Hoffman, Patrick Blessinger, & Mandla Makhanya, *Perspective on Diverse Student Identities in Higher Education: International Perspectives on Equality and Inclusion* (Emerald Publishing Limited: ProQuest Ebook Central, 2018), 7.

<sup>65</sup> Michael J. O’Loughlin, “How Pope Francis Is Changing the Catholic Church,” *America*, January 12, 2017. Available at <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/01/12/how-pope-francis-changing-catholic-church>

the heart of the synodal process.”<sup>66</sup> It continues with a stern warning that reads like a correction: “Instead of behaving like gatekeepers trying to exclude others from the table, we need to do more to make sure that people know that everyone can find a place and a home here.”<sup>67</sup>

Undoubtedly, Pope Francis is a pastor of inclusion. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, SJ frames the pope’s leadership in the language physics. He sees Francis’s call to go to the peripheries similar to a centrifugal orientation that is missionary in nature because it takes the church to existential margins. This swirling ecclesiology taps the high winds of the Spirit who brings more and more people, not fewer and fewer, into the fold.<sup>68</sup> Ironically, Francis’s vision of synodality could, in fact, have some people participating in listening and discussion sessions hosted by pastors who could not give them Holy Communion, but could nonetheless welcome them as active members of the synodal process. This dynamic of inclusion touches not just the existential margins; it can threaten pre-existing borders built by certain gatekeepers seeking to exclude people from the table.

Perhaps Pope Francis’s call for inclusion climaxed at the August 2023 World Youth Day event when he was preaching:

[I]n the Church, there is room for everyone. Everyone. In the Church, no one is left out or left over. There is room for everyone. Just the way we are. Everyone. Jesus says this clearly. When he sends the apostles to invite people to the banquet which a man had prepared, he tells them: “Go out and bring in everyone,” young and old, healthy and infirm, righteous and sinners. Everyone, everyone, everyone! In the Church there is room for everyone.<sup>69</sup>

The pope’s call for everyone, repeated three times in Spanish, led to a cacophony of tens of thousands of young people chanting, “Todos, todos, todos.” Was Francis formulating a *todos* ecclesiology of inclusivity?

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<sup>66</sup> *Enlarge the Space of Your Tent*, 2022, no. 31. Available at <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf>

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, “Francis’sFrancis’sFrancis’sFrancis’s Leadership,” *Pope Francis: A Voice for Mercy, Justice, Love, and Care for the Earth*, ed. Barbara Wall & Massimo Faggioli, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 156-156.

<sup>69</sup> Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness: Welcome Ceremony of World Youth Day,” August 3, 2023. Available at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/august/documents/20230803-portogallo-cerimonia-accoglienza.html>. (Accessed 04/15/2024)

To mark the centennial anniversary of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU), Pope Francis received its delegates in the Vatican in January 2024 with a published address. His remarks echo the sentiments of inclusivity:

We cannot allow fear to guide the management of our universities....The temptation to hide behind walls, in a safe social bubble, avoiding risks or cultural challenges, turning our backs on the complexity of reality may seem the safest course. Don't let a Catholic university merely replicate the walls typical of the societies in which we live: those of inequality, dehumanization, intolerance and indifference, or models aimed at promoting individualism rather than investing in fraternity. A Catholic university must make choices, choices that reflect the Gospel. It must take a stand and clearly show it in its actions, "getting its hands dirty" in the spirit of the Gospel, for the transformation of the world and in service to the human person.<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, these remarks highlight the institutional and professional behaviors incumbent upon leaders in Catholic higher education that would lead to greater inclusion: avoiding fear of those excluded or on the margins; adopting a risk-averse leadership and management approach; resisting strong evils such as inequality, intolerance, and indifference; and participating in the messy, difficult work of stretching the boundaries of schools to welcome members of social or identity groups heretofore excluded or unadmitted. If the pope was casting the beginnings of a *todos* ecclesiology at World Youth Day, he appears to be adapting and situating it within Catholic higher education during the FICU meeting.

### **The Pope Francis Pivot**

Few could debate that Pope Francis is unique and different from his predecessors. Three determinative differences are the popes' ecclesial ministries, relationship to Vatican II, and global origins. Cardinal Timothy Dolan mused on the papacies of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. Dolan asserted that John Paul was a philosopher; Benedict, a theologian; and Francis, a pastor.<sup>71</sup> As well, John O'Malley, SJ noted that a key difference with Pope Francis is that he is the first pope

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<sup>70</sup> Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to a Delegation of the International Federation of Catholic Universities," January 19, 2024. Available at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/january/documents/20240119-fiuc.html> (Accessed 04/15/2024)

<sup>71</sup> Timothy Dolan, "Three Popes," *Furphy Lecture*, DeSales University, Center Valley, PA, 2018.

elected since the Second Vatican Council not to have attended the proceedings of the Council:

Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II, and Pope Benedict XVI, on some level, were still fighting the battle of the Council. Pope Francis doesn't have that baggage. He was ordained just as the Council was finishing and, in a sense, he received the Council in its pure form. Somehow or other, he managed to assimilate it and to appropriate it. It is often remarked that when compared with his predecessor, Pope Francis refers, cites, and quotes Vatican II rather infrequently. That is true. I think he doesn't do that because it's so much a part of him. It's the way he is. It's how he sees the church.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, one could propose that Pope Francis no longer wants to debate Vatican II from philosophical or theological perspectives. Rather, he wants to move the church forward through Vatican II. And he does this as a pastor from South America whose ministry was consistently impacted by his work with those who are poor and marginalized. As a young priest, Francis's theology was grounded in the ethos of caring for the poor. Additionally, Francis is from the global south, which he called "the ends of the earth."<sup>73</sup> Prior to becoming pope, Cardinal Bergoglio, led the CELAM committee in drafting its final work, which became known as the Aparecida Document. The bishops, under his leadership, stated this:

We pledge to work harder, so our Latin American and Caribbean Church may continue to accompany our poorest brothers on their journey, even to martyrdom. Today, we want to confirm and promote the option of preferential love for the poor which was expressed in previous conferences.<sup>74</sup>

This pledge for the preferential option of love for the poor included all structures, pastoral planning, priorities, and even the government. The poor were not to be excluded from anything. This essential outreach from Aparecida can be seen in Pope Francis's continued reminder for all disciples to go to the peripheries, a call he gave to his fellow cardinal-electors prior to the conclave where he became pope. With reminders

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<sup>72</sup> John O'Malley, S.J., "Looking at Vatican II with Pope Francis' Eyes: Leadership and Spirituality," lecture, 2014–2015 Bannan Institute: Ignatian Leadership series, Santa Clara Lecture, February 5, 2015, Santa Clara University. This essay is an excerpt from the lecture; a video of the full lecture is available online at: <http://scu.edu/ic/publications/videos.cfm>

<sup>73</sup> Pope Francis, *First Greeting of the Holy Father Pope Francis*, 2013. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130313\\_benedizione-urbi-et-orbi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco_20130313_benedizione-urbi-et-orbi.html)

<sup>74</sup> CELAM, *Aparecida Document*, 2007, no. 396. Available at Conference Generale de L'Episcopat Latino-Americain et Des Caraibes.

that Jesus himself came from the peripheries, was born among animals, lived as a refugee with his parents, grew up in a backwater town, and connected in his own pastoral work with outcast folks despised by the mainstream, Francis's use of the periphery refers to "all people who are excluded, forgotten, abandoned, shoved aside, and in the most vivid description 'thrown away.'"<sup>75</sup>

Here, Francis pivots from the two prior bishops of Rome. John Paul focused on the relational and personal expressions of welfare and charity of political engagement. Benedict examined gift and reciprocity in the theological context for social relating. Francis looks to the Old Testament and its sensibilities for just men and women seeking the common good.<sup>76</sup> He takes these even further in *Fratelli Tutti*, as discussed above.

Another distinguishing factor from Popes John Paul and Benedict is that he was educated, socialized, catechized, and then formed as a religious seminarian training for the priesthood not in Europe. Besides his theological and spiritual formation, the cultural, relational, and human formation that occurred outside of classrooms carried and transmitted the faith expressions, mores, rituals, ethos, practices, and emotions of the southern hemisphere. It stands to reason that his understanding of the Gospel, the Tradition and traditions he now stewards, and the faith he formally teaches as the bishop of Rome will be tremendously and thoroughly impacted by the experiences that formed him from his youth through the time he exited the plane for the conclave that elected him pope. Fewer European influences will naturally and necessarily have him lead and teach differently from those before him.

Francis's own words speak powerfully about the impact Vatican II had on him in the global south:

The ecclesial climate of Latin America, in which I was immersed first as a young Jesuit student and then in ministry, had enthusiastically absorbed and taken possession of the theological, ecclesial, and spiritual intuitions of the Council, actualizing and enculturating them. For the youngest among us, the Council became the horizon of our beliefs and of our ways of speaking and acting. That is, it quickly became our ecclesial and pastoral ecosystem. ... my intuitions, my perceptions, and my spirituality were quite simply born out of what Vatican II taught.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Carolyn Woo, "Periphery," *A Pope Francis Lexicon, A Pope Francis Lexicon*, ed. Joshua J. McElwee and Cindy Wooden (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 143-146.

<sup>76</sup> Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*, (New York NY: Bloomsbury, 2021), 169.

<sup>77</sup> Pope Francis in Czerny & Barone, *xi*.

Francis's appropriation and integration of the Second Vatican Council are clear, and this may also be the reason why, as pope, he has adopted the pastoral methodology for his magisterium. Francis also departs from John Paul and Benedict with the method of his magisterium. Francis employs the inductive method that Vatican II introduced and John XXIII and Paul VI followed. The next two popes used a deductive method, though Francis maintained continuity with them with emphasis on similar themes.<sup>78</sup> This distinction is evident, for example, in the three popes' positions on the economy. Unlike John Paul and Benedict who pursued the question of the morality of economies that would make them more compassionate and caring, Francis claims it is "necessary to oppose any propensity for selfishness,"<sup>79</sup> "the human inclination to be concerned only with myself, my group, my own petty interests."<sup>80</sup> Thus, Francis's insights and pastoral leadership prompt those in Catholic higher education to advance DEI initiatives with different qualitative approaches from his predecessors: openness, fearlessness, and eagerness.

### *Openness*

Pope Francis embraces and even celebrates differences. Whether, for example, Muslim prisoners; transgender, lesbian, and gay people; or leaders with whom he differs greatly, he meets them where they are, listens to their stories, initiates dialogue, and seeks to be understood. In a word, he encounters them, which is a theme of his papacy that originates in the Aparecida document. This openness is to be modeled, especially at a time when speakers on campuses and ideas are cancelled rather than considered for dialogue. If the pope can embrace a transgender teen in the Vatican, should not a Catholic institution seek ways to welcome and foster the full human development of transgender students?

### *Fearlessness*

Catholic identity is strengthened, not threatened, if colleges' practice and policies reflect the behavior and pastoral leadership of the pope. Indeed, Catholic groups or leaders may respectfully not align, agree with or appreciate a certain dimension of a pope's ministry. However, those who in fact practice, seek direction from and integrate a

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<sup>78</sup> Czerny and Barone, 23-30.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>80</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 166.



sitting pope's pastoral vision, leadership, and teaching, can reasonably and fairly claim muscularity in upholding Catholic identity.

Presently, a policing culture exists in various places within Catholicism where parties seek to expose alleged violations against what is deemed authentically Catholic; two scenarios may be illustrative. One university has for decades hosted an ROTC program that peace activists protest and demand be shuttered for its connection to war preparations that conflict with Pope Francis's teaching on peace.<sup>81</sup> Another school posts a few blurbs on its various social media platforms during Pride Month in June that reference Outreach Ministry, explicitly supported by Pope Francis, prompting some alums and faculty to complain and to threaten withdrawal of philanthropic support because of perceived threats to Catholic identity.

Both situations beckon a response grounded in the normative teachings of the church. Each relates to DEI: The ROTC program allows many first-generation students from economically challenged families to complete college, and the Pride Month posts offer support and community for LGBTQ+ community members. What's more, the church continues to host military ordinarates throughout the world to serve those in the military and their families. Yes, fear abounds around misperceptions of a Catholic school being pro-war or not supporting the sexual ethics of the church. The questions for the leaders are never simple; they always involve nuance—significant nuance; consequently, decisions cannot be reflexive. Furthermore, fear of the pain, optics, or fallout of the misperceptions does not seem to have a place in the leadership that Pope Francis is modeling. This disposition could be traced to his sense of a spirituality that is the work of the Holy Spirit, a theme he develops in the apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exultate*.

Holiness is also *parrhesía*: it is boldness, an impulse to evangelize and to leave a mark in this world. To allow us to do this, Jesus himself comes and tells us once more, serenely yet firmly: “Do not be afraid” (*Mk* 6:50). “I am with you always, to the end of the world” (*Mt* 28:20). These words enable us to go forth and serve with the same courage that the Holy Spirit stirred up in the Apostles, impelling them to proclaim Jesus Christ. Boldness, enthusiasm, the freedom to speak out, apostolic fervor, all these are included in the word *parrhesía*.<sup>82</sup>

Inspired and guided by Pope Francis's “boldness,” those charged with leadership in Catholic higher education have a prime model for discerning how the normative teachings of the church, the pope's

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<sup>81</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 256, 257.

<sup>82</sup> Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exultate*, 2018, no. 129.

pastoral example, and his call for dialogue can be applied with clarity and courage to pressing issues of the day. If a position, policy, or program echoes with the pope's leadership of and teaching in the church, need fear or concern emerge for a Catholic university regarding Catholic identity?

### *Eagerness*

Pope Francis is unafraid to speak out with courage on questions related to immigrants and refugees, care for creation, outreach to the LGBTQ+ community, and robust challenge to clericalism. He has conceived a vision for the church and the program of synodality has the means to implement that same vision. He advances his agenda with no reluctance or timidity; rather, he leads eagerly, confident in the fruits of his discernment and hopeful in their outcomes, while trusting in the Spirit. With such an inspiration, cannot a Catholic college be eager to move forward boldly with its DEI work?

One additional difference between Francis and his predecessors may be revolutionary for DEI practitioners in Catholic higher education: The present pope “shows a greater historical awareness of the progress of certain secular processes” and “is more consistent with historical reality.”<sup>83</sup> The implications of this fact may stretch well beyond the present considerations facing DEI work. Obviously, Pope Francis contrasts in many ways with his predecessors. But he has effectively appropriated their teachings on the environment, economy, and migration while engaging in dialogue with the shifting social and cultural mores. Furthermore, he has not changed one element of the church's teaching on human sexuality. However, Francis sees the world and the signs of the times as opportunities for engagement and encounter, and he seeks, as in the documents of Vatican II, to bring “a broader understanding of Tradition”<sup>84</sup> that “allows the church to move toward rethinking its magisterial posture, so that it may be more respectful of the diverse identities that make it up.”<sup>85</sup> Can this be a mandate for Catholic higher education as it relates to DEI?

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<sup>83</sup> Czerny and Barone, *xxxi*.

<sup>84</sup> Czerny and Barone, 69.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, *xxxi*.

## Conclusion: Pope Francis, SJ

One final key factor that distinguishes Francis from his two immediate predecessors is that he, as Jorge Mario Bergoglio, had been a member of the Society of Jesus for 32 years before he technically left the Society when called to become a member of the hierarchy of the church at his ordination as a bishop. These more than three decades were significant and, like any consecrated religious woman or man, powerful in terms of his faith development, sense of church, and religious imagination. Trained as a Jesuit prior to, during, and after Vatican II, he came to see the centrality and power of baptism as the source and force of the grace of religious life.<sup>86</sup>

As pope, he has called for a missionary church with missionary disciples following their baptismal call. His affection and affinity for Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* on evangelization is evident as that exhortation is referenced thirteen times in Francis's own *Evangelii Gaudium*; he also opined that Paul VI's exhortation "is the greatest pastoral document that has ever been written to this day."<sup>87</sup> Francis reinforces the theology of Vatican II that called all baptized people to evangelize: "In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples."<sup>88</sup> In *Lumen Fidei*, he said that baptism "modifies all our relationships, our place in this world and in the universe, and opens them to God's own life of communion."<sup>89</sup> Pope Francis is an inclusionary missionary, seeking to connect with those who may not feel welcomed, cannot seem to make their way to church, or have not been heretofore invited. Indeed, this pope welcomes diversity, seeks equity, and demands inclusion. Catholic higher education can become more fully Catholic by following his lead and pastoral vision.

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<sup>86</sup> Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1965, no. 5. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651028\\_perfectae-caritatis\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html)

<sup>87</sup> J.J. Ziegler, "Evangelii Nuntiandi: The Greatest Pastoral Document That Has Ever Been Written," *The Catholic World Report*, 2013. Available at <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2013/12/12/the-greatest-pastoral-document-that-has-ever-been-written/>

<sup>88</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 120.

<sup>89</sup> Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, no. 42.