

The Right to Private Property and Loving Our Neighbor

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*This is the second article in a series by Fr. Jeff reflecting on Pope Francis' new encyclical, Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*¹. The entire series can be found online at <http://www.renewaloffaith.org/our-relationships-with-others.html>.

As we continue our reflection on Pope Francis' new encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, we turn to paragraphs 118-123 and the right to private property. One might think that discussion on the right to private property belongs in a discussion of economics rather than an encyclical concerned with "fraternity and social friendship." When understood properly, the ownership of private property is directly related to how we treat people. In fact, it concerns the Seventh Commandment, "You shall not steal." The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* begins its discussion of the Seventh Commandment by introducing the topic of private property and the universal destination of goods.²

Demonstrating that what he says about private property is not a new idea, Pope Francis includes quotations from various sources including St. Gregory the Great (6th Century) as well as St. Pope John Paul II and St. Pope Paul VI (20th Century). The social encyclicals³ of the Catholic Church, beginning with *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, consistently support the right to private property when balanced against the "universal destination of goods."

To understand what Pope Francis is saying, perhaps a *brief* explanation of the "universal destination of goods" would be helpful. I would describe it by quoting the beginning of paragraph 2402 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

In the beginning God entrusted the earth and its resources to the *common* stewardship of mankind to take care of them, master them by labor, and enjoy their fruits. The goods of creation are destined for the *whole* human race⁴ (italics my emphasis).

God created the "earth and its resources" for all, this is the *universal* destination of goods. Acts 2:42-47 speaks of how the early disciples lived the "*communal life*" and "*had all things in common.*" This does not deny the right to private property. The remainder of paragraph 2402 affirms this right.

¹*Fratelli Tutti* is available from HijeGlobal Press, Cottbus, Germany (copyright 2020) or online at http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

² Read paragraphs 2401 and following of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* online at <https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/578/> or in print - *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997.

³ To find a list of the Social Encyclicals and related documents go to <http://www.renewaloffaith.org/social-encyclicals.html>.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2402 online at <https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/578>.

However, the earth is divided up among men to assure the security of their lives, endangered by poverty and threatened by violence. the *appropriation of property* is legitimate for guaranteeing the freedom and dignity of persons and for helping each of them to meet his basic needs and the needs of those in his charge. It should allow for a natural solidarity to develop between men.⁵ (*italics my emphasis*)

What is needed is balance. Having private property that is our own can assure of a home and a safety net (“security of their lives”) in difficult times. However, we should not accumulate so much private property as to deprive people of their own needs. As Pope Francis says.

As a community, we have an obligation to ensure that every person lives with dignity and has sufficient opportunities for his or her integral development (*Fratelli Tutti*, 118).

One person’s right to private property is limited by another person’s needs. This includes food and shelter. It also includes what they need for their “*integral development*”. This is not a new concept. Pope Francis points to the early church fathers like St. Peter Chrysologus and St. Augustine in the fourth century speaking of what we now call the “universal destination of goods”.

In the first Christian centuries, a number of thinkers developed a universal vision in their reflections on the common destination of created goods. This led them to realize that if one person lacks what is necessary to live with dignity, it is because another person is detaining it." (*Fratelli Tutti*, 119).

Yes, we have a right to private property *but not in excess* if it deprives another person of basic needs. Everyone has the right to have their basic needs fulfilled. Pope Francis goes back St. Gregory the Great to show how depriving someone of their basic needs violates the Seventh Commandment, you shall not steal.

In the words of Saint Gregory the Great, "When we provide the needy with their basic needs, we are giving them what belongs to them, not to us" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 119).

Pope Francis affirms the universal destination of goods

Once more, I would like to echo a statement of Saint John Paul II, whose forcefulness has perhaps, has been insufficiently recognized: "God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favouring anyone". For my part, I would observe that "the Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of private property". (*Fratelli Tutti*, 120).⁶

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The quote from St. Pope John Paul II is from *Centesimus Annus*, 31. The second quote is from Pope Francis’ own *Laudato Si*, 93.

There have been some people who question if Pope Francis is a socialist⁷. Socialism rejects the right to private property. Socialism has been rejected by the Catholic Church in such documents as Pope Pius XI's encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*.⁸

I do not believe Pope Francis intends to reject the right to private property. In fact, he affirms it as a right.

All other rights having to do with the goods necessary for the integral fulfilment of persons, including that of private property or any other property, should - in the words of Saint Paul VI - "in no way hinder [this right], but should actively facilitate its implementation"⁹. The right to private property can only be considered a *secondary natural right*, derived from the principle of the universal destination of created goods (*Fratelli Tutti*, 120, italics my emphasis).

Pope Francis does not do this on his own but as affirming St. Pope Paul VI. Yes, private property is a natural right, meaning it cannot be taken away, but it is a secondary right in that the right to private property is limited by the *needs* of others. A rich person should not grow richer by depriving another person of basic needs such as food and shelter.

As I said above, the Church has spoken on the failings of Socialism. In fact, the Church does not advocate for any one economic system. In speaking of the need for balance between the right to private property and the universal destination of goods, Pope Francis says

The right of some to free enterprise or market freedom cannot supersede the rights of peoples and the dignity of the poor, or, for that matter, respect for the natural environment, for "if we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 122).¹⁰

This shows that Capitalism has its struggles too. We must not become too focused on ourselves. Pope Francis reminds of how too much focus on ourselves can affect how we view others when he says

Consumerist individualism has led to great injustice. Other persons come to be viewed simply as obstacles to our own serene existence (*Fratelli Tutti*, 222).

Is Pope Francis a socialist or is he simply concerned with the needs of the poor? I believe what he offers in this encyclical is consistent with church teaching and rooted in the second greatest commandment, *to love our neighbor*. Thus, the discussion of private property is in keeping with the theme of "fraternity and social friendship" in *Fratelli Tutti*.

⁷ For more on this, see Elise Harris, "Top Vatican official says Americans misunderstand pope's social agenda" *Crux*. May 15, 2019 online at <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2019/05/top-vatican-official-says-americans-misunderstand-popes-social-agenda/>

⁸ Available online at http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html

⁹ *Populorum Progressio*, 22.

¹⁰ Interior quote from *Laudato Si*, 95.