

The Limits of Liminality: Where do Trans People Fit in to Pope Francis' Church?

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Abstract

This paper explores a tension between Francis' openness to 'liminality' and certain papal statements condemning transness, which reproduce the ways in which people are marginalised as trans. It seeks to make sense of these tensions, reading them back through Francis' theology of history, and suggesting a place for trans people to locate ourselves within the Church in spite of them. It argues that Francis' failings around transness can be viewed as 'limitations' to be overcome in a redemptive movement. It then argues that Francis' theology of history is reflected in his 'dialogical' use of authority, which admits a space and role for us as pastorally accompanying the Church beyond these limitations. Finally, it argues that Francis' pastoral theology is founded on a theology of encounter which suggests that this process is an expression of divine love that draws people to God through a loving encounter with others. Trans people are thus called to put ourselves at the service of this love, and can take hope in its powers even amidst our own weakness.

Keywords

Pope Francis, Transgender, Encounter, Eschatology, Marginalisation, Love

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Massimo Faggioli argues that one definitive feature of Francis' papacy is his stance towards liminality, particularly of those who exist on the margins of the Church and society. He finds this exemplified in the 2014 extraordinary synod and the 2015 ordinary synod leading up to the publication of *Amoris Laetitia*. The preparatory process and the synods themselves displayed a willingness to allow 'differences' and 'tensions around different theological and cultural comprehensions of new issues... to emerge, to be on full display, and to be part of the

process of synthesis at the synod’ – including around fraught issues such as ‘homosexuality, divorce, polygamy, and premarital cohabitation’.¹

On the other hand, Francis’s own openness to such tensions and differences is far from consistent. This inconsistency is illustrated particularly starkly by his approach to transness. Francis’s Magisterium tends to avoid criticism and condemnation of specific groups of people, reserving its more negative statements for various aspects of contemporary culture and society. In the case of transness, this approach is notionally reflected in his attacks on “gender theory”² or an “ideology of gender”,³ which contrasts with his explicit attempt to welcome trans people as people. However, as this essay argues, transness problematises this distinction by blurring the lines between the social phenomenon which Francis critiques and the people whom he might otherwise seek to welcome. The result is that trans people ourselves become the objects of his attacks on those phenomenon, which in turn has a marginalising function. In effect, we thereby come to represent a ‘liminality’ that lies beyond the limits of Francis’ general openness to the phenomenon. This then confronts trans people with a question: supposing that this tension is an unjust one, how are we (or indeed any other groups in a similar position) to think through Francis’ failure to extend his openness to us? And is there a space for us within Francis’ vision of the Church in spite of it?

This paper seeks to resource Francis’ own teachings about liminality to answer this question. I begin by exploring the tension between his approach to transness and his attitude to liminality. I then continue to draw on Faggioli’s reading of Francis’ theology of history to cope with this limitation. I argue that this theology enables us to contextualise these limits as *limitations* to be overcome, and suggests a model of authority that lacks the power to exclude he otherwise seems to invoke. Connecting this theology of history to Francis’ pastoral theology, I then move from this to outline a self-understanding for trans people in the Church in light of

¹ Massimo Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020), 18-9.

² Francis, “In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Azerbaijan to Rome” (2nd October 2016)
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/october/documents/papa-francesco_20161002_georgia-azerbaijan-conferenza-stampa.html.

³ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (19th March, 2016)
https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf (hereafter cited as *AL*).

these tensions. I argue that this reading locates the Church in an analogous place to an individual in need of pastoral accompaniment, and that trans people can see themselves as providing this accompaniment through their presence in the Church.

The limits of liminality

Francis' primary mode of engagement with transness is under the aegis of 'gender theory'. For example, *Amoris Laetitia* 56, quoting the *Relatio finalis* of the XIV Ordinary Assembly of Bishops,⁴ warns of an 'ideology of gender' that denies sexual difference and undermines the family by working to 'sunder what are inseparable aspects of reality' - including not only sex and procreation, but 'personal identity... radically separated from the biological difference between male and female'. He also construes this in terms of seeking to 'replace the Creator', setting up a theme of overreaching human power.⁵ This mirrors a similar approach to transness in *Laudato Si'* 155, which warns that 'thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation'. The target of this statement is clear from the following statements about 'valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity', and the problems of seeking 'to cancel out sexual difference'.⁶

Francis' focus on gender *theory* is doubtless intended to dissociate his condemnations from trans *people*. This mirrors his pastoral approach which treats it as 'a moral problem' to be

⁴ XIV Ordinary Assembly of Bishops, 'The Final Report of the Synod of Bishops to the Holy Father, Pope Francis', accessed 1st March 2024, 8

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20151026_relazione-finale-xiv-assemblea_en.html.

⁵ Francis, 'Amoris Laetitia', accessed 4th August 2023

https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf (hereafter cited as *AL*).

⁶ Francis, 'Laudato si'', accessed 4th August 2023

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (hereafter cited as *LS*). This passage quotes

Francis's 'General Audience', accessed 4th August 2023

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150415_udienza-generale.html.

‘resolved as best we can, always with the mercy of God, with the truth... with our hearts open’.⁷ However, transness is not so easily targeted in this separate way.

Since the inception of the field the 1990s, the more sophisticated and robust accounts of transness emerging from trans studies have construed transness in terms of a social or political position. An early example is Stone’s description of transness as ‘a genre - a set of embodied texts’ in which the meaning of the body is worked out in a transgressive way against the backdrop of contemporary sexual and gender ideologies.⁸ More recently, Snorton argues that transness, along with Blackness, is an expression of primordial ‘transitivity’, or the indeterminate materiality out of which Western capitalism produced the racialised cultural object that is the body. This expression takes the form of a ‘transversal’ movement with no clear origin or end. However, it becomes ‘transgender’ when it inaugurates a movement within gender.⁹ Construed in this way, transness is a matter of the life one lives; of the position one occupies in society relative to its norms and processes of economic production, and the subjectivity that emerges within it.¹⁰

⁷ Francis, ‘In-Flight Press Conference’. Francis’ response to Joshua McElwee here illustrates this dissociation and its associated intentions particularly clearly. Compare also his condemnatory rhetoric with his more concrete gestures of welcome, such as reported in Nicole Winfield and Trisha Thomas, ‘For This Group of Trans Women, the Pope and His Message of Inclusivity are a Welcome Change’, accessed 29th February 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/vatican-transgender-lgbtq-b3d67868504ba701cce09da9ecc94de0>.

⁸ Stone describes transness as ‘a genre - a set of embodied texts’ (Sandy Stone, ‘The “Empire” Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto’, accessed 4th August 2023, 12 <https://uberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/trans-manifesto.pdf>).

⁹ Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 5.

¹⁰ Obviously there are many different accounts of transness, both within trans studies and outside of the university. The accounts referenced here focus on one particular aspect of the broader social significance of transness, and I cite them here because this aspect is significant for understanding the pitfalls of Francis’ approach. However, they do not claim to be exhaustive, and indeed their foregrounding of negativity and fluidity suggest room for an expansive scope for other accounts both in relation to the social significance of transness as well as the self-understanding that trans people may hold.

This is problematic for Francis' approach as the normative boundaries his condemnations draw serve to reproduce the conditions in which people are marginalised as trans.¹¹ First, they do so by motivating politics that are hostile to trans people – for example, Pope Francis' statement above that transness, while a 'moral problem', must nevertheless be approached 'with the mercy of God' was delivered as part of a defence of earlier statements against trans mainstreaming in schools. Second, this draws our attention to the discursive function of his condemnations: norms regulate the intelligibility of behaviour, thereby producing certain forms of subjectivity that consolidate the norm in turn, while precluding others that do not.¹² This normative dynamic is likewise a major theme of early work in trans studies, not least that of Susan Stryker who saw this abjection as definitive of transness itself.¹³ The construct 'gender theory' or 'gender ideology', which Francis' rhetoric cites, functions as an "empty signifier" that unites otherwise disparate political groups precisely through its ability to cover an indeterminate range of political developments to do with transness.¹⁴ In citing it, his rhetoric has a similarly fluid scope that expands to encompass any form or expression of transness in any given context. His condemnations of transness are also similarly expansive

¹¹ Note that my criticism here is not so much that Francis offers a critique of transness (even if I obviously disagree with that critique), but that this act of criticism itself has a marginalising function. The limitation to Francis' openness to liminality with which I am concerned here to do with the kind of world Francis builds up, and not simply the kinds of accounts of the world that he can accept.

¹² Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), 41.

¹³ E.g Susan Stryker, 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage', *GLQ* 1 (1994): 237-54.

¹⁴ David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar, 'The Anti-Gender Movement in Comparative Perspective', *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality*, Ed. Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, (Lanham/New York: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018) 253-276, 259.

and fluid, militating against the intelligibility of transness in as many forms and contexts as are addressed by global anti-gender movements more generally.^{15 16}

These functions also bear up a profound tension with the theology that undergirds Francis' openness to liminality. Faggioli sees at the heart of Francis's embrace of liminality a renegotiation of the 'spiritual and intellectual *geography*' of the Papacy; a new 'spatiality'.¹⁷

¹⁵ The question of what forms of transness Francis specifically has in mind is a separate consideration. However, it is reasonable to interpret Francis himself as rejecting the intelligibility of all forms of transness. The aptness of his construct as a description of transness of course varies according to the account of transness in question. However, Catholic approaches to transness more broadly often serve to efface actual accounts of trans life, in part through failing to recognise the presence of those various accounts (see Elsa Dorlin, 'Unreal: Catholic Ideology as Epistemological War', *Religion and Gender* no. 6 (2016): 264-167, 265). This holds true for Francis's approach to transness, which never engages any specific account of transness beyond this construct. This failure to explicitly recognise the ways in which trans people conceive of themselves means that he also fails to explicitly recognise the *variety* of ways in which trans people conceive of themselves, or the potential for relevant distinctions between them. This univocal reading of transness suggests a similarly univocal condemnation, regardless of the aptness of the construct that he names as his target.

¹⁶ On this point, it ought to be noted that Francis' concerns emerge at least in part from the reflections of others in the Church (e.g. *AL* 56), in line with the wider phenomenon of transnational anti-gender politics - the origins of which are in no small part attributable to Catholicism (see Mary Anne Case, 'The Role of the Popes in the Invention of Complementarity and the Vatican's Anathematization of Gender', *Religion & Gender* 6 (2016): 155-172; 'Trans Formations in the Vatican's War on "Gender Ideology"', *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society* 44 (2019): 539-664; José Manuel Morán Faúndes, 'The Geopolitics of Moral Panic: the Influence of Argentinian Neo-Conservatism in the Genesis of the Discourse of "Gender Ideology"', *International Sociology* 34 (2019): 402-417). It is precisely because Francis speaks from and to this wider context that his rhetoric has this discursive significance. Likewise, this shows that the problem is not solely to do with Francis, even if he is the focus of this paper.

¹⁷ Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy*, 73.

Part of this involves a ‘particular attention to the peripheries and the marginalized’; those excluded from the ‘political and economic system’.¹⁸ He also argues that this geographical decentring is mirrored in his moving of the papacy away from ‘the perceived political-moral “center” identified with the magisterium of his two predecessors’, for example with a concern for ‘the liminal and peripheral condition of many Catholics in “irregular situations”’.¹⁹

For Faggioli, this latter shift is served by the former: Francis writes that ‘not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium... Each country or region... can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs’.²⁰ By de-emphasising a centralised Papal power to intervene on their pastoral care, marginalised groups are better able to be integrated in a way that is sensitive to the local context. And this illustrates an analogy between Francis’s openness to marginality in the form of global or cultural diversity, and a broader openness towards marginality in general; a more fundamental logic that is expressed in both literal geographical terms, and more figurative social ones.

This common logic can serve as a deeper principle that we can read back into Francis’s own reflections on the global in this more figurative sense. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis outlines a vision of universality modelled on the ‘polyhedron’, which ‘reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness’ (*EG* 236).²¹ He conceives of this model specifically as embodying a tension between ‘globalization and localization’, with each ‘part’ representing a locale in the globe. In this context, the principle exhorts us to ‘broaden our horizons and see the greater good which will benefit us all’ beyond a narrow focus on the local, but to do so ‘without evasion or uprooting’, instead embracing the ‘fertile soil and history’ of our particular location and community, and refusing to lose our ‘individualism’ or to ‘hide our identity’ (*EG* 235). However, in line with Faggioli’s insight, this geographical frame of reference channels a deeper logic of universality. Francis writes:

There is a place for the poor and their culture, their aspirations and their potential.

Even people who can be considered dubious on account of their errors have

¹⁸ Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy*, 78.

¹⁹ Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy*, 84-5.

²⁰ *AL* 3, in Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy*, 84-5.

²¹ Francis, ‘*Evangelii Gaudium*’, accessed 4th August 2023

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (hereafter cited as *EG*).

something to offer which must not be overlooked. It is the convergence of peoples who, within the universal order, maintain their own individuality; it is the sum total of persons within a society which pursues the common good, which truly has a place for everyone.

(EG 235)

Here, this polyhedral universality does not simply refer to geographical pluralism, but a more general pluralism within society, which is conceived as ordered towards the common good. Note also that he specifically includes even those who ‘can be considered dubious’: this universality is premised on the recognition that a society ordered towards the common good ‘truly has a place for everyone’, and speaks against even the normative lines that would otherwise exclude and marginalise.

The way that Francis’ condemnations not only serve to marginalise people as trans, but render trans subjectivity impossible or abject is antithetical to this: Francis consolidates the conditions of a world in which people are not only marginalised as trans, but in which the trans subjectivity which emerges from this has no place; in which we are marginalised but unable to know ourselves as such, and therefore unable to even contest our exclusion.²²

We should also attend to the specifically violent dimensions of Francis’ condemnations. Norms motivate what Butler describes as ‘social punishments’; behaviours which consolidate those norms by violently policing bodies that transgress them.²³ In this case, these are trans bodies. Francis’s speech cannot be abstracted from this broader ideological context. It indirectly enables violence by reproducing the norms that motivate it, and collaborating (however unintentionally) with that violence in the course of this defence.

²² Lemaster explores this in terms of a conflict between two utopias: Francis’s normative vision is embodied in a utopia of reproductive futurity, which is dystopic for trans people whom he correspondingly sees as embodying a dystopic ‘utopia of the “neutral”’ (Pope Francis, ‘Audience with participants in the 23rd General Assembly of the Members of the Pontifical Academy for Life’, Accessed 4th August 2023,

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/10/05/171005d.html>.)

Lemaster argues that this ‘utopia of the neutral’ represents a reproduction of the dystopic violence of Francis’s own vision (Benny Lemaster, ‘Transing Dystopia: Constituting Trans Monstrosity, Performing Trans Rage in Torrey Peters’ *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones*, *The Popular Culture Studies Journal* 6, no. 2-3 (2018): 96-117).

²³ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 55.

This troubling in itself, but also deepens the tension with Francis' model of a polyhedral universality. Francis opposes this model to the violent enforcement of conformity when he contrasts it with the image of the 'sphere', in which all difference is flattened into single, homogenous face (*EG* 236). This opposition is illustrated, for example, in *Querida Amazonia* 31, which describes the Amazon as a 'polyhedron', highlighting the distinct peoples each with their own 'cultural identity and unique richness' within this.²⁴ *QA* opposes this description to the conforming violence of colonialism when it continues to recognise the threat they are under: 'Their situation is very tenuous... allowed to survive only if they make no trouble, while the postmodern colonization advances' (*QA* 29). Admittedly, this notionally anti-violent, anti-colonial rhetoric is embedded in wider queerphobic or anti-gender politics that serve to reproduce the exclusions this essay seeks to escape;²⁵ politics that are undoubtedly present in Francis' thought - for example, in comments about trans mainstreaming in schools as "ideological colonization".²⁶ This would seem to suggest that Francis' polyhedral universalism likewise excludes transness. On the other hand, indigenous queer emancipatory movements exist, while queerphobic politics often have a troubled relationship to colonialism themselves.²⁷ These facts suggest that the problem is less with the model of universality itself and more to do with biases in its application by Francis, in which transness becomes aligned with the homogenising forces of colonialism in a way that obscures the more complex reality of colonialism in the specific contexts Francis analyses. If so, then the norms Francis reproduces, including in the misapplication of his universalism itself, might be framed in terms of the violent flattening forces his universalism opposes.

So how to make sense of these tensions? And is there a way for trans people to see themselves as nevertheless having a place in the Church in spite of our marginalisation?

²⁴ Francis, 'Querida Amazonia', accessed 4th August 2023

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html (hereafter cited as *QA*).

²⁵ David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar, "'Gender ideology" in movement: Introduction', *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality*, ed. Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (Lanham/New York: Rowman and Littlefield International), 1-22, 3).

²⁶ Francis, 'In Flight Press Conference'.

²⁷ For an in-depth discussion of these points, particularly in relation to postsecular postcolonial politics, see Nikita Dhawan, 'The Empire Prays Back: Religion, Secularity, and Queer Critique', *Boundary 2* no. 40 (2013): 191-222.

Francis's liminality in light of its limits

This tension foregrounds the question of liminality itself: trans people are 'liminal' because we are marginalised in the course of the Church's response to marginalisation itself. Perhaps, then, Francis' own teachings might be resourced to speak reflexively to this marginalisation too.

One such resource is Francis' own theology of history, which can serve as a hermeneutical key for reading not just history, but his papacy within it. Faggioli writes: 'Francis's ecclesiology and spirituality see the world not as an object metaphysically separated from or threatening Christianity, but as the *space* in which *time* opens new processes'; a 'core theological orientation' that he finds in *EG* 222-37.²⁸ This portion of the Exhortation outlines Francis's 'four principles', which Francis offers as outlining 'a genuine path to peace' within the 'constant tensions present in every social reality' (*EG* 221).

Perhaps articulating this situation most clearly, *EG* 222-223 describes a 'constant tension' between the 'fullness' of our eschatological destiny and the 'limitation' of the present (no. 222). Abiding in this tension, we must 'give a priority to time' and prioritise the initiation of processes that engage others and thereby outstrip us, 'rather than madly attempting to keep everything together in the present, trying to possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion' (*EG* 223). However, Borghesi goes further to read his principles more generally as setting out a dialectical vision in which poles of fullness and limit, idea and reality, and globalization and localization are held in a tension wherein relations of unity and conflict, and whole and part refuse to resolve in favour of one over the other.²⁹ Read in this way, *EG* depicts our human situation as one that fundamentally cannot be understood in terms of a realised fullness, whether that is in terms of a final unity in which there is no conflict, or a whole in which there is no difference. That is, for Francis, to be human is to live amidst alterity, and in the light of one's limits that are always framed against a backdrop of a fullness that cannot simply be reduced to fit within them.

Faggioli also offers an historical context for Francis' papacy that might be understood as situating it in one such process. He argues that Francis's 'globalization of the papacy'³⁰ is the continuation of a long process of social transformation during which the Church has slowly

²⁸ Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy*, 44.

²⁹ Massimo Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio's Intellectual Journey*, trans. Barry Hudock (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press Academic, 2018), 119-20.

³⁰ Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy*, 29.

detached itself from its legacy as the ‘successor of the Roman empire’.³¹ In this regard, he argues, we can see Francis’s papacy in continuity with other moments of Catholic history, not least the Second Vatican Council, which sought to reinterpret the Church’s location in the world beyond old narratives of Christendom, from which the rest of the world had long moved away. This hermeneutic places Francis in continuity with even the Popes who may seem to contrast with him in certain regards – for example, Paul VI, who completed the council, even though he interpreted it with an eye to ‘inscribing the reforming work of the council in continuity with the teachings of the previous councils’ in a way that embodied a ‘very European and Italian’ theological culture.³² Likewise, despite his disciplinarian traditionalism around liberation theology and issues of sexual ethics, John Paul II also championed a more active role for the laity in Church, as well as an ‘accelerated engagement’ with the ecumenical movement.³³ Finally, he argues, even Benedict XVI’s relatively ‘cautious position about ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, and dialogue with the modern world’ can be understood as a continuation of these themes in the more jaded context of the world after 9/11.³⁴

Reading Francis in this continuity enables us to view his papacy as another stage in a broader trajectory within the life of the Church, specifically with regards to the kind of opening up to alterity found in his wider teachings. This process has born up its own internal contradictions, ambivalences, and resistances at every stage so far, and therefore might be expected to continue to do so through both Francis’s papacy and beyond. Under this reading, the inconsistencies of the opening that has occurred in the course of his papacy can be understood as a function of his position in a process that has yet to come to its full realisation. That is, it encourages us to read Francis not as presenting an *openness* so much as an *opening*; a stage in a process that has not yet been fulfilled, but through which we might move towards that fulfilment.

In other words, we might say that whatever the limits of the opening with which he presents us, Francis also equips us to envisage these limits *as* limits. He also provides us with an eschatological orientation that offers possibilities for a more expansive vision that goes beyond the limits of that vision as he himself presents it to us. Read in this light, the

³¹ Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy*, 24.

³² Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy*, 27-8.

³³ Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy*, 28.

³⁴ Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy*, 29.

ambivalences of Francis's papacy are simply Francis (and the Church more generally) working things out within the existential ambivalence of our tensioned existence.

Dialogical authority

In a certain respect, this claim is nothing new. Advocates for LGBT+ inclusion in the Church often similarly look to points of openness to liminality in Church teaching to lend support to their case. However, there are two further implications to this reading which are significant here.

The first is that this reading implies something about the way in which we ought to understand Francis as wielding his papal authority. Recognising this approach to his authority helps overcome a tension within these kinds of more common approaches: an equally common response to them is that such advocates invoke teaching authority (such as Francis') only in relation to a subset of teachings that support their cause, while effectively refusing to grant this authority to other, less palatable facets of Church teachings. In the process they abuse that authority, or at least give a misleading impression of what recognising that authority means.³⁵

This criticism presupposes that the exercise of authority in promulgating these various teachings is such that it requires them all to be received indiscriminately. At the heart of this is a view of papal authority functioning unilaterally relative to a somewhat passive receiver: whatever Francis says, the receiver must ultimately adopt – albeit perhaps with some scope for interpretive freedom.

In contrast, the vision of the Church implied by Francis' eschatology suggests a less unilateral and more 'dialogical' exercise of authority that refuses its own totalisation, instead admitting the possibility of those who find themselves at odds with his teachings nevertheless having a place to consider them *across* the differences that arises in this context. In other words, while his teachings may seek to eliminate the normative basis for trans life, he promulgates them in a way that nevertheless presupposes our continued existence and the preservation of our differences with him in spite of this.

Reading Francis' teachings through his theology of history reveals an impulse in Francis's thought to go beyond itself, moving past its own limitations into the 'greater, brighter horizon of the utopian future as the final cause which draws us to itself' (EG 222). On its own

³⁵ For example, see Charles J. Chaput, 'Father James Martin and Catholic Belief', accessed 4th August 2023 <http://catholicphilly.com/2019/09/archbishop-chaput-column/father-james-martin-and-catholic-belief/>.

terms, Francis's teaching ought not to be viewed as the consummation of history, but in terms of a stage in a broader process which includes others in such a way as to problematise the notion of a totalised authority that can wield exclusive or universal normative power. This reorients us towards the tensions above as framed in terms of his appeal to 'polyhedral' universality: if Francis's vision of universality rejects the conformity of present plurality to a single, homogenous principle, then to situate his own thought within this 'universal order' requires us to view it in its own particularity, rather than elevating it to play such a totalising role. Read in this way, his own vision of this order is local to his position within it.

To read Francis in this way is to recognise his papacy as speaking (however truthfully) from a particular perspective within broader society, and that it must therefore do so alongside other voices rather than attempting to unilaterally determine the 'universal order'. Granting this, his championing of normative boundaries need not be understood as an attempt to impose those norms over and against all other perspectives (including 'dubious' ones). Rather, he offers them up to a pluralistic world in the knowledge that his perspective can be complemented by, or even (and perhaps only) ordered towards the Common Good alongside those other perspectives.

Francis himself gestures towards this ethos when he writes in favour of a 'cultural covenant' that 'eschews a monolithic understanding of the identity of a particular place' and 'entails respect for diversity by offering opportunities for advancement and social integration to all' (*Fratelli Tutti* 220).³⁶ This covenant is also a 'cultural' one, which 'respects and acknowledges the different worldviews, cultures and lifestyles that coexist in society' (*FT* 219). Hence it

demands the realization that some things may have to be renounced for the common good. No one can possess the whole truth or satisfy his or her every desire, since that pretension would lead to nullifying others by denying their rights. A false notion of tolerance has to give way to a dialogic realism on the part of men and women who remain faithful to their own principles while recognizing that others also have the right to do likewise.

(*FT* 221)

³⁶ Francis, 'Fratelli tutti', accessed 4th August 2023

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (hereafter cited as *FT*).

Francis here is calling specifically for a politics that engages receptively with the poor and their culture, rather than a one in which dialogue is only held ‘between the holders of economic, political or academic power’ (FT 219). It is a mistake to think that trans people cannot be found among the poor, or even that the culture of the poor in general fits neatly within heteronormative and cissexist parameters.³⁷ But more broadly, while his main object of concern is ‘the poor’, he approaches this construct through the lens of addressing exclusion, writing: ‘Liberty, equality and fraternity can remain lofty ideals unless they apply to everyone. Encounter cannot take place only between the holders of economic, political or academic power’ (FT 219). In doing so, he demonstrates that this ‘dialogic realism’ and its recognition of the right to different cultures, worldviews, and lifestyles speaks primarily against such exclusions. It refuses the totalisation of any one culture, worldview or lifestyle (all of which, we should note, include a normative component), to the point that people are excluded on the basis of their differences.

Correspondingly, trans people can reconceive of the way Francis’s condemnations obtain in our lives. They are an offering from a particular location in history that engages us in a process wherein the Church may be drawn out of the limitations represented by that offering itself. And in this context, to appeal to certain aspects of Francis’ teachings in spite of his limitations is not simply to cherry-pick from those teachings, but a form of dialogic response. It is a response that identifies us as inhabiting a new space of possibility for existence that Francis recognises in general, but, limited by the particularities of his place in history, simply does not recognise specific to us; one that provides a perspective from which we can discern both the possibility and necessity of such a movement within those teachings themselves.³⁸

³⁷ See Marcella Althaus Reid, *Indecent Theology* (London: Routledge, 2000).

³⁸ In this vein, the possibility of such a constructive response is encapsulated in another prominent theme in Francis’ teaching on dialogue: the necessity of open-ended, ‘incomplete thinking’ (Robert Catalano, ‘Pope Francis’ Culture of Dialogue as Pathway to Interfaith Encounter: A Special Focus on Islam’, *Religions* 13, no. 4, 279 (2022), 8 <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040279>). Phan likewise argues that, for Francis, the renunciation of pretensions to total truth and the aspirations to total power which flow from them undergirds dialogue in an interreligious context. Attending to the epistemic dimensions of the movement this paper describes, he opposes Francis’ first principle to these pretensions, arguing that the horizon of fullness is analogous to Rahner’s horizon of transcendental knowledge (Peter C. Phan, ‘Pope Francis and Interreligious Encounter’, *Theological Studies*

Here, then, is an account of trans subjectivity which has a place in the Church even as it is denied. To be trans is to exist beyond the normative boundaries reproduced by Francis' condemnations. But this is not solely a bad thing: to exist in this way goes beyond simple exclusion or even transgression. It gives us a distance from our exclusions that can be critical, and therein *redemptive*, embodying the possibility of overcoming the limitations by which we are marginalised in the first place.

Accompanying the Church

The eschatology that underlies this ethos means that this kind of pluralism – even in its critical dimensions - must be welcomed as a good. The other becomes vital for the Church's fulfilment, which is entrusted to them in the process whereby the Church is drawn beyond its present limitations, including those represented by figures such as Francis himself.

This leads to the second significant implication: reading Francis in this way suggests a role for trans people to play in the life of the Church from within this position. In light of this reading, we can see ourselves as those others to whom Francis's eschatology encourages him to entrust the process whereby the Church will come to fulfilment. In this context, the true significance of Francis's condemnations might be less that, if adopted universally, they would make trans subjectivity impossible, and more that they nevertheless engage a world in which we exist, and can respond in such a way as to overcome the limitations they embody.

Another way to think about this might be in terms of a kind of pastoral care of the Church: the pastoral care of individuals is another prominent theme in Francis's teachings that

83, no. 1 (2022): 25-47, 37). Beyond interreligious dialogue, Gioia argues that *EG* offers a model of ecclesial 'synodality' that decentralises authority in the Church, reconfigures traditional relationships between teaching offices and the laity, and invites difference and disagreement; something he finds imperfectly embodied in the 2014-15 Synod on the Family (Luigi Gioia, 'The Recent Practice of Synodality and its Ecclesiological Significance in the Light of Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*', accessed 4th August 2023 https://www.academia.edu/25532592/The_Recent_Practice_of_Synodality_and_its_Ecclesiological_Significance_in_the_Light_of_Pope_Francis_Evangelii_Gaudium). Closer to this paper's concern, it is thus unsurprising that McCarty finds numerous statements in *EG* that suggest greater openness to LGBT+ theological scholarship (Richard W. McCarty, 'A New Hope? Pope Francis, the Academy, and LGBT Scholars and Scholarship', *AUUP Journal of Academic Freedom* 6 (2015) 1-12).

reflects this broader eschatological vision. In his treatment of this issue, Francis offers an account of what it means not only to live with one's own limitations, but to respond to those of others.

One of the great controversies of his papacy revolved around precisely this question in relation to *Amoris Laetitia*'s treatment of non-married couples in sexual relationships, and their admission to the Eucharist.³⁹ Coccopalmerio offers an interpretation of the document that reads Francis as recognising two broad points: first, that some couples living in this way may nevertheless 'desire to change the situation, but cannot act on their desire'.⁴⁰ Second, that this inability may result from 'a condition of weakness'; something that Francis sees as necessitating the 'law of gradualness' (AL 295) that recognises that 'God... requires only what is possible' is correspondingly 'pleased with what is possible', and reflects this in the attitudes of the Church.⁴¹ In both cases, Coccopalmerio argues, the couples in question are not in a state of grave sin, and therefore eligible for admission to the Eucharist.

Here, we have a dialectic between the 'fullness' of the moral law, and an individual's 'limitations', which moderate the demand of that law until they can move beyond them. This dialectic between the 'fullness' of the universal moral law and the 'limitations' faced by individuals likewise reflects the dialectic of Francis's principles, wherein we are suspended between the 'fullness' of the Kingdom and the 'limitation' of the present. And, like the pastoral 'law of gradualness', this principle prescribes a response particular to that context. Rather than attempting to realise fullness in the here and now, we are instead to surrender power, engage others, and embrace plurality over totalisation, with the aim of gradually approaching fullness out of our limitation.

In this context, Francis's principles in *EG* can be read as a kind of law of gradualness for the Church. Following John Paul II, *AL* frames the law of gradualness in terms of enabling an advance or growth in holiness, providing mercy along the way of a process in which the individual slowly becomes more able to follow the law (AL 295). Likewise, for Francis, our journey into fullness is a journey into fulfilment; the 'final cause which draws us to itself' (*EG*

³⁹ See Edward Pentin, 'Full Text and Explanatory Notes of Cardinals' Questions on "Amoris Laetitia"', accessed 4th August 2023 <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/full-text-and-explanatory-notes-of-cardinals-questions-on-amoris-laetitia>.

⁴⁰ Francesco Coccopalmerio, *A Commentary on Chapter Eight of Amoris Laetitia* (New York/Wahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2017), 25.

⁴¹ Coccopalmerio, *A Commentary*, 42.

222). In this way, perhaps paradoxically, it is precisely through surrendering pretensions to universal authority that the Church can come into its own: we do not yet possess fullness. As such, no one voice can pretend to offer it, nor can the world immediately be reconciled in it. Nor can we even approach it individually. As such, we need to engage others in order to do so. This, perhaps, is the most radical aspect of Francis's four principles: pluralism is authentically enriching, leading us towards our fulfilment. That is, pluralism is not simply prescribed to us, but *allowed*. In this way, the Church's position as one voice among many is transformed: it is not a humiliating demotion of a rightfully universal authority. It is a *mercy*, whereby the Church can be accompanied in its own journey towards fulfilment.

In the previous section, I argued that Francis's teachings can be understood in terms of an offering-up to a pluralistic world, rather than an attempt to wield a universal authority that can simply unilaterally determine social norms. Read in this context, this offering-up might further be understood as a reaching-out to a world in which the Church will find the others who will accompany it on its journey to fulfilment. We might understand this as the setting and mode of our dialogical response to his teachings; a connection that Francis himself makes when he frequently construes dialogue in terms of journeying together.⁴² Correspondingly, in staking out the possibility of trans life within the Church against its limitations, trans people can see ourselves as offering the grace of this accompaniment. And if Francis fails to embrace the liminality of our lives, then this is simply a sign that the Church's need for us is greater than he imagines – as well as a sign of our particular grace, which is to receive Francis's offering and appear to the Church even though it does not expect us.

Love, the future, and the Other

So far, I have argued that the eschatology of *EG* enables us to situate Francis's papacy within a broader historical process wherein the Church is drawn beyond its present limitation to fulfilment. In turn, this offers a conceptual space to think beyond the limitations that present themselves today – including Francis's own inability to embrace the liminality presented by transness, which he otherwise embraces elsewhere in his teachings.

This reading of Francis revolves around a movement in which the Church is constantly being drawn beyond itself. Whereas Faggioli identifies Francis's papacy as navigating a tension between the local and the global through decentring the papacy or aligning it with the local or liminal, reading Francis in this way thus reveals a more fundamental tension: that between the

⁴² Catalano, 'Pope Francis' Culture of Dialogue', 6.

Church's self-assertion (specifically in the normalising dimensions of Francis's magisterium), and its self-transcendence in an encounter with a world that exceeds it. There are two dimensions to this movement of self-transcendence. The first is what might be described as a 'diachronic' movement into the future whereby the Church comes to fulfilment through transcending its limitations. The second is a 'synchronic' movement, in which the Church transcends itself to encounter and exist alongside others within the plural field of the present, thus rejecting the kinds of universalising gestures addressed above.

In this context, another factor that speaks against universalising readings of Francis is how he integrates the two movements. Francis also commonly figures dialogue in terms of 'encounter'.⁴³ In this vein, I have already argued that it is only by making this synchronic movement that the Church can engage others and be accompanied in its journey to fulfilment. As such, we might say that this synchronic movement is a condition of the diachronic one. But more than this, the synchronic movement also finds its fulfilment in the diachronic movement such that the two are not so easily distinguished from one another. This means that it is impossible for the Church to move towards its fulfilment without simultaneously reaching out to others that might accompany it.

Lumen Fidei 9 teaches that faith is a response to a call that draws us to our fulfilment.⁴⁴ To hear this call is to encounter God, who issues it, in His love. Hence Christ, as the perfect self-revelation of God in His love, is

the locus of God's definitive intervention, the supreme manifestation of his love for us. The word which God speaks to us in Jesus is not simply one word among many, but his eternal Word (cf. *Heb* 1:1-2). God can give no greater guarantee of his love, as Saint Paul reminds us (cf. *Rom* 8:31-39).

(LF 15)

⁴³ Catalano, 'Pope Francis' Culture of Dialogue', 6-7. Similarly to myself, Rivera reads this dialogical ethic of encounter in terms of *EG*'s 'four principles' (Angeli Francis S. Rivera, 'The Practical Implications of Pope Francis' Culture of Encounter and its Objectives of Establishing and Maintaining Peace in East Asia', *MST Review* 23, no. 1 (2021): 90-134, at 102-117).

⁴⁴ Francis, 'Lumen Fidei', accessed 4th August 2023
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html (hereafter cited as *LF*).

The encyclical repeatedly describes this response in terms of a journey, the paradigmatic example of which it finds in Abraham's literal journey, following God's call to leave Ur (*LF* 9). It also teaches that both the image of God's call, as well as this journeying aspect, gives a certain temporal nature to faith: faith is 'hearing'; a response to an encounter in which we do not totally apprehend the One who calls us, but are instead called to journey forwards through time in trust. It is 'a knowledge bound to the passage of time, for words take time to be pronounced, and it is a knowledge assimilated only along a journey of discipleship' (*LF* 29).

This is explicitly framed in the terms of what would become Francis's first principle in *EG* when it is brought into contact with the interpersonal aspect of this vocation: to hear a word is to encounter the person who pronounces it, albeit without the full apprehension implied by contrasting metaphors of 'sight' – which, in a Christian context, never truly lose this temporal aspect (*LF* 30). This frustrates our attempts to exert control over God presented by totalising knowledge; a theme Francis addresses in his meditation on 'idols', which replace this personal aspect with an object subject to human control, thereby bringing the journey to a false end – something illustrated by the story of the Israelites who turned to idolatry at Sinai in frustration at God's hiddenness during their wandering in the desert (*LF* 13). In contrast, faith calls us to and demands hope, which expresses itself in the temporal consciousness of Francis's first principle:

hope propels us towards a sure future, set against a different horizon with regard to the illusory enticements of the idols of this world yet granting new momentum and strength to our daily lives. Let us refuse to be robbed of hope, or to allow our hope to be dimmed by facile answers and solutions which block our progress, 'fragmenting' time and changing it into space. Time is always much greater than space. Space hardens processes, whereas time propels towards the future and encourages us to go forward in hope.

(*LF* 57) Alongside metaphors of hearing, *LF* also discusses the encounter with God's love in terms of the metaphor of touch. In one passage, Francis explains how God's love touches us at a primordial level, which in turn reconfigures us in our entirety:

In the Bible, the heart is the core of the human person, where all his or her different dimensions intersect: body and spirit, interiority and openness to the world and to others, intellect, will and affectivity. If the heart is capable of holding all these dimensions together, it is because it is where we become open to truth and love, where we let them touch us and deeply transform us. Faith transforms the whole person precisely to the extent that he or she becomes open to love.

(*LF* 26)

One significant image in which Francis discusses the touch of God's love is in terms of the touch of a 'loving gaze'. *AL* states this most plainly when it asserts: 'The aesthetic experience of love is expressed in that "gaze" that contemplates other persons as ends in themselves' (*AL* 128). Prefiguring this, *EG* portrays an encounter with Christ's gaze as transformative in this way. For example, the disciples went out to evangelize 'immediately after encountering the gaze of Jesus' (*EG* 120). Similarly, Francis exhorts us to stand before Christ and therein encounter his 'gaze of love', putting ourselves in His presence such that He 'touches our lives and impels us to share his new life' (*EG* 264).

In summary, it is Christ's love that touches our heart through his gaze, and calls us to embark upon the journey to fulfilment. Responding to this means renouncing idolatrous claims to immediate possession of that fulfilment, engaging others to move beyond the limitations of the present. Correspondingly, *LF* understands the transformation engendered by the touch of God's love as coming to share in Christ's gaze: 'Faith does not merely gaze at Jesus, but sees things as Jesus himself sees them, with his own eyes: it is a participation in his way of seeing' (*LF* 18). Indeed, *Lumen Fidei* indexes the unity of the Church to the unity of this shared gaze, figuring it not only in terms of a communication of love, but as the basis for 'faith-knowledge' (*LF* 29) in the light of that love. Francis writes that

faith is one because it is shared by the whole Church, which is one body and one Spirit. In the communion of the one subject which is the Church, we receive a common gaze. By professing the same faith, we stand firm on the same rock, we are transformed by the same Spirit of love, we radiate one light and we have a single insight into reality.

(*LF* no. 47)

Following on from this, *EG* conceives of evangelization in terms of our loving gaze making present Christ's own, and thereby enabling others to encounter His love, and share in it as they grow in faith:

In our world, ordained ministers and other pastoral workers can make present the fragrance of Christ's closeness and his personal gaze. The Church will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious and laity – into this 'art of accompaniment' which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. *Ex* 3:5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life.

That is, we embark upon this journey by going out and bringing Christ's transformative love to others. We do this by adopting his loving gaze in order to touch them with His love and call them to embark upon that journey themselves. In this way, to answer Christ's call and to journey through time towards fulfilment *is* to reach out to others.

However, in the passage above, the other is not simply the recipient of our loving gaze. Rather, Francis describes them in terms of Moses's encounter with God on Mount Horeb. Oltvai notes that this passage, particularly when read in light of other uses of 'the other' in both *EG* and *AL*, is redolent of the 'theological turn' in phenomenology, in which writers such as Lévinas and Buber figure alterity in terms of divinity.⁴⁵ Following this, Francis also figures the encounter with the Other in evangelization in terms of an encounter with Christ. This is particularly prominent in his reflections on evangelization as a response to human need. For example, *EG* 24 calls for an 'evangelizing community' that 'embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others'.

In this way, by encountering others, we do not simply enable them to hear God's call. We also hear it anew *in* them, in the encounter with Christ, who is the revelation of the divine love that bears that call. To follow that call, then, is not simply to encounter others and draw them along, but to be drawn out of our present limitation *by* them. It is *in* the synchronic movement, whereby the Church transcends itself into the plurality of the world, that the Church makes the diachronic movement towards fulfilment. Hence it is unsurprising that we should find this theme of love returning us directly to Francis' theology of history: Phan argues that the horizon of fullness in Francis' first principle is analogous to Rahner's concept of the Absolute and Holy Mystery, which draws us into itself as the horizon of both our love and our knowledge.⁴⁶ Read in this way, the fulfilment of human reason lies in the fulfilment of love. Likewise, in the reading of Francis above, the loving synchronic movement that draws us into illuminating dialogue therein leads us diachronically to the fulfilment of both our love (in God) and doctrine (in truth and the justice of non-exclusion).

⁴⁵ Kristóf Oltvai, 'Bergoglio Among the Phenomenologists: Encounter, Otherness and Church in *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Amoris laetitia*' *Open Theology* 4 (2018): 316-324, 319-320. Francis's explicit citation of Buber in *LF* 13, along with the link between the encyclical and *EG* drawn in this paper, is also a significant point in support of Oltvai's interpretation.

⁴⁶ Phan, 'Pope Francis and Interreligious Encounter', 39, 43.

Conclusion: an ethic of encounter

Finally, this also provides the foundation for an ethic and understanding of what it means to accompany the Church on its journey through history. I previously argued that the reading of Francis outlined in this paper enables trans people to see ourselves as accompanying the Church beyond its limits – including those presented by Francis himself. The theology of encounter above offers a language in which this can be restated. But what might this mean, more concretely speaking?

Francis' theology of encounter is encapsulated in another great theme of his papacy: synodality. The *Synthesis Report* of the 2023 Synod on Synodality defines this as

Christians walking in communion with Christ toward the Kingdom along with the whole of humanity. Its orientation is towards mission, and its practice involves gathering in assembly at each level of ecclesial life. It involves reciprocal listening, dialogue, community discernment, and creation of consensus as an expression that renders Christ present in the Holy Spirit, each taking decisions in accordance with their responsibilities.⁴⁷

This emphasis on listening in the Spirit evokes the theology of listening in *LF*. Furthermore, Francis' own reflections upon the synodal life of the Church bring this into contact with both the synchronic and diachronic movements of *EG*, likewise through images of listening and sight. *AL* 2 describes the synodal process from which it emerged as marked by great controversy about “a number of doctrinal, moral, spiritual, and pastoral questions”; a recognition of plurality within the Church, from which the insights of the synodal process itself emerged. The document then continues:

Since “time is greater than space”... not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. Jn 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture

⁴⁷ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, First Session, ‘A Synodal Church in Mission: Synthesis Report’, accessed 29th February 2024, 1H.

<https://www.cbcew.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/11/vatican-synthesis-report-eng-oct23.pdf>.

and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For “cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied”.

(AL 3)

In this passage, *AL* cites the first principle of *EG* while evoking the polyhedral universalism of the fourth to affirm this pluralism as legitimate. In this way, it also affirms the necessity of the synchronic movement this pluralism engenders.⁴⁸ Moreover, in doing so, it situates these elements within the diachronic movement mentioned above, here rendered in terms of coming to sight that are also reminiscent of *LF*.

Finally, the Synthesis Report of the 2023 Synod of Synodality sees synodality as embodying and exhibiting an “[e]vangelical solidarity” which demonstrates and transmits “the love and tenderness of God”.⁴⁹ Going deeper, the Vatican’s Commission on Spirituality Sub-Group for the spirituality of synodality describes synodality as a way of living out the Eucharistic communion at the heart of the Church, and so a way of inhabiting a loving relationship with one another and with God, in God’s love.⁵⁰ In this way, the synodal encounter might be seen as embodying an economy of love.

This might help us to frame the nature of trans peoples’ role in accompanying the Church beyond its limitations: it is a vocation to synodality. This has a number of important implications.

First, in living this vocation, we are very much a part of the Church – even though that part may be a liminal one. I have argued elsewhere that a Eucharistic conception of synodality allows us to think of trans participation in the Church’s synodal life as a realisation of its Eucharistic communion.⁵¹ As a participation in this Eucharistic life, trans

⁴⁸ This affirmation is perhaps best embodied in *QA*’s self-effacing direction of the reader away from itself to the Final Document for its own synodal process (*QA* 1, 2, 3).

⁴⁹ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, First Session, ‘A Synodal Church in Mission’, accessed 29th February 2024, Introduction, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report_IMP.pdf.

⁵⁰ Commission on Spirituality Sub-Group: Spirituality of synodality, ‘Towards a Spirituality for Synodality’, accessed 1st March 2024, 13. <https://www.synod.va/en/highlights/towards-a-spirituality-for-synodality.html>.

⁵¹ Nicolette Burbach, ‘Trans Truth and the Synodal Process’, *Theology and Sexuality* 29 (2023) 52-66. Additionally, whereas my previous focus then was on the significance of

accompaniment of the Church might be seen as one process whereby we build up the communion that is the Church in the present. To accompany the Church in this way is thus to be not only a *constitutive* but *constituting* part of it.

Second, the synodal life of the Church is lived out in its communal, institutional life – not least the official meetings and discussions of the synodal process itself. This fact suggests that trans accompaniment of the Church ought (if not necessarily exclusively) to take place within these concrete contexts. Of course, we are not always welcome in the events and spaces that these contexts comprise. Although I do not have the space to address this issue in detail, obstacles to our access must be addressed in order for this process to fully occur – not only by us, but by anyone in the Church who wishes to benefit from our presence. Here, Francis’ openness to our presence as individuals may offer a basis for access, if not a fully satisfactory one.

Third, I also argued elsewhere that synodal participation can and ought to be an occasion for trans self-discovery.⁵² This process of accompanying the Church can therefore likewise lead to a development of our own self-knowledge, and of new ways of being in the Church and society. This ought not to be taken in the reductive sense of our simply coming to ascribe to Francis’, or whatever goes for the Church’s, current views on transness. However, nor can we preclude the possibility of learning from these in some respect. On this point, the views of transness I cited at the beginning of this paper are historicising ones, figuring transness as emerging at the point of contact between bodies and societies. Correspondingly, as this process leads to a transformation of the Church and the society in which it exists, we should also expect a transformation in what it means to be trans itself. In accompanying the Church, its journey very much becomes our own.

Finally, viewed in this way, the process of the Church’s self-transcendence is driven by an economy of *love*. In this regard, understanding our role in this way speaks against a common assumption: that overcoming our marginalisation in the Church is a matter of intellectual persuasion, wherein (an inevitably small number of) expert voices are tasked with arguing others to a place of consensus, or of political struggle, in which we vanquish our enemies, leaving only those who are truly open to us.

synodal participation for trans redemption, the diachronic movement which this paper has argued such participation serves might be seen as a similarly redemptive significance for the Church more broadly.

⁵² Burbach, ‘Trans Truth’, 10.

Against these assumptions, Francis suggests that the Church's transcendence of its limitations to properly embrace us hinges not on our efforts in these spheres, but on the transformative workings of God's loving self-revelation, which takes place in us.⁵³ Francis's first principle in *Evangelii Gaudium* applies here too: fulfilment does not come through the exercise of our power to shape and control the present – either through persuasion or political victory. In this vein also, Francis describes the Synod as “not a political gathering, but a convocation in the Spirit; not a polarized parliament, but a place of grace and communion”.⁵⁴ In short, human political effort is important, but we can trust in something more than ourselves to bring the fulfilment we seek.

This is not to say that there is no room for thinking things through and persuading others. Nor should we refuse necessary political struggle: to see ourselves as ‘sacred ground’ means seeing ourselves as worthy of respect and protection, even when it is our fellow Catholics who threaten us.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, our task in accompanying the Church is ultimately to be present, and to put ourselves at the service of God as He draws the Church beyond itself. It is to persist in the relationships that engender this transformative love, even amidst the necessities of political struggle that attend our fraught contemporary situation. In short, it is to love, and be servants of love, even towards our enemies – not naïvely, or in a way that acquiesces to injustice, but in the recognition that this is ultimately the force that brings us to fulfilment. It is to abide in these

⁵³ In this vein, Oltvai describes the pastoral, as the sphere of encounter with Christ, as having a priority over the moral theology that emerges from this (Oltvai, ‘Bergoglio Among the Phenomenologists’, 323-325).

⁵⁴ Francis, ‘Holy Mass with the New Cardinals and the College of Cardinals, Opening of the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: Homily of His Holiness, Pope Francis’ (4th October, 2023)

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2023/documents/20231004-omelia-nuovi-cardinali.html>.

⁵⁵ This argument evokes Cone, who cites Buber to argue that Black people must assert themselves as a *Thou* in the face of White people who would objectify them as *It* (James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power* (50th Anniversary Edition) (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 53-64). Leaning more heavily into Oltvai's Lévinasian reading of Francis might suggest an argument that runs more closely parallel to Cone's, although there is potentially a contradiction in the self-description as Other this would involve.

tensions, and to recognise that they too are expressions of the limitations of our time. And it is to not lose hope amidst them, but to fix our eyes along with our fellow Catholics on the ‘brighter horizon of the utopian future... which draws us to itself’ (*EG* 222).