

Introduction: Political Love

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POLITICAL LOVE. FOR THEOLOGICAL ETHICISTS SCHOOLED IN the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, such a phrase jars the sensibilities. Among Protestants and Catholics alike, our Niebuhrian roots run deep. We know that “politics” is power politics, the realm of statecraft, dirty hands, realism. We likewise know that while “love”—Jesus’s agapeic, kenotic, suffering love—is the law, fulfillment, and final end of what it truly means to be human, on this side of the eschaton love is an “impossible possibility.”¹ At least for collectives. While for Niebuhr love “remains a law for the individual as a vertical reference,” within the political realm it can only at best be a leaven. Within the confines of history, we must “meet power with power.”² The best we can achieve will be a relative, transient, and always imperfect justice.

Pope Francis disagreed. In *Fratelli Tutti*, he boldly called for a new practice of political love. With Martin Luther King, Jr., he considers political love to be far from “merely utopian” (no. 180). He tacitly rejects the many dualisms (both theological and philosophical) that structure Niebuhr’s vision of the social and political landscape. He rejects, too, his bleak, market-informed understanding of politics as endless competition for advantage between self-interested monads (whether persons or groups). He posits instead “a renewed appreciation of politics as ‘a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good’” (no. 180). Here, politics and charity (or love) are inseparable. With Niebuhr, he acknowledges that charity is, according to Jesus, “the synthesis of the entire Law” (no. 181). But rather than being simply the law for individuals in their transcendent relationship to God,

This means acknowledging that “love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Harper, 1935), 147–148.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Ethical Dualism,” 1952. Stanford Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/reinhold-niebuhrs-ethical-dualism.

felt in every action that seeks to build a better world.” For this reason, charity finds expression not only in close and intimate relationships but also in “macrorelationships: social, economic and political.” This political charity is born of a social awareness that transcends every individualistic mindset: “‘Social charity makes us love the common good,’ it makes us effectively seek the good of all people, considered not only as individuals or private persons, but also in the social dimension that unites them.” Each of us is fully a person when we are part of a people; at the same time, there are no peoples without respect for the individuality of each person. “People” and “person” are correlative terms. Nonetheless, there are attempts nowadays to reduce persons to isolated individuals easily manipulated by powers pursuing spurious interests. Good politics will seek ways of building communities at every level of social life, in order to recalibrate and reorient globalization and thus avoid its disruptive effects (nos. 181–182).

Such social and political love, Pope Francis believes, is not only faithful, but also effective (nos. 183–185), dismantling yet another binary that has long structured discourse in theological ethics.

In the current socio-political moment that continues to extend dark tentacles around the globe, most recently in Chile, both Pope Francis and Reinhold Niebuhr might seem unrealistically idealistic.³ Thus, it is a glimmer of grace and hope that the authors in vol. 15, no. 1, independently bring to the *Journal of Moral Theology* theological and theoretical investigations and concrete proposals for practices of political love. Valerio Aversano and Ellen Van Stichel do so most directly in their opening article entitled “How Can We Abandon Them? The Legacy of Pope Francis on Right-Wing Populism.” Here they analyze the relationship between the burgeoning novel right-wing nationalisms and populisms and the rhetoric of Christian identity. They turn to *Fratelli Tutti* to counter the charge, launched from the outset of his papacy, that Pope Francis was a Peronist and a populist; to employ his own analysis as a hermeneutical tool for illuminating current political developments; and to explore what his notion of political love might look like as an ethical Christian response to populism. As the Chilean election demonstrates, Aversano and Van Stichel’s analysis is particularly timely.

Yet we hardly need to look to Chile for relevance. The amalgam of right-wing populism and Christian rhetoric pervades the US landscape, distorting both the Christian tradition broadly and Catholicism specifically. Stephen Pope analyzes one of the most

³ Tiago Rogero, “Chile’s Far-Right President Taps Into Support for Pinochet that Never Went Away,” *The Guardian*, December 19, 2025, theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/19/chile-jose-antonio-kast-pinochet.

recent chapters in the distortive instrumentalization of Catholic tradition for political ends in his article “Revisiting the *Ordo Amoris*: A Contemporary Interpretation of a Classic Christian Theme.” By returning to the classic Augustinian and Thomistic accounts, Pope deftly debunks J.D. Vance’s specious misinterpretation of this traditional concept and provides a constructive account of how Christians should think about the ordering of love in their lives today, giving particular attention to the norm of the universal destination of the world’s goods and the principle of solidarity. He argues that any truly Christian ordering of love today requires us to give a high priority to the needs of the abject poor of our world and be particularly responsive to the dignity, aspirations, needs, suffering, and agency of our least advantaged neighbors, both at home and abroad.

Aversano, Van Stichel, and Pope engage the intersection of love and electoral politics. The remaining articles explore what Pope Francis’s vision of social and political love or charity might look like within the spheres of healthcare, economics, and—of all things—Catholic universities. In our third article, Thana de Campos-Rudinsky explores the move “From Grief to Grace,” proposing, as her subtitle notes, “An Ethics of Love for Institutions Responding to Perinatal Loss.” Perinatal loss and the grief of mothers and fathers might seem far afield from politics. Yet Campos-Rudinsky argues that the suffering bereaved parents experience is often compounded by the structural conditions—or politics—of healthcare settings. Drawing on personal narratives of profound perinatal loss, she argues that the move from grief to grace—from invisibility, fragmentation, and isolation—is not a solitary act of private resilience, but a communal and institutional moral responsibility, one that healthcare teams and institutions must fulfill through a constructive framework she names the “Ethics of Love for Institutions.” As she argues, grief becomes grace when institutions—animated by love—uphold both love of self and love of neighbor in the architecture of care.

Our final two articles turn the lens onto Catholic universities. Central to Pope Francis’ constructive vision in *Fratelli Tutti* and his account of political love is a thorough-going critique of the economic systems that continue to visit repeated assaults on the poorest in the world. How do Catholic universities participate in this economic system, which is always also a politics? The answer to that question has become exceedingly grim, especially over the last two decades.⁴

⁴ Gerald Beyer, *Just Universities: Catholic Social Teaching Confronts Corporatized Higher Education* (Fordham University Press, 2021). See also the *Journal of Moral Theology* 8, Special Issue 1 (2019), on “Contingent Faculty,” at jmt.scholasticahq.com/issue/1798-vol-8-issue-si1-2019, and *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, Special Issue 2 (2020), on “University Ethics,” jmt.scholasticahq.com/issue/2600.

While it may be impossible to dislodge Catholic universities from the grip of neoliberalism *in toto*, perhaps small steps might be a start. In “Unshackling the Coffee Supply Chain: An ‘Ethics Project’ for Catholic Colleges and Universities,” Bernard G. Prusak and Kim Lamberty propose one such possibility. Prusak is no stranger to this conversation.⁵ He and Lamberty analyze how the coffee supply chain works and how it is entangled in what Pope Francis called “the economy that kills.” Out of a long-standing practice of the kind of social friendship Pope Francis expounded with a community in Haiti, they outline a practical project for morally improving how coffee is supplied on the campuses of Catholic colleges and universities. Echoing Stephen Pope, their proposal offers a concrete way to resist the exploitation of the vulnerable and to affirm of the basic human dignity of the poor. In this way, Catholic universities might model for their students what political love looks like.

A final—and perhaps surprising—location for the exploration of political love is the university classroom. Jason A. Heron and Alessandro Rovati explore just such a prospect in their article “From Coercion to Fascination: Grades, Vulnerability, and Responsibility.” The limits of traditional modes of grading—plagued by structural bias and grade inflation⁶—provide solid grounding for Heron and Rovati’s experimental proposal for “ungrading.” Their analysis brings *Gaudium et Spes*, Pope Francis, and educational theories of Luigi Giussani and Alfie Kohn into conversation with their own pedagogical experiences to probe what a better sort of politics might look like in Catholic university classrooms. How do long-standing grading practices inhibit wonder, the love of learning, the love of particular bodies of knowledge; how do they prevent a key practice of love, which is contemplation; how do they obstruct professor-student relationships based in shared love of knowledge and disciplines and foster instead instrumentalist, Niebuhrian structures of power versus power? How do all these factors thereby undercut the ability of Catholic colleges to inculcate the foundation for sound personal and moral judgments—which is charity? As the fundamental goods, virtues, and practices of our profession are now under assault by artificial intelligence, their analysis is particularly timely and provides

⁵ Bernard G. Prusak and Jennifer Reed-Bouley, eds., *Catholic Higher Education and Catholic Social Thought* (Paulist Press, 2023). See also Matthew Shadle’s review of this volume in the *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 2 (2024): 169–171, doi .org/10.55476/001c.121953.

⁶ Rose Horowitz, “The Perverse Consequences of the Easy A,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 25, 2025, theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/08/harvard-college-grade-inflation/684021/.

a way forward for reimagining the art of teaching twenty-first-century college students.

We hope, too, that these five articles and the issue as a whole spur further analysis of Pope Francis's generative concept of political love. What theological and theoretical commitments distinguish his vision from that of Niebuhr or other 'realists'? What other concrete practices instantiate political love in other social, economic, and political relationships, both macro and micro? Where, particularly, are we called to embody Christoform political love in our current moment—what would it look like and what would it take to make it real? We are grateful for the authors in this issue for catalyzing this conversation. **M**