

Negotiating Authenticity: Immersion Experiences as Compromised Vehicles for Francis’s “Authentic Encounters”

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Abstract: This article explores whether it is possible for immersion experiences to reflect the authenticity Pope Francis argued is requisite for encounter. After defining immersion experiences and showing how their material form and embeddedness in unjust structures make them vulnerable to perpetuating inequitable power relations, I examine Francis’s usage of authenticity as a qualifier for encounter, identifying three ideals for authentic encounter in Francis’s writings, namely *mutuality*, *recognition*, and *responsibility*. I argue that processes of authentication shaped by social power often cut against these ideals, particularly insofar as immersion experiences tend toward “authentic” representations of the other structured by a privileged gaze. The final section draws these insights together to argue that immersion experiences are a compromised vehicle for encounter. Drawing on theologian Lauren Winner’s framework for characteristic damage in Christian practice, I explore how encounter’s characteristic damages are expressed in and made even more likely by immersion experiences. Yet, following Winner, I contend that such characteristic damage does not negate a practice altogether. Rather, knowledge of the way practices are likely to go wrong can help us to target the work of repair.

IN *FRATELLI TUTTI*, POPE FRANCIS WROTE, “THE PROCESS OF building fraternity, be it local or universal, can only be undertaken by spirits that are free and open to authentic encounters.”¹ This was not the first time Francis used the category of authenticity. In fact, the term appears a total of 310 times in the English translations of his official documents, including repeated use in relation to encounter. This raises the question: what is an “authentic encounter”? Colloquially, we use “authenticity” to mean that which is genuine. We might therefore take an authentic encounter to be one unmediated by the trappings of performance or pretense. This ideal is difficult to

¹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, October 3, 2020, no. 50 [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_encyclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_encyclica-fratelli-tutti.html).

realize, particularly when encounter is marked by power asymmetries and epistemological divergences that make “genuine” selves difficult to fully express, as social theorist Gayatri Spivak observed when she asked whether the subaltern can speak.² These challenges make authenticity a complicated moral descriptor for “encounter.” Authenticity can easily bend us toward essentializing cultural others as projections of our own making rather than encountering them as whole, complex human beings.

Nevertheless, Francis contended that the way to fraternity is authenticity in encounter across divides, be they socioeconomic, racial, religious, or otherwise. This line of thinking animates countless versions of immersion experiences common to U.S. Catholic universities, parishes, and organizations. Such experiences, which theologian James Menkhous calls an “important cornerstone” for Catholic and other faith-based institutions, seem to operationalize Francis’s calls to build a culture of encounter.³ Indeed, they are frequently invoked in this regard. Marianist sister and sociologist Laura Leming, for example, calls immersive pedagogies a “teaching practice for encounter,” while theologian Thomas Kelly describes the AJCU Ignatian Colleagues Program’s global immersion experiences as a “school of the poor.”⁴ Andrea Wisler, Executive Director of Georgetown University’s Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching and Service has even suggested that immersion experiences may have played a role in the development of Francis’s thought on encounter. She writes,

It consoles me to imagine that, at some point, as archbishop of Buenos Aires or as a parish priest of a rural church community in Argentina, Pope Francis was asked to meet youth or students on an “immersion.” Perhaps high school boys from a Midwestern Jesuit secondary institution slept on the floor of his basement church . . . maybe these experiences were among the first heart strings to spark his notable and public way of proceeding—encounter.⁵

² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, 2nd ed., (Routledge, 2006), 28–37.

³ James Menkhous, *Immersion: A Pilgrimage into Service* (New City Press, 2022), 94.

⁴ Laura M. Leming, “Negotiating a Culture of Encounter and Disruptive Discourse in Catholic Higher Education,” *Integritas* 7, no. 2 (2016): 9, doi.org/10.6017/integritas.v7i2p1; Thomas Kelly, “Ignatian Colleagues Program Immersions: Formation in the ‘School of the Poor,’” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 8, no. 2 (2019): 100–107.

⁵ Andrea Wisler, “On Immersion and Mercy in Jesuit Education: Pope Francis and the Call for Encounter,” *Berkley Forum: Creating a Culture of Encounter*, November 30, 2021, berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/on-immersion-and-mercy-in-jesuit-education-pope-francis-and-the-call-for-encounter.

For Wisler, Francis's calls to build a culture of encounter not only inspire immersion experiences; immersion experiences may have also inspired the development of Francis's thought on encounter. At least according to practitioners shaping and leading immersion experiences, immersion as an on-the-ground practice and encounter as a theological category are mutually informative, perhaps even mutually constitutive.

In this article, I explore whether it is possible for immersion experiences to reflect the authenticity Francis argued is requisite for encounter, given the histories and present realities of systemic injustice in which they operate. To address this question, I first define what immersion experiences are and identify how their material form and the structures in which they are embedded make them vulnerable to perpetuating unjust power relations. I then examine Francis's usage of authenticity as a qualifier for encounter, identifying three ideals for authentic encounter in Francis's writings, *mutuality*, *recognition*, and *responsibility*. Following this, I attend to how processes of authentication shaped by configurations of social power can cut against Francis's ideals for authenticity, paying particular attention to how the structural logics and material form of immersion experiences bend toward "authentic" representations of the other bound up with a privileged gaze. The final section draws these insights together to argue that immersion experiences are a compromised vehicle for encounter. Drawing on theologian Lauren Winner's framework for characteristic damage in Christian practice, I explore how encounter's characteristic damages are expressed in and made even more likely by immersion experiences. Yet, following Winner, I contend that such characteristic damage does not negate a practice altogether. Rather, knowledge of the way practices are likely to go wrong can help us to target the work of repair. As such, I suggest how particular forms of repair can bring encounter through immersion experiences closer to Francis's ideals for authenticity in encounter.

WHAT ARE IMMERSION EXPERIENCES?

"Immersion experiences" is an umbrella term for a diversity of practices undertaken by universities, ecclesial bodies, and parachurch ministries: "urban plunges" in a local city, travel seminars for college students, week-long parish service trips to a distant locale, or any number of other kinds of programming. They may have a service component, or they may solely focus on listening and learning from marginalized persons, places, and histories. The common touchstone is experiential engagement with a marginalized "other" across a cultural divide within the confines of a packaged experience. Given this, I define "immersion experiences" as any packaged program that arranges for a (generally) privileged group of people to encounter a

(generally) disadvantaged group of people toward transformative ends oriented on moral ideals such as justice and solidarity. By “packaged experience,” I mean that all aspects of the experience, from transportation to meals to activities have been pre-organized for the group and paid for in advance by participants or by a sponsoring body on behalf of the participants. Typically, these experiences are organized by a leader such as a campus minister, professor, clergyperson, or nonprofit staff person, promoted via materials such as flyers, emails, and websites, ordered by a common itinerary that directs meaning and action during the experience, and are in some cases scaffolded by readings, preparatory meetings, and/or post-experience debriefings.

At their best, immersion experiences create proximity where it does not exist across racial, socioeconomic, ethnic, and other divides, enabling participants to envision and exercise neighbor love where they previously could not. Our globalized social context presents us with unprecedented challenges in knowing and loving our neighbors, who are no longer simply the people geographically closest to us but include people to whom we are connected digitally and through political, economic, and social global flows.⁶ At the same time, as moral theologian Marcus Mescher argues, the Western social imaginary of “expressive individualism” has contributed to a “domestication of Christianity,” which “sends the message that God only desires individual human well-being accomplished through therapeutic care and augmented through God’s love.”⁷ In other words, while on a global scale we are more connected than ever, as individuals we are experiencing increasing atomization. This confluence of individualism and globalization, Mescher contends, can make it difficult for Christians to imagine or even desire solidaristic connections with distant neighbors. It is for this reason that Mescher identifies “the practice of nearing” others as essential to any ethics of encounter.⁸ Such nearing includes educating ourselves about how we are connected to seemingly distant others and seeking to build just relationships in and through those connections.

Immersion experiences are one way that Christians seek to practice such “nearing.” This is an admirable practice in a fragmented world. Yet we cannot assume that good intentions exempt immersion experiences from the effects of the inequitable systems and histories in which they are embedded. Immersion experiences are bound up with markets and with ideologies of whiteness and coloniality in ways

⁶ Marcus Mescher, *The Ethics of Encounter: Christian Neighbor Love as a Practice of Solidarity* (Orbis Books, 2020), 70.

⁷ Mescher, *The Ethics of Encounter*, 78.

⁸ Mescher, *The Ethics of Encounter*, 145.

that can and characteristically do undercut their ideals. I will briefly describe some ways this can occur.

Market Logics

In a July 2025 Angelus blessing Pope Leo asserted, “The holiday industry wants to sell us all sorts of ‘experiences,’ but perhaps not the ones we are really looking for. Every genuine encounter is free; it cannot be bought, whether it is an encounter with God, with others or with nature.”⁹ Here Leo places genuine encounters outside of economic exchange; they are free of cost. What then do we do with the fact that we *do* seek to purchase “genuine encounters” when we pay money to participate in immersion experiences?

Such a question may seem counterintuitive. Immersion experiences are generally seen as outside of the structures of the “holiday industry.” They are run by campus ministries, parishes, or parachurch organizations whose missions relate not to making financial profit but to the living out of theological values like justice and solidarity. The material dimensions of the experience are often treated as accidental to the substance of the goods of the experience itself. As Susan Haarman and Annie Selak write, “There is an idea that outsiders render holiness through their interactions with the local people and that this places them outside the problematic model of tourist who seeks simply to consume.”¹⁰ We ought to be wary of this kind of spiritualization because it is liable to make us miss how the material and spiritual are always mutually imbricated.¹¹

Indeed, the very form of the “packaged experience” makes immersion experiences a product that must be promoted and sold in a marketplace of other competing experiences. Anyone who has tried to convince college students that a spring break service trip beats going to Cancun can attest to this. This requires promotional materials and itineraries that render people and places as compelling to the moral sentiments of more privileged others.¹² Once registered, participants effectively outsource the curation of encounter to organizers, who decide whom they will meet, where they will go, and what they will do. These choices direct attention in ways that open some possibilities for meaning while foreclosing others. To purchase an immersion

⁹ Pope Leo XIV, *Angelus*, July 20, 2025, vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/angelus/2025/documents/20250720-angelus.html.

¹⁰ Susan Haarman and Annie Selak, “An Examination of Alternative Break Trips and Whiteness in Jesuit Education,” *Jesuit Higher Education* 10, no 2 (2021): 138–149.

¹¹ For one account of the mutual imbrication of the material and the spiritual, see Robert Orsi, *History and Presence* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

¹² Graham Dann, “The People of Tourist Brochures,” in *The Tourist Image*, ed. Tom Selwyn (John Wiley, 1996).

experience is also to consume a packaged narrative that delimits the terms of encounter.¹³ Even with the best of intentions, representing people or communities as a packaged product flattens their complex multitudes and risks perpetuating an essentialist romanticized gaze onto diverse others. The embeddedness of immersion experiences in systems of market exchange makes them vulnerable to such an outcome.

Ideologies of Whiteness and Coloniality

The tendency of immersion experiences to essentialize diverse others points to their imbrication with ideologies of whiteness and coloniality. For instance, persuasive packaging of marginalized communities relies on what anthropologist Didier Fassin calls “humanitarian reason,” a social imaginary that forms Western moral sentiments toward “precarious lives.”¹⁴ Fassin conceptualizes humanitarian reason as a politics of compassion operationalized by governments, NGOs, and various other Western publics that grants recognition to marginalized groups based on universal human experiences of suffering rather than on their rights in the context of inequitable political histories. The other elicits my sympathy or compassion because she suffers, and this “relieves the burden” of recognizing that inequitable histories and structures in which I am implicated have caused her suffering.¹⁵ While organizers of immersion experiences may try to counteract this dynamic by encouraging participants to reflect critically on their privilege, doing so runs against dominant social currents and can feel dissonant with immersion experiences’ packaged form, which relies on mobilizing the very moral sentiments that can obscure political responsibility.

Moral sentiments like compassion that fund humanitarian reason can lead to superficial versions of solidarity and recognition marked by patterns of whiteness and coloniality. Riffing on Dietrich Boenhoeffer’s idea of “cheap grace,” Haarman and Selak describe “cheap solidarity” and “cheap recognition” as occurring when participants in immersion experiences feel moved by and identify with the other’s suffering without committing to a longer process of reflexive interrogation into their “complicity in structures of domination.”¹⁶ As

¹³ Sara A. Williams, “Moral Commodities and the Practice of Freedom,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 48, no 4 (2020): 642–663, doi.org/10.1111/jore.12333.

¹⁴ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (University of California Press, 2012), 5.

¹⁵ Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 252.

¹⁶ Haarman and Selak, “An Examination of Alternative Break Trips and Whiteness in Jesuit Education,” 146.

Mescher argues, such reflexive interrogation is requisite for deconstructing the implicit bias that keeps us from developing relationships of mutual respect and equality.¹⁷

Haarman and Selak connect “cheap solidarity” and “cheap recognition” to the practice of “inverted hospitality,” a term they borrow from theologian Willie James Jennings “to refer to the phenomenon of whiteness claiming to be ‘the owner of the space it entered.’”¹⁸ They argue that it is common for immersion experiences to invert hospitality by dictating the terms of the encounter, a move not far removed from the colonial enterprise. For example, upon recounting the use of a culturally inappropriate icebreaker and scriptural reflection by American students with their counterparts on an immersion trip to Belize Haarman and Selak write, “American students enter an environment that is not their own and dictate the customs and procedures. The true owners of the space are forced to adapt to rules set by the Americans. This behavior reinscribes power dynamics of colonialism, forms American students in an environment of superiority, and operates out of a framework where the outsiders know best.”¹⁹

There is a danger here that the party with the greater social power will seek to make the other legible on her terms, undercutting mutuality and leading to misrecognition according to social categories and representations with which she does not herself identify. As stated earlier, this makes the category of “authenticity” a complicated moral descriptor. Who gets to decide what makes an interaction or representation “authentic,” and how does that affect possibilities for cultivating just relationships? I will return to this question at length, but first I need to expand upon what Francis meant when he used “authenticity” as a descriptor for encounter.

FRANCIS ON AUTHENTICITY IN ENCOUNTER

To grasp the nuance of how Francis employed the category of “authenticity” to qualify encounter, it is important to examine the original language he chose to use for this term. Doing so curiously reveals that Francis did not always use the same word for what came to be translated in English as “authentic.” When Francis wrote in *Fratelli tutti* “the process of building fraternity...can only be

¹⁷ Mescher, *The Ethics of Encounter*, 121.

¹⁸ Haarman and Selak, “An Examination of Alternative Break Trips and Whiteness in Jesuit Education,” 143.

¹⁹ Haarman and Selak, “An Examination of Alternative Break Trips and Whiteness in Jesuit Education,” 143.

undertaken by spirits that are free and open to *authentic* encounters”²⁰ (emphasis mine) the term he used in his native Spanish was *reales* and in Latin *veros*, both of which might be translated as “real” or “true” more readily than “authentic.” In other documents, however, Francis used the Spanish *auténtica*/Italian *autentiche* to describe encounter, which carries similar meaning to “authentic” in English, that which is genuine. Whether Francis used *reales/veros* or *auténtica/autentiche*, however, his writings exhibit a consistent understanding of what is rendered in English as “authentic encounter.” This suggests that Francis grounded authenticity in that which is “real” and “true,” raising two questions: 1) To what is an authentic encounter true? and 2) What makes an encounter real versus unreal, that is, not an encounter at all? In what follows, I trace several recurring features of Francis’s teaching on authentic encounter in order to address these questions.

Paying Attention

Francis insisted that directing sustained attention toward right ends is necessary for authentic encounters, and he warned that the will and ability to do this is under threat. Just before the quote above from *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis contended that the “flood of information at our fingertips” gives us “a mass of unverified data” with which to spout opinions rather than patiently attend to others’ experience. Quick internet searches are “not the way to mature in encounter with truth,” Francis wrote. Such a substitution fails to “keep our attention focused, to penetrate to the heart of matters, and to recognize what is essential to give meaning to our lives.”²¹ Francis’s teaching bemoans what psychologist and economist Herbert A. Simon termed the “attention economy.” Attention is a limited resource, Simon observed. If a barrage of information “consumes the attention of its recipients,” then our attention is depleted in diffuse manner, rather than focused on the things to which we really ought to be paying attention.²² In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis contended that authentic encounters cut through this noise to attend to right things, including the patient “embrace [of] the broader experience of individuals and peoples.”²³

Whether or not Francis intended this, one hears echoes of the philosopher and mystic Simone Weil, who wrote that attention is the

²⁰ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 50.

²¹ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 50.

²² Herbert A. Simon, “Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World,” in *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest*, ed. M. Greenberger (The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 40.

²³ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 50.

substance of love of God and neighbor.²⁴ Just as Weil cast neighbor-love as attending to the other in her “truth” rather than as a projection of the categories we have been handed by social ideologies, political machines, or demographic data, so Francis asked us to risk this as a condition of authentic encounter. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he wrote,

Just as some people want a purely spiritual Christ, without flesh and without the cross, they also want their interpersonal relationships provided by sophisticated equipment, by screens and systems which can be turned on and off on command. Meanwhile, the Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with other, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction.²⁵

Here we see that Francis cast the ability to pay sustained attention to the other as requisite to a “face-to-face” encounter, what may be a reference to Emmanuel Levinas’s notion that the other makes infinite ethical demands on us. This kind of face-to-face encounter, Francis argued, is undercut by technologies that allow us to simply turn off the screen when our preconceived notions of the other are challenged. In Levinasian language, such an act contains our wish to kill the other by negating their being.²⁶ Francis theologically likened this in the quote above to turning our face from the incarnate Jesus in favor of a spiritualized Christ that who makes no concrete demands on us.

Personal Transparency

Francis taught that to enter face-to-face encounters requires us to come as we are, without pretense. In his 2023 audience with students at the Pontifical Urban College, he named the “courage of authenticity” [*autenticidad/autenticità*] as the first of three characteristics that “nurture and strengthen” formation. “Our closeness to God and to our brothers is achieved and strengthened to the extent that we have the courage to take off the masks we wear,” Francis told them. He continued, “Let us present ourselves to others without screens, for what we are, with our limits and contradictions, overcoming the fear

²⁴ Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting for God* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 64–65.

²⁵ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2023, no. 88, [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).

²⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991).

of being judged because we do not correspond to an ideal model.”²⁷ Francis here asserted that authenticity in encounter takes the courage to become vulnerable to the other, laying bare rather than trying to hide our own limitations.

Similarly, in his 2024 address to participants in the International Congress on Youth Ministry of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, Francis underscored that discernment is “truth-oriented” insofar as it offers youth “a path to authenticity [*autenticidad/autenticità*]: a way of emerging from artificial identities and discovering their true [*real/reale*] identity. Discernment is about being ‘real’ [*genuinos/veri*]: before oneself, before others, and before God.”²⁸ Francis here again insisted that “being real” and “true” in encounter with self, others, and God is imperative. He offered discernment as the method for taking off our “masks” in this way; indeed, the process of Ignatian discernment with which Francis was intimately acquainted would be impossible to undertake in good faith without such a result. We also see here that Francis explicitly connected authenticity with the true and the real in regard to how the self enters encounter.

Openness to Difference and Challenge

Francis suggested that transparency goes hand-in-hand with openness to difference and challenge in encounters. Further on in his address to the Pontifical Urban College, Francis told the students that authentic encounters necessitate an openness to new ways of seeing things. “The life of faith is a continuous exodus,” he said, “an exit from our mindsets, from the enclosure of our fears, from the small certainties that reassure us. Otherwise, we risk worshipping a God that is only a projection of our needs, and therefore an ‘idol’, and of not even living authentic [*auténticos/autenici*] encounters with others.”²⁹ Here Francis insisted that authenticity in encounter not only entails dropping our pretenses, but also, in that vulnerable state, being open to the others’ differences and how they might challenge our own entrenched ways of thinking. Not to do so would be to idolize a projection of our egoistic desires, making it impossible to see the face of the other clearly.

²⁷ Pope Francis, “Address to the Superiors and Students of the Pontifical Urban College ‘De Propaganda Fide,’” January 21, 2023, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/january/documents/20230121-collegio-propaganda-fide.html.

²⁸ Pope Francis, “Address to Participants in the International Congress on Youth Ministry of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life,” May 25, 2024, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/may/documents/20240525-pastorale-giovanile-congresso.html.

²⁹ Francis, “Address to the Superiors and Students.”

In his 2022 address to Kazakhstani authorities, diplomats, and civil society leaders, Francis contended that authentic encounter requires not only openness to difference, but the recognition and responsibility that extends from such openness: “The defence of freedom, an aspiration inscribed in the heart of every person, the sole condition for an authentic [*real y no artificial/reale e non artificiale*] encounter between individuals and groups, is expressed in civil society chiefly by *the recognition of rights, accompanied by duties*.”³⁰ Francis underscored here that openness to the other makes demands on us. He argued that authentic or “real” encounters defend the other’s freedom by recognizing her rights and fulfilling our duties to her, which I take to mean acting responsibly to ensure those rights are upheld. We might imagine *inauthentic* encounters, the “artificial” encounters to which Francis contrasted “real” encounters in the Spanish and Italian, consist of the opposite: a denial of the others’ freedom due to our *misrecognition* of their rights and our responsibility to them.

Weaving Together These Themes

This fuller picture of Francis’s use of “authenticity” can help us to address the questions raised earlier: 1) What makes an encounter real vs. unreal? and 2) To what is an authentic encounter true? Regarding the first question, Francis’s teaching indicates that *real* encounters are marked by *mutuality* and *recognition*. Authentic encounters entail a spirit of respectful openness to the other, allowing her to challenge the mindsets and assumptions I bring to the encounter. This requires the patient attention it takes to know the other as she *really* is so I may properly recognize her, rather than projecting my own agendas and biases onto her. Francis observed that such projections present us with a false, or *unreal*, vision born of our own egoistic desires. They are idolatrous insofar as they make a god of our own ego and ground our understanding of the other in relation to that god, leading to a *misrecognition* of her humanity. The remedy according to Francis is self-examination through discernment, which offers us the reflexivity needed to cut through our egos and vulnerably bring our “true” selves to our encounters with others.

This leads to what Francis meant by encounters being *true*: they tell the truth about oneself, about one’s relation to the other, and injustices that lie therein. Here I want to connect truth-telling to the way Michel Foucault framed *parrhesia*. In his genealogy of the term,

³⁰ Pope Francis, “Meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society, and the Diplomatic Corps during the Apostolic Journey to Kazakhstan,” September 13, 2022, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/september/documents/20220913-kazakhstan-autorita.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/september/documents/20220913-kazakhstan-autorita.html).

Foucault argued that in the ancient world *parrhesía*, or truth-telling, involved “absolute conviction on the part of the *parrhesiast* that what she says is true and an element of risk in the articulation of that truth,” as well as an alignment of her life “with the truth she proclaims.”³¹ As ecclesialogist Mary Kate Holman has demonstrated, Francis’s teachings drew on the concept of *parrhesía* with a pneumatological twist, contending that the conviction and courage to tell the truth boldly is a gift of the Spirit.³² In the context of encounter, to know the truth well enough to practice such *parrhesía* first requires me to examine myself and my structural relation to the other through a Spirit-guided process of discernment. What are the historical legacies and social ideologies like colonialism, whiteness, and patriarchy that distort my theological anthropology, and therefore my ability to see myself and the other as we are grounded in the *imago Dei*? Such Spirit-led reflexive examination is formative for the development of the conviction to boldly tell the truth about the unjust histories and structural power asymmetries between us, and to act in a way that aligns with the truth of the other’s *imago Dei* by seeking to make our relations more just. In other words, to exercise my *responsibility* to the other.

This review of Francis’s teaching on “authentic encounter” illuminates his claim in *Fratelli Tutti* that “the process of building fraternity . . . can only be undertaken by spirits that are free and open to authentic encounters.”³³ Moral theologian Kenneth Himes observes that in *Fratelli Tutti* Francis conceptualized fraternity as undercutting “the tendency to create relationships of higher or lower status, in-group and out-group dynamics” and as a mode of “see[ing] the other . . . as a gift to be valued and appreciated,” which “encourages an attitude of reciprocal care among members of society.”³⁴ It is evident how “authentic encounters,” that is, those marked by *mutuality*, *recognition*, and *responsibility*, would be requisite for this vision of fraternity. I can only achieve radically equal and reciprocally caring fraternal bonds if I do the work to properly recognize who I am and who the other is, approach the other with mutual openness, and exercise care through responsible action on her behalf.

³¹ Mary Kate Holman, “Parrhesia as Ancient and New: An Ecclesial Culture Shift Toward Frankness, Courage, and Boldness,” *Theological Studies* 86, no. 4 (2025): 545, doi.org/10.1177/00405639251385962.

³² Holman, “Parrhesia as Ancient and New,” 545–549.

³³ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 50.

³⁴ Kenneth R. Himes, *Sacred and Social: Theological Foundations for Catholic Social Teaching* (Georgetown University Press, 2025), 126.

AUTHENTICITY IN IMMERSION EXPERIENCES

Critical scholarship on authenticity frames the idealization of this concept with a good deal more suspicion than does Francis. In his influential genealogy of authenticity as a modern virtue, cultural critic Lionel Trilling demonstrated a nineteenth century shift from the value of “being as one appears” (sincerity) to the value of “discovering what one truly is” (authenticity).³⁵ People began to understand themselves as a self that remains when history and culture are stripped away. It is this feature of authenticity that Theodor Adorno critiqued for its propensity to abstract the individual from history.³⁶ If authenticity is to be found inward, there is no reason to attend to material social relations and political arrangements. Such an ideology easily leads to suppressed historical consciousness, political quietism, and passive complicity with injustice. The danger in this, as Adorno suggested, is that we mistake ourselves and our relations with others as free of the social when in fact social power is always mediating us qua ourselves and ourselves qua others. This raises the need to examine authenticity’s politics: how it is working and whose interests it is serving in any given context.

The constructivist approach to authenticity offers a lens through which to do this. Constructivists argue that authenticity is always made and remade, contested and authorized, in thick and dynamic cultural contexts. To understand how authenticity is functioning ideologically, socially, and politically, constructivists claim we must regard it as “a matter of power, of who has the right to authenticate.”³⁷ Taking up the constructivist point that ideals for authenticity—such as the ones Francis laid out—are always negotiated in systems of power, I will focus on where the power to authenticate lies while taking up several themes in social scientific literature on cross-cultural immersion experiences. These are: 1) the premise of the innocent suffering other; 2) Christian privilege in defining the terms of encounter; and 3) the transient nature of immersion experiences.

The Innocent Suffering Other

In her ethnographic work with student medical volunteers in Malawi, anthropologist Andrea Freidus describes how students funded their

³⁵ Charles Lindholm, *Culture and Authenticity* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 4.

³⁶ Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowsky and Frederic Will (Northwestern University Press, 1973), 9.

³⁷ Edward M. Bruner, “Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction: A Critique of Postmodernism,” *American Anthropologist* 96, no. 2 (1994): 408, doi.org/10.1525/aa.1994.96.2.02a00070.

compassion with “lotto logic,” the belief that Malawians live in poverty because of their bad luck rather than the result of historical injustices.³⁸ This framing allowed students to avoid confronting their complicity in systemic inequality, instead authenticating their compassion in terms of presumed innocence—theirs and the Malawians’. This led to an emphasis on their efforts to “make a difference” and “alleviate suffering” on an interpersonal level rather than on seeking to make conditions more just by working for the rights of Malawians to receive quality care from a trained healthcare provider.³⁹

We might simply see this as a missed opportunity for the students to engage in the reflexive discernment which Francis called for. Such reflexive work could have led to the proper recognition needed to exercise responsibility rightly. There is some truth to this. Yet to stop there would miss that such a case reveals the structural forces at play that keep us from living into such ideals. Indeed, Fassin has demonstrated how the humanitarian reason baked into Western modernity rests on the presumed innocence of victims, which renders them worthy of our attention and compassion.⁴⁰ As it did for Freidus’ students in Malawi, this construct shifts the emphasis from the “right of the receiver” to the “obligation of the giver.”⁴¹ It frames our responsibility as a kind of noblesse oblige, concealing our complicity in unjust broken systems that deprive the other of her rights. This creates a “radically unequal order” between the privileged party and the disadvantaged one that can lead us to attempt possession of the other “even in the name of the good.”⁴²

Immersion experiences can slip into possessing the other “in the name of the good” by directing our attention to representations of the other as one-dimensional innocent sufferers. When Brazilian feminist theologian Ivone Gebara writes of “one-dimensional anthropology,” she is highlighting the dangers of typifying any human being as “either this or that,” as totally defined by pre-determined attributes that render her little more than a flat, static being.⁴³ Yet this is precisely what we do when we reduce complex human beings to tropes like “the poor.” As theologians Joerg Rieger and Priscila Silva write,

³⁸ Andrea Freidus, “The Limitations of Compassion in International Volunteering,” *Anthropology Now* 10, no. 3 (2018): 10–20, doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2018.1602401.

³⁹ Freidus, “The Limitations of Compassion,” 13.

⁴⁰ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 161–180.

⁴¹ Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 253–254.

⁴² Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 253–254.

⁴³ Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Orbis Books, 1989), 11.

The so-called option for the poor lacked analyzing and acting together with the poor themselves. Without names, addresses, or voices, liberation theology denounced a sacrificial structure that is latent to this day but remained on the surface when the subject is to enter the reality of the most ordinary life. That is, there was talk about real people, but without sufficient qualitative approximation.⁴⁴

If the language we use has power to condition what we see, then language like “the poor” has the potential to authenticate experiences of encounter by tying the authenticity of the other to whether she performs according to the expectation of “the poor” as innocent victim and sufferer.

For example, as mentioned in the introduction, theologian Thomas Kelly has written about the AJCU Ignatian Colleagues Program’s global immersion experiences as a “school of the poor.”⁴⁵ Kelly borrows this term from Adrien Demoustier, SJ, who used it as a description of Ignatius’ transformative learning while living among the poor.⁴⁶ Like Ignatius, Kelly argues, leaders in Jesuit universities can find transformation through encountering the poor. Yet terms like the “school of the poor” have the potential to set expectations antithetical to this goal. Calling “the poor” a “school” reduces those encountered to a homogenous romanticized group whose primary role is pedagogical for more privileged others. Instead of a focus on the rights and dignity of complex, individual persons, language like “school of the poor” shifts the emphasis to the desires of the more privileged party in the encounter.

Gebara argues that to move from one-dimensional to pluri-dimensional anthropology, we must see the human being as “not primarily a definition but rather a history within space and time . . . [they] contain good and evil, love and hatred, peace and violence, not as mutually exclusive but in a mixture that includes all these ‘ingredients.’”⁴⁷ Gebara’s exhortation rhymes with Francis’s call for openness to difference and challenge in encounter, but offers a more precise anthropology for how the other might present such a challenge to our authenticating logics. The question is how we can remain open to the other’s complexity while embedded in systems that are

⁴⁴ Joerg Rieger and Priscila Silva, “Liberation Theologies and Their Future: Rethinking Categories and Popular Participation in Liberation,” *Religions* 14 (2023): 6, doi.org/10.3390/rel14070925.

⁴⁵ Kelly, “Ignatian Colleagues Program Immersions.”

⁴⁶ Adrien Demoustier, “The Disturbing Subject: The Option for the Poor: The First Companions and the Poor,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 21, no. 2 (March 1989): 7, doi.org/10.6017/ssj.v21i2.4179.

⁴⁷ Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, 10.

continually collapsing her into an “authentic” essence like the innocent suffering other.

Christian Privilege

The vision of the innocent suffering other did not emerge in a vacuum. It quite evidently and explicitly emerges from the Christian theological narrative that Jesus Christ was the perfect innocent victim whose passion realized humanity’s redemption. Fassin traces the rise of humanitarian reason to this idea of redemptive suffering, though writes that once modernity brought suffering from the personal into the political realm, “salvation [no longer] emanate[d] . . . from the passion one endures, but through the compassion one feels.”⁴⁸ In other words, in the age of humanitarianism redemption is tied to the moral sentiment of compassion for another and its ability to move us “to correct the situation that gives rise to the misfortune of others.”⁴⁹ Mobilizing compassion is therefore to offer “access to the transcendent truth of the victims.”⁵⁰ We are saved through our ability to be moved by our moral sentiments; we facilitate others’ salvation by generating compassion. “Authentic encounters” in this key have a social script that have the potential to exclude by imposing Christian logics onto religious others.

In fact, Christian ethicist James Haring argues that the ideal of authenticity is itself a form of Christian privilege, functioning as “the basic currency of Christian symbolic capital.”⁵¹ Haring explicates how antecedent to authenticity’s rise were anti-Jewish strands of the Christian tradition that posture the inner life of the spirit over external norms and laws, theological claims amplified in Protestantism but traceable to Augustine and the Apostle Paul. Drawing on the work of Jewish Studies scholar Daniel Boyarin, Haring writes that while shedding external constraints in favor of the inner life of the spirit seemingly promotes tolerance, it actually denies the importance of difference and particularity in favor of a universalizing Christian narrative that has been secularized for modern times.⁵² Coupled with the recognition that humanitarian reason is propelled by a soteriological vision for authenticity, we can see how the rubric of “authenticity” can inadvertently lead us to a kind of flattening

⁴⁸ Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 250.

⁴⁹ Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 250.

⁵⁰ Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 251.

⁵¹ James W. Haring, “Authenticity and Christian Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible (Theological) Knapsack,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 43, no. 2 (2023): 387, doi.org/10.5840/jsce20241289.

⁵² Haring, “Authenticity and Christian Privilege,” 389–394.

compassion that fails to attend to epistemological and social difference.

Indeed, this kind of flattening can be seen in Francis's own writings. For example, in his critical reflection on *Fratelli Tutti*, Muslim theologian Martin Nguyen points out that Francis essentially Christianized the terms of "authentic" engagement between Muslims and Christians. Referring to Chapter Four of the encyclical in which Francis described his relationship with Imam Al-Tayyeb, Nguyen writes,

Pope Francis and Imam Al-Tayyeb figure within the text as symbols of Christianity and Islam respectively. . . . The uninitiated reader is led to believe that if Christendom has a Pope, then surely Islamdom must have its "grand Imam" when in fact no such parity or parallel exists. Moreover, the crux of the seemingly affirming statement reinforces an essentializing divide between "East" and "West" where Islam and Christianity are imagined as categorically divided across spatial, conceptual, and civilizational lines. . . . This variety of reductionist language only serves to obfuscate the breadth and complexity of our contemporary religious landscape and hides a much more intimately intertwined history.⁵³

As Nguyen notes just before this quote, Francis's intentions here were undoubtedly good. Yet one cannot help but hear echoes of Catholic priest and theologian Ivan Illich's famed admonition, "to hell with good intentions."⁵⁴ There is real harm that can be done when compassion across divides is deployed in a way that envelops the other into the logics of Christianity. As Nguyen ponders later in his article, "How precisely are we to remove or ameliorate the structural barriers to 'authentic' dialogue? On whose terms is dialogue taking place? . . . Must dialogue always carry undertones of host and guest or developed and the underdeveloped?"⁵⁵ In Nguyen's questions we see clear ties between the logics of humanitarian reason and authenticity as Christian privilege. Though well-intentioned, *Fratelli Tutti* at times slips into an authentication that relies on compassion across divides as the erasure of difference—and in that erasure, everything starts to take the form of Christianity. Such a universalizing approach "fails to be

⁵³ Martin Nguyen, "Exploring the Depths and Boundaries of Fraternity: A Muslim Reading of *Fratelli Tutti*," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 32, no. 1 (2022): 23, doi.org/10.2143/SID.32.1.3290942.

⁵⁴ Ivan Illich, "To Hell with Good Intentions," in *Collaborative Futures: Critical Reflections on Publicly Active Graduate Education*, ed. Amanda Gilvin, Craig Martin, and Georgia M. Roberts (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 76.

⁵⁵ Nguyen, "Exploring the Depths and Boundaries of Fraternity," 29.

attentive to what kind of love, care, or other assistance the particular neighbor needs.”⁵⁶

One way this dynamic is present in immersion experiences is in using Christian theological and cultural logics to authenticate encounters with cultural others. For example, in her work on Christian approaches to homelessness in the US, Christian ethicist Laura Stivers argues that both the charitable approach of evangelical Christian rescue missions and the low-income homeownership approach of Christian organizations like Habitat for Humanity fund compassion by authenticating the other as “good” housing insecure persons. In the case of rescue missions, this involves embracing the narrative that one’s housing precarity to at least some degree resulted from individual deviant behavior, and a commitment to correcting the deviant behavior is necessary. Such terms of authentication follow the Christian theological movement from sin to repentance to redemption, a narrative that housing insecure persons are urged to embrace as a personal religious narrative. Though Catholic and mainline Protestant missions are less likely to proselytize directly, the Christian narrative nonetheless structures how housing insecure persons are regarded.⁵⁷ In the case of Habitat for Humanity, there are expectations that to deserve their housing, people must put hundreds of hours of sweat equity into building their own homes on top of going to their regular jobs. This more subtly but still plainly plays on the Christian movement from sin to redemption. There is an assumption that housing insecure people must demonstrate their virtue and turn away from the vice of laziness by substantially helping to build their own home, something expected of no other category of homeowner.⁵⁸ The danger here is that volunteer groups engaging in immersion experiences with Christian organizations like these absorb these authenticating theological logics and bring these expectations into encounters as the source of their compassion.

Transient Nature of Immersion Experiences

The transient nature of encounter through volunteer and immersion experiences raises challenges additional to those we have discussed. As Freidus writes, in such circumstances compassion itself “runs the risk of being merely transient.”⁵⁹ She follows this statement by noting that none of the student volunteers with whom she worked in Malawi

⁵⁶ Mescher, *The Ethics of Encounter*, 87.

⁵⁷ Laura Stivers, *Disrupting Homelessness: Alternative Christian Approaches* (Fortress Press, 2011), 68–85, 108–113.

⁵⁸ Stivers, *Disrupting Homelessness*, 87–103, 113–116.

⁵⁹ Freidus, “The Limitations of Compassion,” 17.

“made a long-term, sustained commitment to the orphans or patients with whom they worked. Justice, as opposed to compassion, requires sustained commitment.”⁶⁰

Freidus is not the only researcher who has found this lack of sustained commitment. In his mixed methods study with groups traveling to the U.S./Mexico border with BorderLinks, an experiential learning organization that grew out of the 1980s Sanctuary Movement, sociologist Gary Adler found that while emotional attitudes toward immigrants shifted in many travelers after their trip, behavioral shifts that would indicate concrete expressions of solidarity such as political advocacy were limited at best, as were sustained connections with the immigrants travelers had met.⁶¹ Of the post-trip surveys he distributed to travelers six months after they had returned home, Adler writes:

Despite the binational partnership rhetoric of BorderLinks and the homestays during travel, only 12 percent of travelers had been in touch with anyone that they had met in Mexico. Furthermore, more than three-quarters *unsuccessfully* reported the names of the Mexican family whose home they had stayed in for a homestay (most could not remember any name) . . . It is far from clear that the trip experience encouraged connection with immigrants in travelers’ local communities or produced a tangible connection to people in Mexico. Only a minority of travelers ended up involved in civic or political action targeted explicitly at immigration.⁶²

Such data calls us back to Illich’s critique that volunteer and immersion experiences are more for the traveler’s own feelings of self-actualization than building thick ties of fraternity and solidarity with receiving communities. Adler’s finding that most travelers *could not even recall the names* of their Mexican homestay hosts underscores this point. While most of Adler’s travelers reported some kind of increase in sorrow, compassion, despair, or anger after their trip, it seems that by and large these feelings did not translate into concrete forms of social and political responsibility.

We might recall here John Paul II’s definition of solidarity in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* as “not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to

⁶⁰ Freidus, “The Limitations of Compassion,” 17.

⁶¹ Gary Adler, *Empathy Beyond US Borders: The Challenges of Transnational Civic Engagement* (Cambridge, 2019), 198–236, 247–250.

⁶² Adler, *Empathy Beyond US Borders*, 215.

commit oneself to the common good.”⁶³ If *responsibility* is a key component of Francis’s vision for authenticity in encounter, short-term experiences like occasional volunteerism and immersion travel seem to have a limited capacity to realize this. Rather, it seems more likely that the authenticating force for travelers is the cultivation of emotions such as compassion and sorrow, placing the emphasis on our own self-actualization rather than on our responsibility to the other.

IMMERSION EXPERIENCES AS A COMPROMISED PRACTICE OF ENCOUNTER

I have painted a bleak picture of immersion experiences as a potential avenue for realizing Francis’s authentic encounters. My intention, however, is not to write off immersion experiences but to critically interrogate them as compromised vehicles for encounter. By calling immersion experiences compromised, I mean to say they constitute a practice with “characteristic damage” that keeps them from fully realizing their ideals. I borrow this framing from Lauren Winner, who argues that like all things in our postlapsarian world Christian practices have become damaged by sin. Some of this damage, Winner argues, “belongs to the form of the thing damaged.”⁶⁴ For example, “communication with other people is a proper part of prayer . . . but it entails a characteristic deformation: Spoken, corporate prayer can become principally or exclusively a means of communicating with other people (and it can become a way of glossing gossip with piety) instead of principally a means of communicating with God.”⁶⁵ Likewise with eucharist and baptism, Winner argues, Christian practices can go wrong in ways that are characteristic of the practice itself.

Encounter as a Christian practice has the propensity for such characteristic damage. For example, attending to the other is a proper part of encounter, yet attention easily collapses into an egoistic gaze that authenticates the other in terms of the innocent suffering victim of our own making, or an object onto which we write our Christian scripts, or the subject of inwardly-focused moral sentiments. The material form of immersion experiences makes it likely that encounter will go wrong in such characteristic ways. Immersion experiences package and market encounter as a product to be purchased. This

⁶³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, December 30, 1987, no. 38, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html

⁶⁴ Lauren Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (Yale University Press, 2018), 5.

⁶⁵ Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, 68.

involves representations of the other that appeal to the moral sentiments of privileged Christian audiences, authenticating the other in terms not her own. No matter how earnest we may feel as participants in an immersion experience, it is likely that we will be at the very least unwitting purveyors of the characteristic damage of encounter.

Following Winner, I contend that such a tendency for damage does not negate a practice altogether. Rather, Winner writes, “some Christian practices (Christians can rightly hope) can generate from within themselves an awareness of the damages for which they have a propensity; and Christians may (we can, again, rightly hope) learn to notice and fitly respond to the damage.”⁶⁶ By telling the truth about characteristic damage, we can predict where practices go wrong and steer them in other directions. In the case of encounter through immersion experiences, this means contending with the fact that some of Francis’s characteristics for “authentic encounters” (such as *attention*) can become warped into misrecognition of the other (rather than Francis’s ideal of *recognition*), and others (such as *transparency* and *openness to challenge*) can become a coercive insistence for trust in the face of structural vulnerability (rather than Francis’s ideal of *mutuality*). Finally, both kinds of damage can result in the inability to discern and exercise Francis’s ideal of *responsibility*, because they obscure the truth of our relationship with other in favor of our own ideologies and demands. In what follows, I address how attending to each of these forms of damage can lead us toward repair.

Attending Rightly: From Misrecognition to Recognition

As with Winner’s assertion that we must attend to characteristic damage in order to address it, so moral theologian Hille Haker argues that any sufficient ethic of *recognition* must remain vigilant to *misrecognition* that “see[s] someone either merely as *alter ego*, thereby erasing their uniqueness, or as entirely alien to oneself.”⁶⁷ According to Haker, just encounters are characterized by a negation of misrecognition. If misrecognition is the ascription of our own cultural and ideological categories onto the other, then its negation consists in maintaining the “gap” that must always remain between self and other. Haker writes, “Recognition is easily reduced to the positive judgement of the other’s worth or status in relation to oneself or one’s own culture. . . . [Rather], the gap between the self and the other cannot be closed, requiring us to constantly interpret and

⁶⁶ Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, 17.

⁶⁷ Hille Haker, “Recognition and Responsibility,” *Religions* 12, no. 7 (2021): 467, 6, doi.org/10.3390/rel12070467 (emphasis in original).

reinterpret ourselves, the world we perceive, and the others whom we encounter.”⁶⁸ We must, in other words, remain open to challenge, as Francis counseled.

How is this possible in the context of immersion experiences, whose packaged narratives tend toward collapsing the gap between self and other? An important first step is to keep experiences radically open to disruption and tension. Rather than downplay, ignore, or try to squash occurrences that do not fit pre-conceived narratives of self or other (e.g., the innocence or wisdom of “the poor”), organizers and leaders ought to design experiences that can flexibly lean into the dynamic complexity of the other and, in the words of Judith Butler, “suspend the demand that [she] be self-same at every moment.”⁶⁹ To do this, leaders must be willing to hand the other control of the terms of authentication rather than authenticate the other on preconceived terms. This may mean the other states or shows us that she is otherwise than who we thought she was. When this happens, the temptation will be to write her off as an outlier, an *inauthentic* representative of the group we are encountering. Yet to do this would be to *misrecognize* her. This does not mean we must agree with all of her perspectives and choices, but it does mean that to properly recognize her necessitates we accept her multitudes, both virtuous and flawed.

Such moments, while uncomfortable, can bid us to examine whether the basis of our compassion is a flat construct of the other, and to revise our affect in light of this. Indeed, the acknowledgement of this irreducibility of the other to our expectations for “complete coherence” in general, and for coherence with our social constructs and ideologies in particular, can become an occasion for our own ethical formation, and for deepened ethical relations between self and other.⁷⁰ This is the case because it requires us to inhabit a stance of *becoming*. By maintaining a vigilant critical stance toward misrecognition through an openness to revising our perceptions and judgments when they are interrupted, we are undertaking a formative practice that makes us into people more capable of discerning the truth about the self, other, and structural relations between self and other, and therefore more capable of loving rightly.⁷¹

This kind of practice requires mutual vulnerability. We must be receptive to being affected by the other, and the other must be willing

⁶⁸ Haker, “Recognition and Responsibility,” 14.

⁶⁹ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Fordham University Press, 2005), 42.

⁷⁰ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 42–43.

⁷¹ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 64. Margaret Farley writes that “a love is right and good insofar as it aims to affirm truthfully the concrete reality of the beloved.” We must attend to the other as a concrete, complex individual to know how love her in just manner. Margaret Farley, *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing* (Orbis Books, 2013), chapter 7.

to give us an account of herself that reveals the gaps between her self-understanding and our expectations of her—and vice versa. This is a fraught request for those with marginalized positionalities, whose susceptibility to misrecognition makes them especially vulnerable to harm.

Transparency and Openness: Mutuality in the Face of Structural Vulnerability

Francis taught that transparency and openness to difference and challenge are requisite for authentic encounters. Otherwise put, for Francis, authenticity requires vulnerability. Moral theologian Carolina Montero Orphanopoulos writes of vulnerability as both neutral and ambiguous. It is neutral in that it is simply a fact of our existence that we are, as Haker puts it, “susceptible to be[ing] affected by incidents and/or conditions beyond [our] control” as part of our human condition.⁷² We are also interdependent creatures who are from birth formed as persons by our interactions with others. Such affectability is a descriptive fact whose neutrality only comes into question when we consider the implications of its positive and negative dimensions.⁷³ Vulnerability is salubrious when it entails receptivity and openness to positive relationships and influences in the world. Indeed, such vulnerability, in the context of healthy, mutual relationships, is necessary for our development as social and moral agents. This is the kind of vulnerability I believe Francis had in mind when he taught that authentic encounters require mutual transparency and openness, which can lead to positive personal transformation. Yet vulnerability is ambiguous; it has not only positive but also negative dimensions. It can leave us open to harm and suffering in interpersonal encounters and in the context of structural injustice.

Those on the margins are especially vulnerable to harm in their interactions with persons and systems. Haker defines structural vulnerability as “particular states of vulnerability . . . [that] entail the more specific socially inflicted risks, due to one’s socio-economic status, one’s ethnicity, sex, or religion.”⁷⁴ To this list we can add race, disability, sexual identity, and any other social identity that marginalize groups of people. Such structural vulnerabilities make people particularly precarious to repeated misrecognition, which can lead to the internalization of degrading self-evaluations in relation to

⁷² Hille Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics: Catholic Ethics and Social Challenges* (Schwabe Verlagsgesellschaft AG, 2020), 139.

⁷³ Carolina Montero Orphanopoulos, *A Theological Approach to Vulnerability: Towards a Humane Ethics* (Springer, 2025), 176.

⁷⁴ Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 151.

others, stunting their sense of agency and sustaining profoundly unjust relational arrangements.⁷⁵ This can erode trust among members of marginalized populations “that others will not constantly harm and/or shame them, especially in the public sphere,” inhibiting “the positive dimension of vulnerability, i.e., openness to others.”⁷⁶ The experience of structural vulnerability can, in short, give marginalized persons understandable cause to close themselves off rather than maintain the kind of open and transparent posture that Francis counseled, particularly in encounters with those who do not share their marginalization.

Orphanopoulos argues that recognition of vulnerability’s ambiguity invites us beyond a descriptive analysis of vulnerability to a normative one.⁷⁷ She writes,

the intricate web of human interdependence, along with our connection to the created world, introduces a challenge concerning the distribution and exercise of power within these relationships. Any form of interdependence inherently involves power dynamics and, consequently, places a call to responsibility, giving rise to an ethical imperative. Vulnerability’s role is intertwined with an awareness of this responsibility.⁷⁸

It is incumbent upon us to discern our ethical responsibility to the other given our positionality in the configurations of power that characterize the relationship. In the case of immersion experiences, such discernment raises the question of whether we perpetuate structural violence when asking marginalized persons to risk mutual transparency and openness. This prospect is especially risky given immersion experiences’ propensity to authenticate the other on pre-conceived terms (i.e., to misrecognize her) and to foster moral sentiments (e.g., compassion) that stop short of true solidarity (e.g., concrete political action).

On one hand, as Orphanopoulos points out, to overemphasize the “situational vulnerability” of marginalized groups can lead to discrimination against them based on assessments that they are weak or deficient.⁷⁹ To do this would be to again authenticate the other on our own one-dimensional terms, with tropes such as “innocent helpless victim.” On the other hand, it is important to recognize that to expect transparency and openness without qualification is to ignore

⁷⁵ Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 138, 144; Haker, “Recognition and Responsibility,” 3.

⁷⁶ Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 152.

⁷⁷ Orphanopoulos, *A Theological Approach to Vulnerability*, 176.

⁷⁸ Orphanopoulos, *A Theological Approach to Vulnerability*, 194.

⁷⁹ Orphanopoulos, *A Theological Approach to Vulnerability*, 186.

the injury this may represent to the other. In either case, whether we expect the other to be so traumatized or ignore that they might be, we are asserting ourselves before receiving the other. We ourselves are not being truly open, and therefore not approaching the encounter in a spirit of mutuality.

The stance required here is vigilant responsiveness to the concrete demands of the encounter, including discernment as to what degree of transparency and openness is appropriate and just. This entails the acknowledgment that authenticity cannot require unguarded openness in all cases without generating harm. Such harm is to some degree predictable based on encounter's characteristic damage. It may occur through intended or unintended acts of misrecognition, or simply through a perceived demand for transparency and openness where trust is not present or earned. In the case of immersion experiences, where possible leaders can work to develop long term relationships not only with organizations but with individual people on the ground to build the trust and recognition that openness requires. Such a practice can result in greater mutuality and greater ability to exercise response-ability.

Mutuality In and Through Response-ability

The realization of mutuality is bound up with our ability to be responsive to the other in front of us (response-ability). Of such responsibility in the context of asymmetrical power arrangements, Haker writes:

Regarding structural vulnerability . . . moral agency must be spelled out in agents' different scopes and degrees of response-ability: in light of unequally distributed (ontological and moral) vulnerabilities, all parties must be enabled and willing to take responsibility for their actions; but all agents must acknowledge that the scope of possible action may differ according to their different social power. Excluded or marginalized groups are not only passive victims of injustice; that their voices are not heard does not mean that they do not *have* voices or agency but, rather, that they are *silenced* by a code of honor that is embedded in social norms.⁸⁰

Here Haker links moral agency with the ability to respond appropriately given the power dynamics between self and other. She also makes clear that the other is not a helpless victim. Rather, akin to Spivak's claim that the subaltern cannot speak, Haker asserts that it is not marginalized persons themselves but their lack of social

⁸⁰ Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 152.

recognition that silences their voices and constrains their agency. This is an important starting point for our expressions of responsibility. It corrects the “lotto logic” Freidus diagnosed among her students with the truth of our mutual embeddedness in systems of power that privilege some and disenfranchise others. The recognition that we share contingency within the same systems of power draws us into mutuality. It shifts our starting point from “the obligation of the giver” (an obligation to the construct of the innocent helpless victim) to “the right of the receiver” (recognition of the rights to which we have access that the other does not).

This shift in frame can help us know how to respond to the other in front of us, because it tells the truth about how we are in relationship to one another. Such a frame for response-ability recalls H. Richard Niebuhr’s grounding of moral agency in the fitting “response to *interpreted* action upon us.”⁸¹ According to Niebuhr, we express moral agency through interpreting the other’s actions and responding in a morally appropriate way. Further, he argued our responses ought to be accountable to the other’s reply, in a kind of moral dialogue.⁸²

To interpret the action of the other well—to discern the truth of the matter—requires us to attend to the ways the other and I are mutually implicated in systems of power, and how that privileges or disenfranchises each of us in the present context. In the case of immersion experiences, this necessitates scaffolding the experience with education about the histories of structural injustice in which participants are implicated. Beyond this, however, it requires astute discernment in real time as to how each unique individual encountered is positioned in these histories. Even when immersion experiences do attend to histories of injustice, they tend to be pulled toward the characteristic damage of misrecognition by interpreting those encountered as generic representatives of the same structural position (e.g. “the poor”) rather than as unique individuals. This obscures our ability to respond to the person in front of us as a unique subject in her own right. The inability of the BorderLinks participants to recall the names of their Mexican hosts is symptomatic of this tendency. Rather, where leaders can invite participants into pre-existing trusting relationships on the ground, they can create space for the kind of moral dialogue that raises complexities regarding intersectional locations in fields of power, engenders recognition of the other’s individual uniqueness (e.g., their biography, interests, talents, dreams, etc.), and produces conditions for mutual accountability.

⁸¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 61.

⁸² Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 64.

This is a tall order. It demands years of time, commitment, and various forms of labor from immersion experience leaders and marginalized persons on the ground (who would need to be compensated accordingly). Despite these hurdles, it is possible. For instance, place-based community engagement (PBCE) offers one model for this kind of commitment within the sphere of higher education. Kent Koth and Erica Yamamura define PBCE “as a long-term university-wide commitment to partner with local residents, organizations, and other leaders to focus equally on campus and community impact within a clearly defined geographical area.”⁸³ Students at universities committed to PBCE have access to immersion experiences that take place within the context of a devoted, ongoing relationship between the community members and the university grounded in shared goals and work. Community members become immersion experience leaders alongside university faculty and staff, able to represent themselves and their own communities from the planning and promotion stage through implementation. Such a model requires institutional and community support, resources, and buy-in. It takes time to build and is not feasible in every circumstance (which may mean that immersion experiences are not appropriate in every circumstance). Yet I contend that mutuality is *most* possible when such conditions are met.

CONCLUSION: FROM COMPASSION TO SOLIDARITY

I have argued that immersion experiences are compromised vehicles for Francis’s “authentic encounters.” The characteristic ways they can misrecognize and make demands on the other undercut the ideals of mutuality, recognition, and responsibility that Francis equated with authenticity in encounter. Identifying such characteristic damage can help us pinpoint where and how the work of repair must take place. For encounter through immersion experiences, this repair might be summed up as attending to the gap between our authenticating discourses about the other and the other’s own self-understanding, ideally in the context of long-term relationships of trust. Such repairs will help us to move past vague feelings of compassion tied to constructs of a generic other, to responsible action in solidarity with complex pluri-dimensional human beings whose inequitable situation in shared systems of power calls us to response. **M**

⁸³ Kent Koth and Erica K. Yamamura, *Place-Based Community Engagement in Higher Education: A Strategy to Transform Universities and Communities* (Routledge, 2018), 34, ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/fairfield/detail.action?docID=5419311.

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