

Catholicism and Social Justice Since Vatican II: An International Perspective.

Dr. Michele Dillon

Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Professor of Sociology, University of New Hampshire
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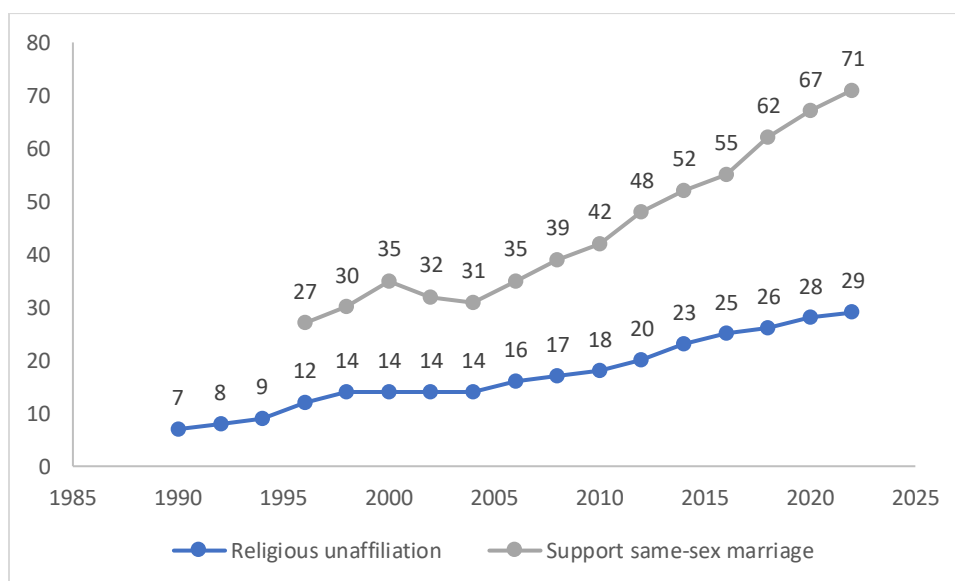
The Catholic Church's well-established tradition of social justice teaching for the modern age dates to Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), and the further elaboration of its principles by successor popes, including especially Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) and John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963). Vatican II and subsequent papal encyclicals further affirm the moral obligation to build a just society amidst accelerated economic, social, and technological progress. Vatican II's pronounced elevation of social justice—its insistence on the proactive, societal obligations of the church hierarchy and the laity, and its articulation of concrete justice questions amid societal change¹—expanded the church's social justice engagement across several countries (e.g., Berryman 1987; Clevenger 2020; Faggioli 2016; O'Brien 1997; Smith 1991; Still and Rompre 2018). Today, I focus on the U.S., recognizing that while the church and church teachings are universal, Catholic institutional, community and individual practices always occur in, and are shaped by, the specific socio-historical, cultural, political and economic context in which the church is embedded and evolves. First, let's note a few important contextual points about contemporary American society:

- Although religion is culturally and empirically a vibrant party of American life, American society has, similarly to Ireland, undergone significant secularization over the past twenty-five years, evidenced by an accelerated pace of religious non-affiliation and a relatively rapid increase in acceptance of civil rights for same-sex couples, including marriage (see Figure 1).

¹ See especially *Gaudium et spes*, in Abbott 1966.

- Notwithstanding the large numbers of Catholics and Protestants who have disaffiliated, Catholics—largely due to immigration and the higher fertility rates of Hispanics—continue to maintain a stable share of the population (approx. 21 percent).
- Close to two-thirds of U.S. Catholics are white and, since the 1970s, they are among the most highly educated and most affluent Americans. Hispanic Catholics (approx. one-third of U.S. Catholics) are disproportionately young and poor.
- In 2022, 11.5 percent of the U.S. population, approximately 37.9 million people, were living below the poverty line (down from 15 percent in 2010, and from 23 percent in 1959; <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/stories/poverty-awareness-month.html>).
- The U.S., historically, has had a strong (though contested) separation of church and state, and a robust non-profit sector across all institutional domains (including health care, education, social services, the arts). As an historical outsider, an immigrant minority religion, the Catholic Church established its own robust institutions in the mid-nineteenth, parallel to other church and state institutions.

Figure 1: Secularization in the U.S. (Source: Pew Research Center, various years)

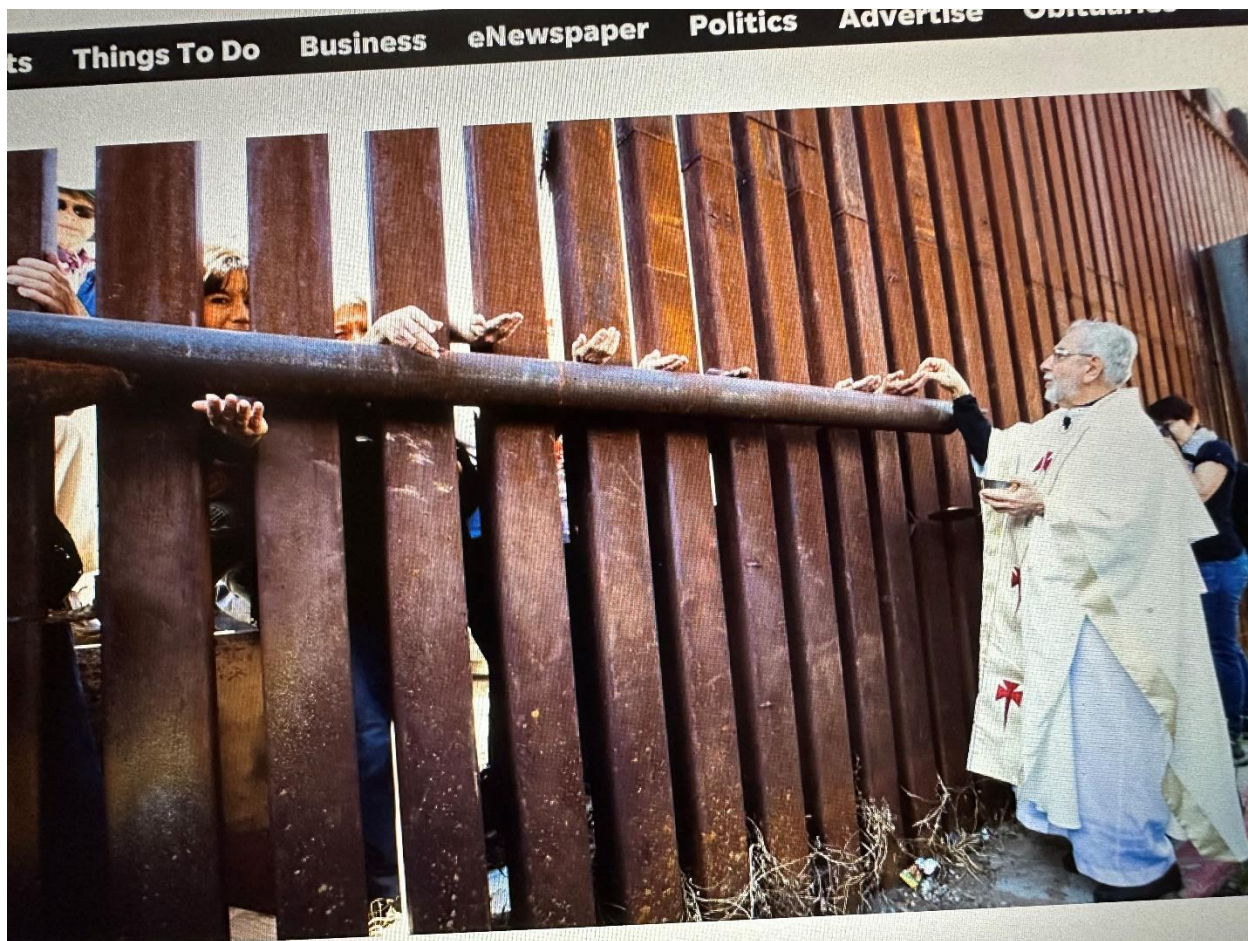


Nonetheless, despite significant contextual differences between the U.S. and Ireland regarding philanthropy, racial composition, and Catholicism's minority religious status, the tensions I highlight regarding the U.S. Catholic bishops' and laity's prioritization of social justice may have relevance for the current situation in Ireland.

Catholic Social Justice in Action: The Church Hierarchy's Leadership

Vivid newspaper photographs a few years ago captured the symbolic power of a public Catholicism advancing the cause of social justice. In April 2014, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and several other media outlets showed Bishop Gerard Kicanas, from the diocese of Tucson in the border state of Arizona, distributing Holy Communion to outstretched hands through the narrow openings between the high steel bars of the U.S.–Mexican border fence (see Figure 2). He and other bishops had concelebrated an outdoor Mass with Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley on the Arizona side of the fence. This iconic image continues to reverberate amidst the contested politics of immigration. Bishop Kicanas's actions exemplify a church that has tremendous capacity to prod the consciences of Catholics as well as that of a secular nation. (See <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-mass-at-the-border-pictures-20140401-photogallery.html>)

Figure 2: Bishop Kicanas distributing holy communion to prospective immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.



The 1980s—what might be considered the high point of public Catholicism in the U.S.—saw a similar moral boldness. In 1983, the Catholic bishops’ conference (USCCB) issued a pastoral letter on *The Challenge of Peace* and in 1986 one called *Economic Justice for All*. The topics addressed – the continuing threat of warfare, nuclear armament, and growing economic inequality – and the urgency of the calls to action issued, were squarely in line with the justice priorities elaborated in *Gaudium et spes*. The process the bishops followed in preparing and writing the letters was also fully attuned to Vatican II’s emphasis on the importance of collaborative and lay-inclusive dialogue: “Over one hundred experts were interviewed for each letter, the media were invited to listen to the bishops’ discussion of the drafts, and lay people were invited to send in written responses to early drafts” (D’Antonio, Dillon, and Gautier 2013:

1; D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, and Wallace 1989: 164; see also Burns 1992: 108-118). Further, the letters were widely praised by elite secular media. *Time* magazine said the *Peace* letter was “a sweeping critique of nuclear deterrence strategy at the very time that [President] Reagan was caught up in an intense international struggle over the issue”; and *Newsweek* described *Economic Justice for All* as “a thorough-going, thought-provoking repudiation of the Reagan administration’s supply side economics and a call to reexamine economic priorities in light of the Church’s preferential option for the poor” (D’Antonio et al. 2013:1).

The bishops have long maintained the church’s commitment to highlighting awareness of economic justice issues and have a solid record of action in efforts to improve the living conditions for poor individuals and communities including migrants and refugees. At the national level, the infrastructure supporting the bishops’ extensive commitments to social justice include their office for Justice, Peace and Human Development; and committees on Domestic Justice and Human Development; International Justice and Peace; and Migration. 2021 marked the 50th anniversary of the establishment in 1971 of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the U.S. bishops’ “national anti-poverty program” through which it “works to break the cycle of poverty.” Additionally, dioceses across the US each have an organizational structure and resources providing a suite of social services based on diocesan/regional needs, and at the local parish level, there is extensive volunteer programming and engagement in social welfare outreach and support activities. Further, since 1993, the U.S. bishops’ Communities of Salt and Light program serves at the local parish level to harness Catholics’ engagement in advancing social justice.

The most prominent institutional driver of Catholic social justice work is the independently governed Catholic Charities, founded in 1910 (as the National Conference of

Catholic Charities). It has a highly visible presence across the U.S. with autonomous agencies in each diocese and a strong reputation for the scope and depth of its work as the largest non-governmental provider of social services in the U.S. Its mission “is to provide service to people in need, to advocate for justice in social structures, and to call the entire church and other people of good will to do the same.” Under the auspices of the local bishop, its national leadership is currently entirely lay. Catholic Charities is a member of Caritas Internationalis, an international federation of Catholic social service organizations, as is Catholic Relief Services, founded in 1943 to help refugees fleeing the devastation of World War II.

Moral Tension in Prioritizing Socio-Economic Issues

Yet, despite the church hierarchy’s impressive record of social justice engagement, it does not elevate economic inequality as a foremost priority for Catholics to consider in their voting behavior and related decisions. *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* is the U.S. bishops’ document intended to offer guidance to Catholics on how they should inform their consciences and “exercise their rights and duties” as citizens. It was first issued in 2007 and is subject to revision and episcopal conference approval prior to its quadrennial publication/dissemination, typically in November a year prior to the U.S. presidential election. It’s a contentious document, including among the bishops themselves. The recurring, key tension is whether abortion should be listed as *a* pressing priority along with other pressing priorities (e.g., immigration reform, economic inequality, climate change, racism) or whether it should be *the* preeminent priority. Defining abortion as *the* preeminent priority is reflective of and fully consistent with the sustained and extensive, publicly engaged activism of the American bishops since (and before) the federal legalization of abortion in 1973 by the U.S. Supreme Court (*Roe v. Wade*). And despite the U.S. Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe* in its 2022 *Dobbs* decision, the

bishops have reiterated, in anticipation of the 2024 presidential election, that the threat of abortion “remains our preeminent priority” (<https://www.usccb.org/offices/justice-peace-human-development/forming-consciences-faithful-citizenship>).

The tension between prioritizing “moral” over political-economic issues is not confined to the U.S. It’s an inherent tension, rather, in Catholicism and in how the church envisions its contemporary relevance. The tension lies in what the sociologist Gene Burns (1992) has elaborated as the “Catholic ideological structure” wherein church teachings on faith and morals—morals long construed by the Vatican as sexual morals—are morally binding directives and differentiated from what are considered more flexible ethical principles pertinent to sociopolitical and economic issues (Burns 1992: 98; 119-123). The church’s longstanding doctrinal prioritization of faith and morals over socio-economic issues, notwithstanding Vatican II’s nuancing of that differentiation, was strongly reinforced during the papacy of John Paul II (1978-2005) and subsequently Benedict XVI (though less intensely). The theological reins enforced during those decades included the elevation of doctrinally conservative bishops and, spurred by the perceived continuing threat of abortion, saw a more defensive, conservative turn in the U.S. bishops’ conference from the late 1990s (Dillon 2018).²

The eruption of the sex abuse crisis in early 2002, with the Boston archdiocese its epicenter, and the resultant reverberating impacts on the church’s moral, pastoral, and financial credibility had a somewhat tempering effect for a few years on the bishops’ moral activism. Within a decade or so, however, once the bishops’ revised guidelines for the protection of minors were in place, the passing of the Affordable [Health] Care Act (in 2010; colloquially known as

² It’s noteworthy that in 2010, Bishop Kicanas, then Vice President of the USCCB was defeated by Archbishop Dolan in the election for USCCB President. Dolan was appointed archbishop of New York in 2009 and elevated to Cardinal in 2012. This is the only time in the history of the USCCB that a sitting VP did was not elected President (Fox 2010).

Obamacare) providing free access to contraception (against the bishops' opposition), and the evident momentum in policies, laws, and public opinion in favor of same-sex marriage, converged to motivate the bishops' resurgent activism (Dillon 2018).

Starting in 2011, the bishops embarked on a "religious freedom" campaign. They gave voice to an expansive (postsecular) view of religious freedom, stating, for example, that "Religion is not something that can or should be divorced from the commercial sphere. Indeed, it is religion that often serves to direct that sphere toward the common good." Yet, their public statements, legal briefs, and political initiatives such as their annual "Fortnight for Freedom," made it plain that they were most eager to buffer church teachings on marriage and sexual morality against the threat to their further dilution posed by laws and policies affirming gender and sexual equality.

Their motivation, moreover, was accompanied by their self-acknowledged belief that their silence in the face of Catholic dissent on sexual issues had contributed to the secularization of Catholicism. In the words of Archbishop Lori, chairman of the Bishops' Committee for Religious Liberty:

As fewer people practice the faith, the culture becomes more secular and as the culture becomes more secular still fewer people are inclined to practice their faith . . . religious freedom begins to take a back seat to other so-called freedoms. . . . Among the most significant . . . sexual freedom. When people lose interest in the Church or claim to have issues with the Church, it oftentimes has to do with the Church's teachings on sex and marriage: contraception, sterilization, abortion, same-sex marriage, LGBT issues. Some have walked away in protest but many have just faded away without a real understanding of what the Church actually teaches and why. In such matters, silence has not been golden (quoted in Dillon 2018: 101).

Hence the bishops' legal activism focused on, for example, the rights of businesses to decline to provide goods and services to same-sex couples, and the rights of employers to be automatically exempt from providing insurance-mandated contraception as part of employees' medical benefits

package. By contrast, the bishops have been hesitant in identifying economic policy actions that might be considered immoral or a threat to the common good—despite their argument that church teachings place a check on businesses against economic exploitation and related ills (see Dillon 2018: 97-125).

The challenge encountered in rebalancing the church's priorities

Indeed, it can be argued that a reason why some high-profile U.S. bishops today are Francis's loudest critics and others seem to tacitly subvert his agenda is alarm at what they see as his deviation from the church's prioritization of faith and morals through his insistent accentuation of social justice and his emphasis on the church's pastoral role—the church's obligation to serve as a field-hospital rather than as an enforcer of doctrinal purity. Soon after being elected pope, Francis conveyed this nuancing of the church's priorities. In a widely publicized September 2013 interview, he named what he called the church's obsession, and called for a new balance in its priorities. Francis stated:

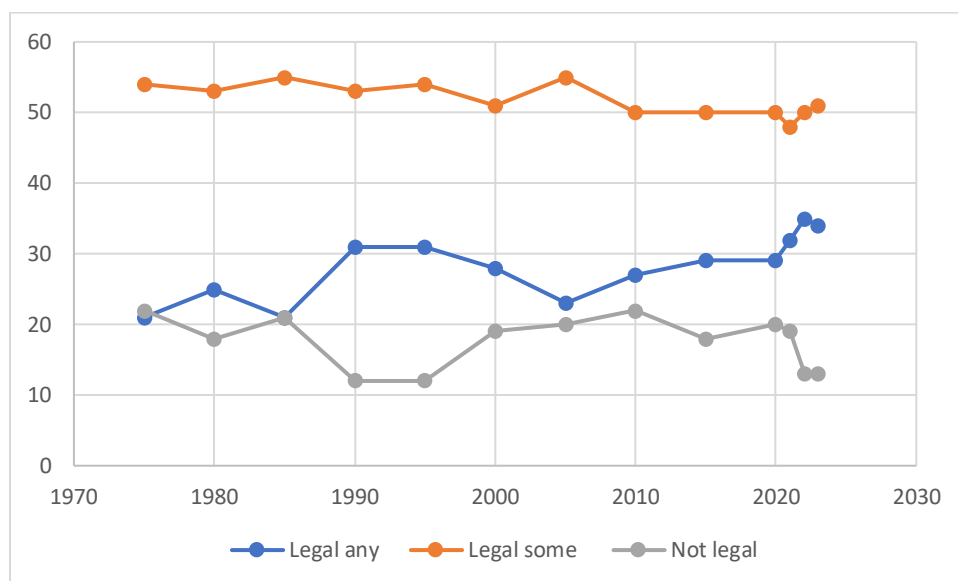
We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible . . . when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context. The teaching of the church is clear, for that matter, and I am a son of the church, but it is not necessary to talk about these things all the time. The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. Proclamation in a missionary style focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things. . . . We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel. . . . [T]he proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives. Today sometimes it seems that the opposite order is prevailing.³

³ The interview "A big heart open to God," was conducted by Antonio Spadaro, editor of the Rome-based Jesuit journal *Civiltà Cattolica* and was published in *America* magazine, translated by Massimo Faggioli; and published online, September 30, 2013. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>

The substance and tone of Francis's statements, exhortations (e.g., *The Joy of the Gospel* [JG] 2013), and encyclicals (e.g., *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* 2015) over the past ten years have consistently substantiated this rebalanced understanding of the church to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Time and again, Francis emphatically highlights the urgency of attentiveness to the inclusion of the poor in society and the remediation of problems such as climate change whose global effects exacerbate poverty and other forms of social and cultural exclusion. Hearing "the cry of the poor" and coming to their aid (JG #187), he has reiterated, "is fundamental at this time in history." (JG #185). Heeding this plea "means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs we encounter." (JG #188).

Nonetheless, despite Francis's social justice emphasis, the U.S. Catholic bishops' conference, with the exception of a few individual bishops (e.g., Cardinals Cupich, Tobin and McElroy), tend to resist the rebalancing Francis calls for. They continue, as I noted above, the prioritization of abortion above all other issues, they have maintained the thrust of their activism on religious freedom, and they have been generally reticent to amplify Francis's calls to action on climate change and poverty. Given the bishops' consistency of political action on abortion, some readers may find it interesting to know that despite the extensive array of both pro-life and pro-choice activism over the past fifty years, American abortion attitudes show much stability, with most Americans favoring legal abortion in some but not all circumstances (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Attitudes to legal abortion in the U.S., 1975-2023.



Note: Percentages agreeing with the statement that abortion should be (i) legal in any circumstance, (ii) legal in certain circumstances, or (iii) illegal in all circumstances. (Source: Gallup poll, various years.)

Beyond the Bishops: Catholics' Embrace of Social Justice

One of the most notable impacts of Vatican II on social justice activism is the energy it unleashed among religious sisters (nuns), and this was especially evident in the U.S. Books and films (such as *Rebel Hearts*) attest to the theological “radicalization” of nuns who were inspired by the words and principles of Vatican II to literally get out of the convent and get into poor and socio-economically disadvantaged neighborhoods while remaining as vowed religious. (Many too decided to pursue advanced degrees in sociology, theology, law, etc., and in line with Vatican II to subsequently deploy their new-found knowledge and skills in the work of justice, either as academic or as practitioners.) This post-Vatican II development injected a huge amount of talent and commitment into the actual daily work of social justice as well as bolstering its religious and political advocacy. It also contributed to the secularization of Catholicism – both because it gave nuns new freedom and experiences that were empowering and emancipatory in

and of themselves, and which, in turn, emboldened them to take a more autonomous view of their relationship to the Vatican and church hierarchical authority. It also simultaneously opened new possibilities for nuns' routine interactions with lay people and in forming alliances with the laity on issues of church reform, alliances that still hold today.

Most notably, a small number of religious sisters from across the U.S. came together in 1971 to form what today is known as NETWORK, a high-profile Washington D.C.-based lobbying organization that advocates for justice across several domains (e.g., employment policies, food security, immigration, affordable health care). In recent years, its “Nuns on the bus” tour which follows presidential campaign candidates across several American cities while it publicly lobbies in situ for more just economic and social policies, has received extensive media attention, as well as the notice of politicians and local voters (see <https://networklobby.org/bus2020/>). Its Executive Director, Sister Simone Campbell played a critical role in, among other significant federal policies, forging support for the legislation that ratified the Affordable [Health] Care Act (Obamacare) in 2010 (opposed by the bishops); and in 2022 she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Biden.

More broadly, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) – an association of the leaders of congregations of women religious founded in 1956 and which represent two-thirds of all U.S. nuns, also has long had a significant, activist focus on what it calls “transformative justice.” Indeed, it quotes the opening sentence of *Gaudium et spes* on its website while elaborating on its commitment “to addressing the root causes of systemic injustice.” Because of their activism, the LCWR and Network were subject to a doctrinal inquiry initiated by Benedict in 2008 on account of concerns that the nuns were more focused on social justice and intra-church equality than on defending church teachings on abortion and sexuality.

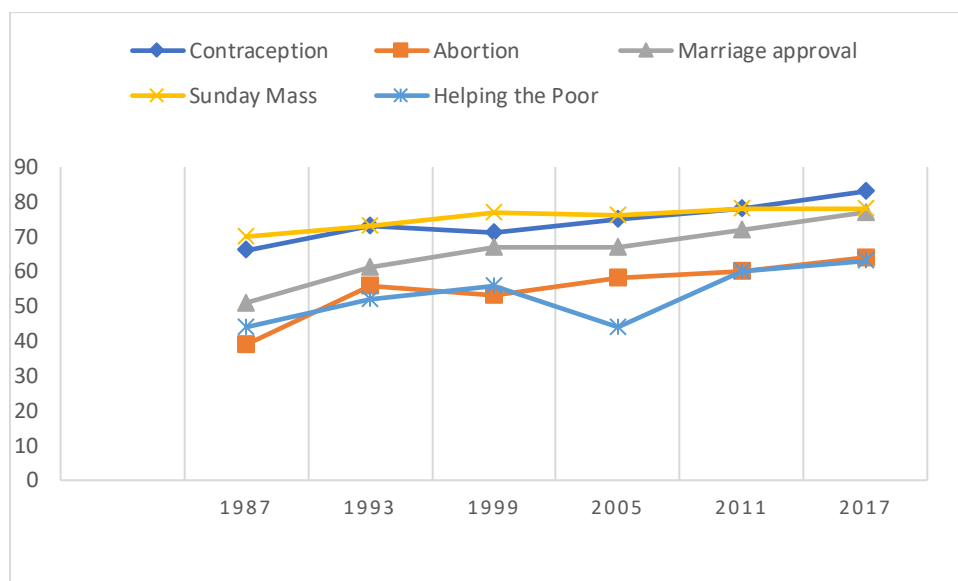
Following the inquiry which ended in 2012 with the Vatican delegating the close monitoring of LCWR activities to a small group of U.S. bishops, this arrangement was abruptly ended by Francis in 2015 and, meeting with some of their leaders, he encouraged them to continue their social justice activities.

Catholic attitudes

The elevated embrace of the church's teachings on social justice over sex and gender issues is also apparent among the U.S. Catholic laity. For several post-Vatican II decades now, successive cohorts of American Catholics have lived out a vibrant sense of ownership of Catholicism that allows them to be committed to the church and their Catholic identity while rejecting the moral authority of the Vatican and the bishops (Greeley 1985; Hout and Greeley 1987; Dillon 1999).

The national survey of Catholic laity led by Bill D'Antonio from the Catholic University and conducted six times between 1987 and 2017, with me joining the research group in 2010, shows a steady pattern of increased lay autonomy relative to several elements of church teaching. As Figure 4 shows, large proportions of U.S. Catholics say that one can be a "good Catholic" and not adhere to church teaching on weekly Mass, contraception, marriage, abortion, and helping the poor (see Figure 4). It's notable that Catholics express more deference to church teaching on helping the poor than on contraception, marriage, and weekly Mass. It's also interesting, especially given the tension in the theological-ideological prioritization of abortion over poverty/social justice, that American Catholics tend to see both issues as having relatively equal parity (except in the 2005 survey).

Figure 4: Trends in Catholics' views of their autonomy as "good Catholics" 1987-2017.



Note: Percentage agreement that “One can be a good Catholic and not adhere to church teaching on [specific issue]” The data for Figure 4 are presented in Table 1 at the end of the paper. (Source: Catholic Laity Survey [D’Antonio et al., 1989; 1996; 2001; 2007; 2013; Dillon 2019].)

These data nonetheless illuminate the challenge in motivating Catholics’ active commitment to social justice, a challenge made more urgent by the fact that in the U.S. there is not the same level of government support for the poor and disadvantaged as there is in Ireland, much of Europe, and Canada. While Catholic Charities and other such agencies receive government subsidies, these subsidies are not sufficient to meet the demand for the respective services and hence the significance of individual and corporate charitable giving. Yet, in 2017, 63 percent said that one can be a good Catholic without donating time or money to the poor (see Figure 4), a view equally common across younger and older generations of Catholics (data not shown). And barely half (49 percent) of American Catholics said that “charitable efforts toward helping the poor” are essential to what it means to be Catholic. Further, two-thirds (64%) of Catholics in the 2017 survey said they didn’t do any voluntary work to help the poor and other vulnerable groups in the previous six months; over a fourth (29 percent) reported doing so

occasionally, and fewer than one in ten (7 percent) regularly. More generally, only 13 percent said they had regularly volunteered in the community in the past six months, a third (35 percent) reported occasionally doing so, and over half (52 percent) reported never volunteering.

Nevertheless, there is a strong culture of everyday giving in American society, both formally (e.g., donating time and/or money to local and national charity and cultural organizations, schools, churches), and informally (e.g., helping neighbors and family members). Many studies over the last several decades indicate that religiously affiliated individuals are more likely to donate money and to give more money and time to helping others than those who are not church members, though there are no clear-cut patterns as to whether specific religious groups (e.g. Catholics) are, in general, more giving than others (e.g., Vaidyanathan, Hill and Smith 2011) and political ideology further complicates these trends (e.g., Yongzheng and Peixu 2021).

Social change, inequality, and empathy walls

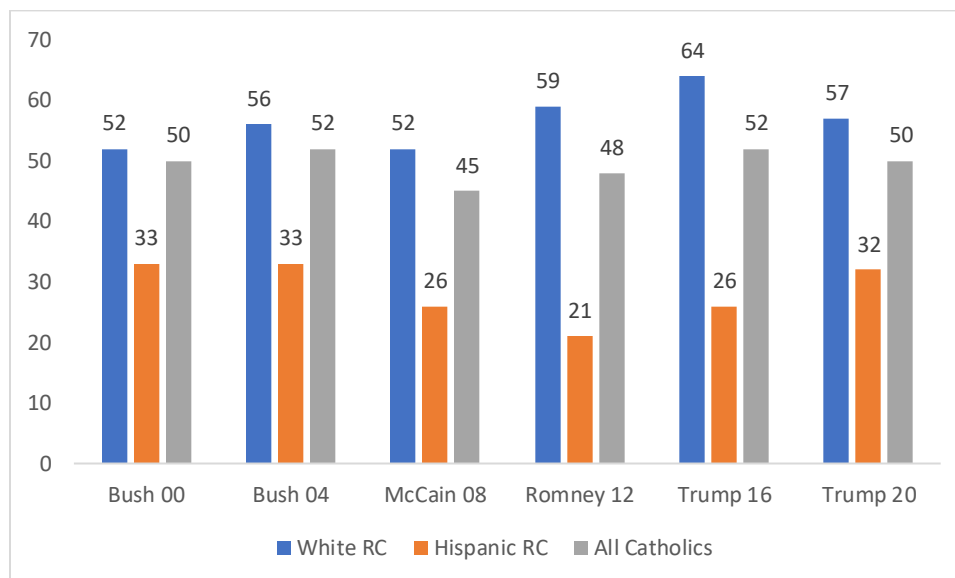
Not only giving patterns, but perhaps even more importantly, voting and other political behavior that is supportive of socially inclusive government policies, are intertwined with the dynamics of the larger economic, political and social context. Among other factors, the exponential increase in, and the demographic and ideological diversity of, unaffiliated Americans; the increase in political polarization, including polarized perceptions of the government's role in social assistance and misperceptions of the racial minority groups it benefits (e.g., Hout and Maggio 2021; Perry 2022); global forces that escalate migration and refugee flows, underscored in the U.S. by the persistence the US-Mexican border crisis; and consciousness of an every-growing wealth gap (e.g., Pew Research Center 2020), are all likely to influence how Americans, religious or not, assess their own and the government's social justice

obligations. Amid socio-economic uncertainty due to industrial, technological, and cultural transformation and the politics of resentment it fosters, it is easy, as Arlie Hochschild (2016: 5) has noted, for empathy walls to develop, walls that foster indifference and even hostility toward those who are different from us.

Concern for—and political action on behalf of—poor people and others who are socially disadvantaged is further complicated by ideological and cultural assumptions (ethos of individual self-reliance, upward mobility/the American Dream). This is substantiated by a recent national poll: while 61 percent of Americans said that there is too much economic inequality in the U.S., only 42 percent said that reducing economic inequality should be a top priority for the federal government (Pew Research Center 2020: 3-4).⁴ Notably, too, Democrats and low-income earners were far more likely than Republicans and high-income earners to endorse both statements. The data are not broken down by religion but given that white Catholics are among the nation's highest earners and a majority of white Catholic has voted for the Republican candidate in each of the past six presidential elections (see Figure 5), we can infer that many Catholics share the Republican/high-earners' views of economic inequality.

⁴ The issues receiving greater prioritization were more affordable health care, 72 percent; dealing with terrorism, 65 percent; reducing gun violence, 58 percent; and addressing climate change, 49 percent.

Figure 5: Percentage of Catholics' voting for Republican presidential nominees, 2000-2020.
(Source: Pew data, various years; and Nortey 2021.)



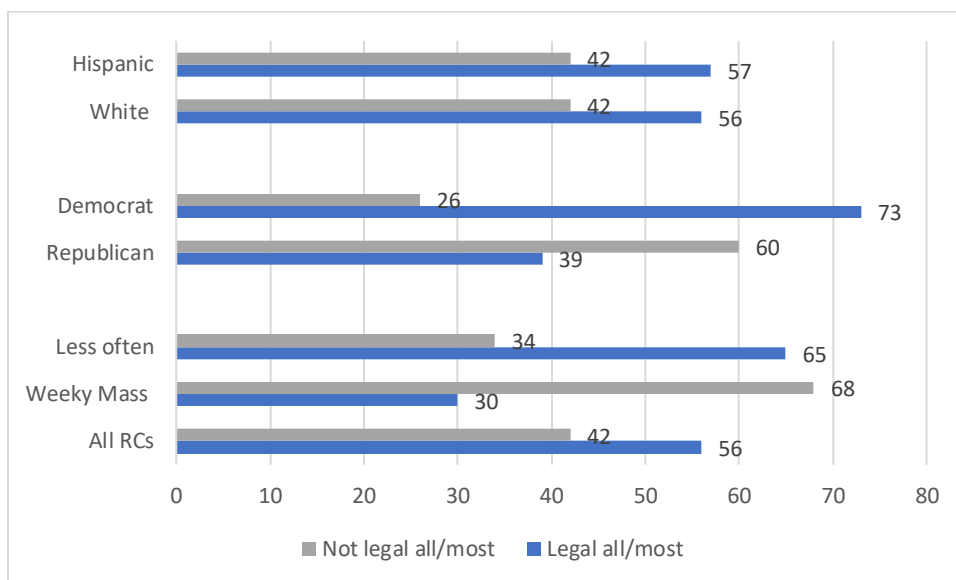
Note: The Democratic nominees were Al Gore (2000), John Kerry (2004), Barack Obama (2008 & 2012), Hilary Clinton (2016), and Joe Biden (2020).

It is difficult to parse out, but the available data suggest that, historically, notwithstanding John F. Kennedy's iconic election, white Catholics became attracted to the Republican party largely on account of its fiscally conservative policies (e.g., low taxes; reduced social assistance programs). In any case, today in the U.S., with political affiliation rather than religious affiliation serving as the overarching driver of attitudes and behavior, Catholic Republicans are significantly more likely than Catholic Democrats to oppose legal abortion (see Figure 6) (and a parallel polarized division is evident in attitudes on climate change).

Finally, another point to consider is that, irrespective of socioeconomic status, political affiliation, or ethnicity (white Catholics are significantly more affluent than Hispanic Catholics), Catholics may be likely to push back against the framing of social justice as a Catholic or church ethos in light of the continuing financial (as well as moral) fall-out from the church's sex abuse scandals. Over thirty dioceses have declared bankruptcy protection due to litigation and victim

compensation costs (e.g., Riley 2019), the most recent being San Francisco and, America’s oldest and most iconic Catholic diocese, Baltimore.

Figure 6: U.S. Catholics’ views on abortion, differentiated by race, political affiliation, and Mass attendance, 2022.



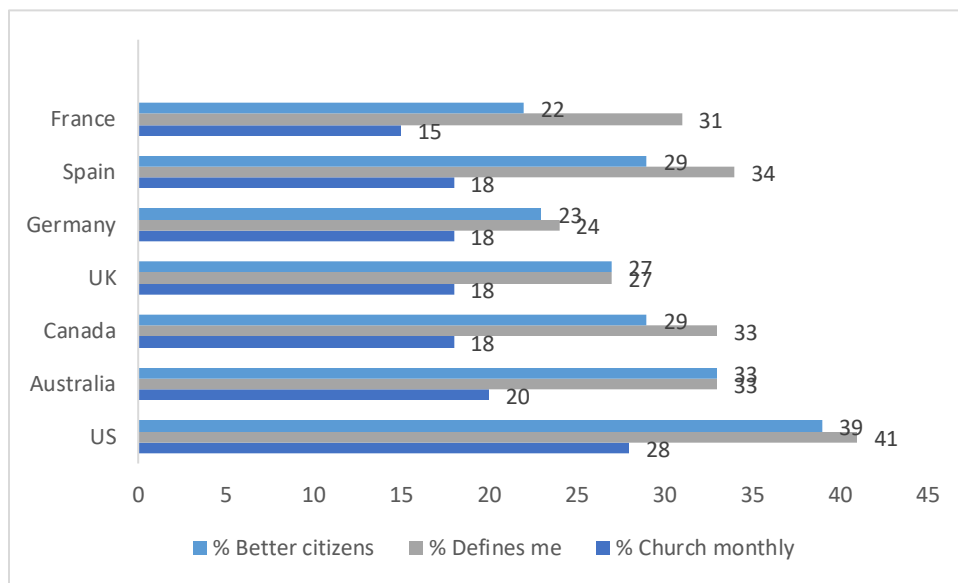
Note: Percentages agreeing that abortion should be legal in all or most circumstances or illegal in all or most circumstances (Pew Research Center data; Smith 2022).

Does the Catholic Social Justice Tradition have Political Relevance Amidst Secularization?

Robust secularization trends in the U.S. – as well as for several decades in Europe and Canada, and more recently, Ireland and South America – may cast a pall on the socialization of new cohorts into an appreciation of social justice and of its underlying theological rationale. Increased secularism, however, does not mean the end of religion or the demise of its public relevance. As conveyed by Figure 7, approximately one-fifth to a third of individuals in well-settled secular countries have opinions or practices conveying the continuing personal and cultural salience of religion. Theoretically, at least, recognition of what is construed as postsecular society—wherein the religious and the secular empirically coexist in well-settled secular societies and engage respectfully with one another (Habermas 2008; Dillon 2018)—

might help revitalize the push toward collective remedial policies that would mitigate poverty, homelessness, climate change, the political and cultural exclusion of immigrants and refugees, etc.

Figure 7: Cross-country comparisons on key religious indicators.



Note: % = percentage in each country agreeing strongly or somewhat with specific statements:

Better citizens: “People with a religious faith are better citizens.”

Defines me: “My religion defines me as a person.”

Church monthly: “Respondent goes to a place of worship once a month or more often.”

Source: IPSOS Global Religion, 2023. This was a survey conducted in 26 countries, excluding Ireland.

One does not need to be immersed in Catholicism or in its social teaching to be motivated to support the work of social justice. Nonetheless, the accumulated body of Catholic social teaching provides a commanding intellectual and ethical framework with which to think about the common good. It can (possibly) nurture a more stable and enduring social justice mindset than *ad hoc* reliance on public tragedies (e.g., migrant drownings) and other episodic suffering events, to stir people’s consciences. Its relevance lies in its sustained articulation of the obligations owed by individuals, groups, and institutions—including the state—to serving and sustaining the common good, notwithstanding the pervasive transnational hold of neo-liberalism and the apparent preeminence of the logic of the market. Even if one does not share, for example,

the Christian belief that all individuals are created in the image and likeness of God and, therefore, as Catholic teaching outlines, are deserving of fundamental respect, one can embrace its secular translation into the principle that the dignity of the individual must be respected without exception (cf. Habermas 2006). Further, the transnational history and embedded physical presence of the church across the world gives the church a global perspective on socio-political and economic issues that can add breadth, depth, and nuance to how specific issues are assessed from a single national or local perspective.

It is true, of course, that if people are attending church they are more likely to routinely hear reminders from the readings, sermons and prayers of the faithful of the moral obligation to love their neighbor and to practice hospitality toward the less well off. They are also likely to be provided with structured opportunities for getting engaged in social justice activities and, further, invited or encouraged by a co-religionist peer to do so. Absent, or independent of, church participation, however, there are other channels through which secular society can foster a social justice mindset. For example, there has been a surge in recent years in academic programs that focus explicitly on Peace and Justice Studies and Social Justice Leadership. Additionally, new programs in Environmental Studies/Sustainability are normatively underpinned by a commitment to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, several of which in turn closely align with Catholic social justice principles. Whether offered in a Catholic or a secular university, I would suggest that among other productive intellectual resources, the Catholic social justice paradigm should be a core element of all such curricula. There is also no impediment to secular justice organizations couching their mission and goals in language adapted from and credited to Catholic social justice teaching.

The Societal Need for the Public Amplification of Catholic Social Justice Teaching

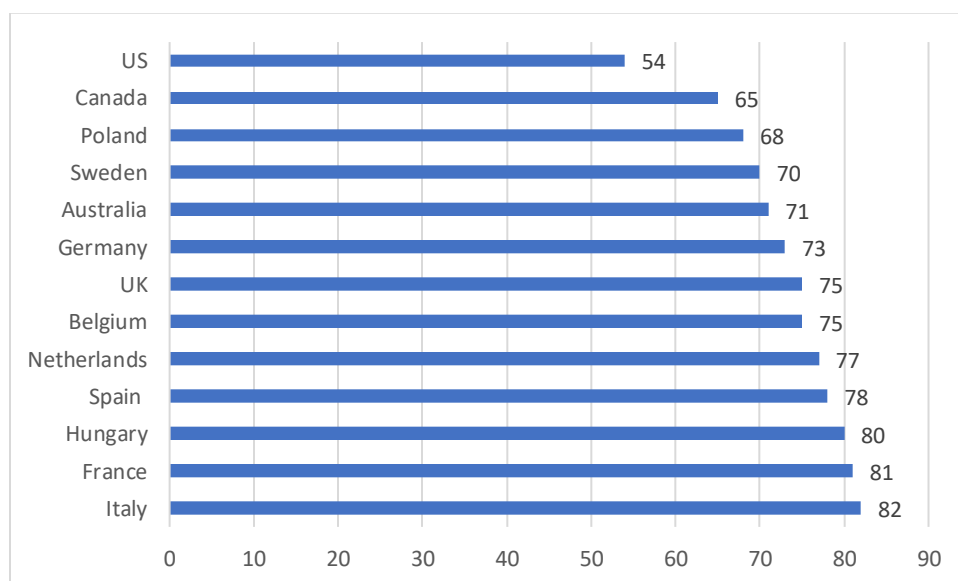
Although Catholics and others pay little attention to papal encyclicals and bishops' statements, it's nonetheless important in this postsecular era for church leaders (clerical or lay) to continue to exercise an active public voice and to do so through an array of channels. The media and other forms of exposure they receive allow for the incubation of the arguments expressed and enhance their potential to help prioritize justice issues and/or steer public discourse—and political action—on a given issue amid persistent problems of global economic and social exclusion. The postsecular capacity of the church to elevate the urgency of social justice is most visible in Francis's consistent attentiveness to the pressing, intertwined problems of economic inequality and climate change. His groundbreaking encyclical, *Laudato Si'* (*LS*; On Care for Our Common Home), published in June 2015, marks the Vatican's first extensive discussion of environmental issues, though previous popes frequently pointed to the negative consequences of climate change. The trenchant analysis Francis offers in *Laudato Si'* - and reiterated in his November 2023 statement *Laudate Deum* (*LD*; Praise God) - builds on the sharp critique of global economic inequality previously elaborated in *Joy of the Gospel* (noted above). As he argues in *Laudato Si'* (Francis 2015), given the wide-ranging ways in which human economic activity and the environment interact, these are not two separate problems but a singular societal crisis demanding intertwined solutions. In his clear framing of the issues at stake:

...human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself...these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us....We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis that is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded and at the same time protecting nature. (*LS* # 70; 139)

The (potential) universal appeal of Francis's call to action on climate change

In light of the construal of social justice and the common good consistently outlined by the church (dating back to Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*), the twinning of poverty and climate change is a remarkable ethical and rhetorical move. It is also one which opens the relevance of the church's discourse on social justice to new, increasingly secular audiences. Given that the threat posed by global climate change is increasingly perceived as a top concern for people across diverse countries (see Figure 8), including the U.S., Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, the UK, and Australia (Pew Research Center 2022a: 10), the church's framing of the issue has the potential to expand the social justice mindset of those for whom environmental concerns are paramount, including young people.

Figure 8: Percentage agreeing that global climate change is a major threat to their country. (Pew Research Center 2022)



Significantly, the arguments elaborated in both *Laudato Si* and *Joy of the Gospel*, while fully embracing specific Catholic theological beliefs and themes, are also especially well-suited to the multiple, frequently contradictory, strands in the current *zeitgeist*. Affirming the rationality of science, the arguments—as is the church's longstanding practice when it engages in public debates—extensively rely on the legitimacy of scientific studies, thus establishing the secular

credibility of the points being articulated (e.g., Dillon 1993;1996). Yet, at a time when we are witnessing a decline in trust in science (Pew Research Center 2022b) and there is pervasive denial of scientific findings on the negative impacts of climate change or of the extent of poverty, the church is also well-equipped to deploy poetic-emotional reasoning that can extend the rhetorical reach and appeal of its arguments and, additionally, simultaneously connect with the currents of (non-religious) spiritual yearning that are also pervasive. Notably, Francis opens *Laudato Si'* by quoting lines from the popular, beautifully evocative canticle of St. Francis, the patron saint of ecology, and in several instances across the encyclical he references him. He states, for example:

It is significant that the harmony that St. Francis of Assisi experienced with all creatures was seen as a healing of [the rupture between human beings and nature]....This is a far cry from our situation today, where sin is manifest in all its destructive power in wars, the various forms of violence and abuse, the abandonment of the most vulnerable and attacks on nature. (*LS* #66)

Though St. Francis is a figure squarely located within the church's religious repertoire, the church doesn't own him! The secular (or postsecular) authority of St. Francis is well conveyed by the remarkable fact that the British National Gallery, grandly situated in London's Trafalgar Square—a living memorial to Protestant Britain's imperial dominance in the 19th and early 20th centuries—hosted an exhibition, St. Francis of Assisi, in summer 2023. It featured an array of classical and contemporary depictions of the saint's life and works. According to the exhibition notes, the “consistently relevant” and “radical” St. Francis

continues to be an attractive and inspirational figure for Christians and non-Christians, pacifists and environmentalists, those who campaign for social justice, utopians and revolutionaries, animal lovers and advocates of human solidarity....He is considered by many to be a patron saint, or an ally, of causes related to social justice, interreligious dialogue, socialism, feminism, the animal-right movement and ecology, among others (Author's notes from museum visit, July 13, 2023).

St. Francis aside - notwithstanding the limits to the influence of any religious or political figure, there is some evidence of Pope Francis's impact on climate change. His moral influence is credited with helping push approval of the Paris Climate Agreement (in December 2015), committing 195 countries including the Holy See to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This moral influence continues to reverberate as underscored by Francis's recent, publicly streamed conversation with Bill Clinton on climate change (September 2023) as part of the Clinton Global Initiative, and his scheduled participation in the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 28) in December 2023 (which he was unable to attend due to illness), including participation with other global religious leaders in the summit's inaugural Faith Pavilion – another noteworthy postsecular phenomenon. The Vatican itself also organizes conferences on specific justice issues; and among other official Vatican statements, Francis's support for the Pan-Amazonian Church Network in Latin America, established in 2014, and his 2020 exhortation *Querida Amazonia* further strengthens the political and religious legitimacy of environmental and social justice advocacy.

Additionally, the Vatican and several Catholic dioceses and parishes across the globe, including in Ireland, have instigated or expanded an array of environmental sustainability policies, including the pledged divestment of church assets from fossil fuels (e.g., Mac Donald 2023; Roewe 2024). The work of Catholic Climate Covenant, an environmental advocacy organization established in 2006 and composed of several Catholic partner organizations; as well as that of other advocacy organizations and local grassroots chapters who are part of the cross-national Laudato Si' (Climate Change) Movement, are energized by Francis's prioritization of climate change and its twinning with economic justice issues. An array of these groups participated in what has been described as the largest post-2019 climate change march, held in

Manhattan during Climate Week, in September 2023, coinciding with the UN's Climate Ambition Summit. Such advocacy and action are further bolstered by the Vatican's establishment of the Laudato Si' Action Platform (in 2021) and the concrete resources it offers interested parties.

Consistency between talk and action on the part of any actor, whether religious or secular, bolsters their public legitimacy as authentic moral, relatedly, opens the possibility that more people will at least take note of what they have to say. The strength of the church's ethical stance is bolstered by the consistency between the church's discourse and its own record of action in this domain—for example, the “green” policies implemented by the Vatican; and the extensive work of Catholic Charities in mitigating poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness in local communities as well as ameliorating the circumstances of migrants and refugees. Secular or religiously unaffiliated people may not be in the habit of paying attention to the statements of the Catholic Church, a discourse that the un-immersed might reasonably presume to think of narrowly as “religious discourse.” Yet, given that religiously unaffiliated individuals are among those most concerned about global warming (70 percent of the unaffiliated in the U.S. compared to 57 percent of Catholics see global climate change as a serious problem; Diamant 2023), were they to be motivated to peruse *Laudato Si'* they would find a persuasive ethical-secular discourse whose specific arguments could bolster their own convictions about environmental justice while also providing them with arguments to deploy in trying to persuade others of the urgency of the intertwined problems and the enormity of the political solutions required.

Conclusion

Pope Francis may be especially adept at conveying the church's contemporary, postsecular relevance: his moral prioritization of the twin issues of economic justice and climate

change, his plainspoken style, his openness to an array of arguments and sources of authority, and his own genuine commitment to welcoming the marginalized and the excluded cohere into a powerful exemplar of a church that is well attuned to everyday social realities and, as Vatican II envisioned, able “to speak to all [people] in order to illuminate the mystery of man and to cooperate in finding the solution to the outstanding problems of our time.” (*Gaudium et spes* #10). Irrespective of who is pope, however, a plenitude of Catholic resources, including the church’s dynamically accumulating body of social justice teachings and an extensive infrastructural bedrock, are available to church leaders and lay participants for help in apprising the signs of the times and making the sorts of interventions in the public square that can ensure not only the church’s relevance, but the building of a better, more inclusive society.

Appendix: Table 1.

Data for Figure 4: Percentage agreeing that “one can be a good Catholic and not adhere to church teaching” on specific matters (Catholic Laity Survey).

	1987	1993	1999	2005	2011	2017
Contraception	66	73	71	75	78	83
Abortion	39	56	53	58	60	64
Marriage approval	51	61	67	67	72	77
Sunday Mass	70	73	77	76	78	78
Helping the Poor	44	52	56	44	60	63

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