



**Called to build a more fraternal world:
Secular Franciscans as a Community of Care and
Moral Transformation**

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Introduction

Way back in April of 2019 when I was first asked to be a keynote speaker at this historic gathering, I chose as my theme – “Secular Franciscans and our Radical Vision of the Fully Flourishing Life.” I had just finished a book by Dr. Serene Jones, a theologian and first woman president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, entitled, “Call it Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World.”¹ Dr. Jones writes what she calls a “prairie theology,” a downhome, a Southern-style of theological thinking that is encouraging, sensitive, and eminently practical. She speaks eloquently about the need for all of us to focus on building a flourishing life with grace, because that is what God’s desire for us. I wanted to write an optimistic talk.

And then, Covid hit. We were thrust into a worldwide pandemic that kept us in our houses for months on end. Schools and colleges were closed. Work sites shut down. Children couldn’t visit their grandparents. Hospitals were overwhelmed. Over a million Americans died from the disease and for many who recovered there was the trauma of long-term consequences of memory fog and physical disability.

No matter how optimistic we wanted to be and no matter how “flourishing” we could imagine our lives could get, all of us began to see an underside to our life as Christians that we had been ignoring for years. In the shadow of Covid and because of the *Black Lives Matter* movement, we came face to face with racism with an honesty and realism that we had never before been willing to admit.² At the same time, we also came to a public admission of the range and scope of sexual harassment that women have had to endure in both public and private settings. We lifted the veil over our eyes and finally admitted how often women (and sometimes men) have been sexual harassed and devalued in the workplace to the detriment of their physical, social, spiritual and economic health.

As the shadow of Covid stretched longer and darker over our lives, we began to realize even more strikingly just how fragile our financial world had become. More and more of us began to realize and even Nobel laureates in economics were finally willing to admit publicly that our economic world was not only unequal but immensely unfair.³ We had once lulled ourselves with slogans that all Americans could simply pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and find whatever level of economic stability that was commensurate with their willingness to do hard work. That was the myth we had been taught from our youth. Reality was now setting in and showing us something different. Our inequality was not the marker that distinguished those who worked hard and those who did not.⁴ We came to realize that, as economic Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz has reminded us, that our economic inequality is manufactured by those at the highest

¹ Serene Jones, *Call it Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World*. (New York: Viking, 2019).

² Bryan Massingale, “The assumptions of white privilege and what we can do about it,” NCR (June 1, 2020).

³ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2017)

⁴ Chuck Collins, *Is Inequality in America Irreversible (The Future of Capitalism)*. (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018).

levels of income and power to satisfy the needs and desires of a very slim super minority of people.⁵ This Nobel laureate (and others) confessed that the rich or, more precisely, the richest of the rich are indeed getting richer (and way richer), while the rest of us are certainly falling further and further behind, with wages remaining stagnant for more than two decades. This realization led to demonstrations all across America, with some rallies calling to “make America great again” and others calling for a more progressive equalization of opportunities through tax reforms.

The seriousness of these experiences has led to a sharper and more critical discourse in American life and a sharper division between red states and blue states. Polarization has never been as raw or as widespread as it is today.⁶

With all this brewing in my mind, I realized that I could not speak of a “flourishing life” for fear that it might turn us further and more deeply into ourselves. Talking of a “flourishing life” might be experienced as only as a language for *individual* happiness and *personal self-fulfillment*, just at a time when all signs point to a *social* crisis, a problem with our *group* connections and the *common bonds* we are supposed to have with one another. A talk on the flourishing life would have been easy and maybe even comforting like a dish of chocolate pudding, but it would have no nutrients for the times in which we live.

And so, I went back to your Rule of Life hoping to find a way forward and a grace that would go deeper into the heart of the Secular Franciscan spirituality. I read the great Rule that Pope Paul VI left you in 1978, just months before his death. Every word in the rule is rich. Every sentence is provocative and could be the subject of life-giving retreats. But, it was Chapter 2, number 14 that stopped me in my tracks. As soon as I read it, I knew that this was what God wanted me to speak about. Here is what I read:

Secular Franciscans, together with all people of good will, are called to build a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively.

It is easy to skip over the significance of these words or simply to treat them as metaphorical, a cliché of happy thoughts of no real import. However, it is here, I believe, that the Secular Franciscan Order finds its mission, here is where your purpose as an international community of intentional disciples is highlighted. It is here in this one sentence that you find the reason for your existence as an Order, the goal of your prayer and action. It is here that you find the trajectory of your conversion and the reason why the Holy Spirit has gifted you with your vocation. You, the Secular Franciscan Order, are called to build a more fraternal and evangelical world, in imitation of Christ, our Brother, and in the spirit of Francis and Clare of Assisi.

⁵ Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), 7.

⁶ David Brooks, “How to Build Trust: A Practical Guide,” *NY Times* (June 10, 2021).

That said, your ultimate goal is not to create “fraternities.” The reason for your Secular Franciscan vocation is not to go to fraternity meetings, no matter how important they are and how supportive they may be. Your *raison d’être* is not simply to develop warm, cordial, and loving relationships with individuals who join your local fraternity. The Pope could have charged you with that and made that the scope of your existence, if he wanted to but he did not. Your Rule of Life calls you to “build a more fraternal world.” What does that mean?

I want to explore the implications and consequences of that mission. How do you as an Order create a more fraternal world?

I want to do this in a few steps and with a series of questions.

1. What kind of a world are we now building?
2. What kind of world did Francis want to build?
3. What would it take for us to build a more fraternal world today?

Obviously, these are large questions and our time together is limited. And so, I will have to outline my thoughts and be as brief and as provocative as possible. I will use my experience as a psychologist, theologian and organizational development specialist. The nuances of my suggestions will be found in the footnotes that accompany this talk. They can be used for your further reflection later on.

What kind of world are we building now?

At first, it may seem odd to you to be asked to ponder, “what kind of world are we building now?” Your first reaction might be – “what is he talking about? The world is just there. It is what it is. We enter the world and simply react or respond to it.” That may seem like common sense, but philosophers, scientists, and theologians tell us that we don’t simply respond to a world that is just objectively “out there,” it’s more complex than that.⁷ The fact is that we imagine the world to be a certain way; we think about the world in a specific fashion and we react to that interpretation of the kind of world we have, both individually and collectively.

Here is how the great Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, says it:

It has become increasingly clear, however, that reality is not fixed and settled, that it cannot be described objectively. We do not simply respond to a world that is here, but we engage in constituting that world by our participation, our actions, and our

⁷ See for example, the work of Fr. Bernard Lonergan in *Insight*, Volume 3 (Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

speech. As participants in the constitutive act, we do not describe what is there, but we evoke what is not fully there until we act or speak. The human agent, then, is a constitutive part of the enterprise, which means that the shape of reality in part awaits our shaping adherence. Or, as a chemist has put it concerning his research, “The world is not a crossword puzzle to be solved, but a symphony yet to be written.”⁸

In my first few weeks with undergraduate freshmen who take their first theology course with me on “The Way of Francis and Clare,” I have to break through their naïve but common sense view that the world is just “out there” and that their common sense of the world is universal, fixed, and just the way things are and must be. When we start doing theology and study the Scriptures, we find none other than Yahweh challenging common sense, what I call the “embedded social imagination” of Pharaoh and the Egyptians in regard to the Jews living under Pharaoh’s oppression. The world as it had been constructed by the Pharaohs justified the enslavement of Jews as a cheap labor force in a violent arms race conducted by the Egyptians for military superiority over and against neighboring countries. It was Yahweh who imagined another world beyond enslavement, domination and deprivation. It was that other world of neighborly justice that Yahweh commanded the Jews to imagine and act on while they wandered in the Sinai desert for forty years.

And similarly, the world as imagined by the Romans and Jewish leaders at the time of Jesus was one of violent domination by the Empire and religious polarization that radically separated the clean from the unclean and the righteous from the unrighteous by the Jewish High Priest and Sanhedrin. Jesus commanded his followers to imagine another world and another kingdom where mercy substituted for violence, compassion substituted for political control, and universal love substituted for tribalism. Jesus offered another way of imagining the world and that new interpretative lens is called “gospel” and the change from one lens to the other is what we call “conversion.”

And so, what is our embedded social imagination, our unique lens, our “world” and interpretive way of making sense of what we experience?

Over the past year, I have been reading a lot of sociology, economics, political science, psychology and theology to answer that question. Here, at least in part, is what I have concluded about the world as we experience and interpret it.

The world we are building today struggles with trust. For many reasons and in various ways, we are struggling with how much we can trust our core institutions and one another. And this mistrust

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Israel’s Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988,) 12.

is creating increasing levels of violence and polarization, isolation and depression, deteriorating our economy and threatening our ability to reverse the dangerous effects of climate change.

Trust and the World we are Building

Trust in our core institutions – political, social, educational, financial, scientific, medical, military and religious – is critical for the proper and effective functioning of our society.⁹ We depend on these institutions for our security and laws, our money and livelihoods, our businesses and trade. We rely on them for our education and our investments, as well as our physical-emotional-and-spiritual health.¹⁰ Trust in our public institutions and in our leaders is essential for social and economic progress. It encourages individuals and groups to cooperate with one another for the sake of the common good. Trust fosters an entrepreneurial spirit and thus promotes innovation and scientific discovery.¹¹ It allows local and state agencies and federal governments to deliver needed services to the public efficiently and effectively. It gives employers and investors the incentive to create new jobs and risk capital.¹² Social trust is an essential ingredient for social stability, active citizenship, and peaceful governance.¹³

Indeed, we might say with psychologist J.B. Rotter:

The entire fabric of our day-to-day living, of our social world, rests on trust – buying gasoline, paying taxes, going to the dentist, flying to a convention – almost all our decisions involve trusting someone else.¹⁴

Anthony Evans and Joachim Kruger provide a helpful definition of trust in the economic world:

According to a widely accepted definition, trust is ‘a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon the positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another’ (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 395). Trust presupposes risk because there must be a possibility for loss and regret.

⁹ For a comprehensive review of the study of trust, see Eric Uslander, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Also, Benjamin Ho, *Why Trust Matters: An Economist’s Guide to the Ties that Bind Us* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

¹⁰ MS Kopacz, D.Ames D, HG Koenig. “Association Between Trust and Mental, Social, and Physical Health Outcomes in Veterans and Active Duty Service Members With Combat-Related PTSD Symptomatology,” *Front Psychiatry*. (September, 2018) 4:9,408. doi: 10.3389/fpsyt.2018.00408. PMID: 30233429; PMCID: PMC6131606.

¹¹ Brian Kennedy, Alec Tyson, and Cary Funk, “Americans’ Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines” (Pew Center Research: February 2022), accessed at: file:///C:/Users/David/Downloads/PS_2022.02.15_trustdeclines_REPORT.pdf.

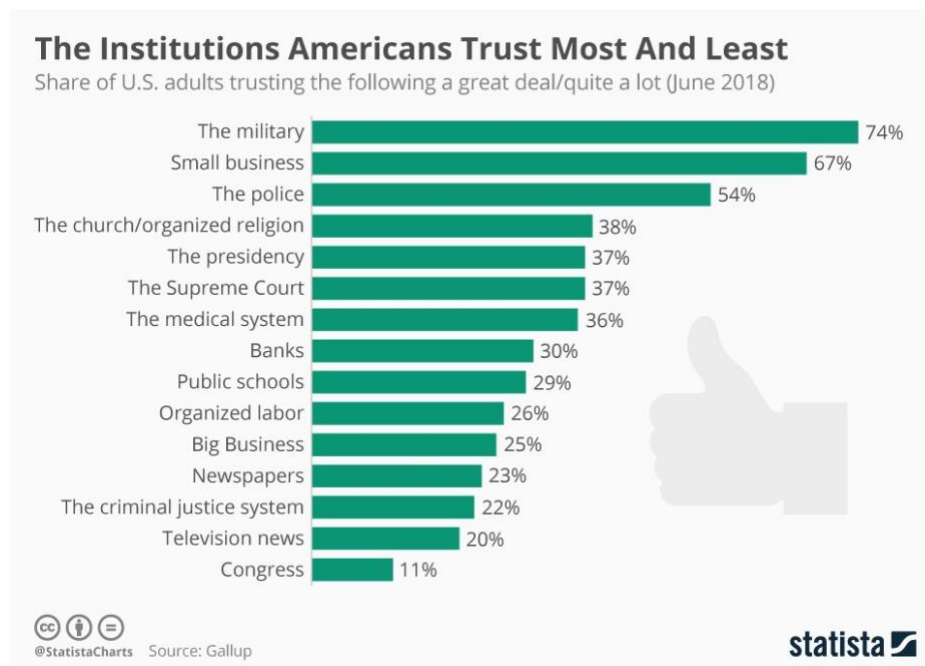
¹² Jonathan Perry, “Trust in public institutions: Trends and implications for economic security,” United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 20 July 2021, accessed at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/2021/07/trust-public-institutions/>.

¹³ Kenneth Newton, Dietlind Stolle and Sonia Zmerli, “Social and Political Trust,” in Uslander, *Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, 37-38.

¹⁴ J.B Rotter, “Generalized expectancies for interpersonal trust”. *American Psychologist*, 26, 443.

Without personal vulnerability, trust devolves into confidence – a belief without consequences (Luhmann, 2000). Similarly, trust cannot exist without a positive expectation. When people trust, they accept risk because they believe they can avoid a negative outcome. Trust without a positive expectation is self-destructive.¹⁵

Notwithstanding the centrality of trust, we find a disturbing erosion of trust in most of our major institutions and a lack of confidence in those who lead them. The Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy and the Aspen Institute’s Communication and Society Program concluded a major study on trust recently with the following warning:



There is a crisis of trust in American democracy. By virtually every measure, Americans’ trust in most of their democratic institutions, and particularly in the media, has declined dramatically over the past half century.¹⁶ It is striking that a country known for its freedoms and legacy as one of the oldest and strongest representative governments now finds itself struggling to find support for its very democracy.¹⁷

¹⁵ Anthony M. Evans and Joachim I. Krueger, “The Psychology (and Economics) of Trust,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 3/6 (2009): 1003–1017, 10.1111/j.1751-9004.2009.00232.x

¹⁶ Anne Applebaum, *The Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2021).

¹⁷ Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy, *Crisis in Democracy: Renewing Trust in America*, Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, February 2019.

The loss of trust in our institutions and systems is widespread. In 2018 Gallup surveyed Americans to test their level of trust for a variety of social institutions. The results are clear. Only three social institutions garner a “great deal” or “a lot” of trust: the military (74%), small business (67%), and the police (54%). In Gallup’s 2021 survey of trusted institutions, the church and organized religion had the confidence of only 38% of Americans, down from 68% in 1975 and 60% in 2001.¹⁸

The Causes of Mistrust of Social Institutions

In their analysis of the crisis of trust in our social institutions, the Knight Commission members highlighted six interlocking and largely economic causes:

1. **Poor institutional performance:** According to political scientists Kenneth Newton and Pippa Norris, when institutions perform poorly, people lose trust in them: “It is primarily governmental performance that determines the level of citizens’ confidence in public institutions.”¹⁹ The Knight Commission connects several events that have led to the conclusions of poor institutional performance by government:

Starting with the Vietnam War and Watergate, a series of governmental actions served to diminish public trust. Bad behavior by elected officials—including the Clinton impeachment, after the President was accused of lying under oath; the Iraq War, which turned out to have been launched under false assumptions; a failure to defend against foreign interference in elections; and the gridlock that seems to have dominated U.S. political processes in recent years—provided ample grounds for Americans to doubt the effectiveness of their government. And news media that emphasize conflict, scandal and dysfunction could well be contributing to the loss of trust.²⁰

2. **Large global shocks:** Several large scale developments have shaken faith in American institutions. The Edelman report cites the following:
 - a. *Globalization* that has increased volatility in the workforce, causing a loss of jobs and dislocation among workers.
 - b. *The Great Recession of 2008* had a devastating and long-term negative impact on American businesses and households. According to the Pew Charitable Trusts, the loss from declining home values in the United States totaled \$10.8 trillion, or an average of nearly \$100,000 per household, in 2008 and 2009. Millions of people lost jobs.

¹⁸ Gallup, “Confidence in Institutions,” (2021), accessed at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidenceinstitutions.aspx>.

¹⁹ Kenneth Newton and Pippa Norris, “Confidence in Public Institutions: Faith, Culture, or Performance?” in *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* edited by Susan J. Pharr and Robert D. Putnam. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 52-73.

²⁰ Knight Commission, 2019, 58-59.

- c. *Global migration.* The influx of economic refugees when added to the number of political refugees increase tensions around gender and race.
 - d. *The rise of disinformation.* The explosion of deliberate misinformation in the service of political agenda has deteriorated the trust that people once had about the legitimacy of government and its actions.²¹
3. **Political polarization:** There is widening gulf developing between Democrats and Republicans. Finding common ground or even establishing civil dialogue between them is harder to accomplish. The reason seems clear: more and more people are only tuned in to their preferred media echo chambers. News is becoming more tribalized as people channel only the news that they like and opinions with which they already agree.²²
 4. **Differing interpretations of the meaning of trust/distrust:** The very meaning of trust and distrust is up for debate. In his 2012 book, *Twilight of the Elites*, Christopher Hayes argues that it is no longer useful to speak of “left” and “right.” It is more cogent and more accurate to speak of insurrectionists and institutionalists. While institutionalists see the erosion of trust as “terrifying,” insurrectionists “see the plummeting of trust in public institutions as a good thing.”²³
 5. **Increasing economic inequality:** The decrease in trust in American institutions, including government and the media, generally correlates with an increase in economic inequality.

As the French economist Thomas Piketty has demonstrated, after years of declining inequality from the time after the Great Depression and World War II and a period of relative stability thereafter, the world witnessed a significant rise in income inequality beginning in the mid to late 70s.²⁴ It is now at levels not seen for nearly a century and it is still increasing. Nobel laureate in economics, Joseph Stiglitz, provides a snapshot of America’s inequality:

The simple story of America is this: the rich are getting richer, the richest of the rich are getting still richer, the poor are becoming poorer and more numerous, and the middle class is being hollowed out. The income of the middle class is stagnating or falling, and the difference between them and the truly rich is increasing.

It’s no use pretending that what has obviously happened has not in fact happened. The upper 1% of Americans are now taking in nearly a quarter of the nation’s income every year. In terms of wealth rather than income,

²¹ Edelman Special Report 2022, *Trust in Health*. <https://www.edelman.com/trust/22/special-report-trust-in-health>.

²² Amy Chua, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations* (New York, Penguin Books, 2018).

²³ Christopher Hayes, *Twilight of the Elites: America after Meritocracy* (New York: Random House, 2012).

²⁴ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2017).

the top 1% control 40%. Their lot in life has improved considerably. Twenty-five years ago, the corresponding figures were 12% and 33%. One response might be to celebrate the ingenuity and drive that brought good fortune to these people, and to contend that a rising tide lifts all boats. That response would be misguided.²⁵

²⁵ Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), 7.

6. **Widespread experiences of unfairness.** Angus Deaton, Nobel Prize-winning economist, suggests that what shapes negative attitudes in society and politics is not inequality in itself but rather the perception of the fairness of our economic system. People will accept some forms of inequality as fair and therefore unobjectionable, argues Deaton. We are not all equal in our talents or our efforts. However, people perceive other forms of inequality as unfair and objectionable. He provides the following examples: unequal access to health care and quality education, the sluggish federal minimum wage, the reduction of major industries to a few merged companies (tech, media, and health care), the elimination of pension benefits for workers, anticompetitive practices of large corporations, or government policies favoring businesses over individuals. The public views these as unfair because they are often the result of economic pressure or political lobbying to which the ordinary American does not have access.²⁶

A recent poll found that seventy percent (70%) of Americans believe the U.S. economic system unfairly favors the powerful.²⁷

Social mistrust of core institutions globally has been tallied and summarized by Kristen Lord:

Plummeting public trust is sweeping the globe. It is infecting relations among people, between people and their governments, and between people and a range of societal institutions. We sense this erosion of trust in social media and domestic politics, in our communities, and even at our dinner tables.

Distrust infuses public rhetoric and political debates, obstructing action in the public interest. Together, this cumulative distrust is undermining the ability of social institutions to function and serve the people they are intended to benefit.

And if researchers are correct that trust is easier to destroy than construct, the consequences of today's trust deficit could haunt societies around the world for many years to come.²⁸

Pope Francis and his Franciscan World

It is clear that Pope Francis understands the critical problem of trust not only in politics and economics, but also within the church. His pastoral work has been targeted toward the development of a new understanding and conception of the world that we can live in. In his encyclical on the

²⁶ Preeti Varathan, "A Nobel Prize-winning economist thinks we're asking all the wrong questions about inequality," *Quartz* (December 27, 2017).

²⁷ Ruth Igielnik (Pew Research Center, January 9, 2020) at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/01/09/70of-americans-say-u-s-economic-system-unfairly-favors-the-powerful/>

²⁸ Kristen M. Lord, "Six Ways to Repair Declining Social Trust," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.48558/60R4-F118>.

environment, he imagines a world beyond private interests and personal autonomy and asks policy makers and ordinary citizens to think beyond their immediate personal needs and begin thinking of the earth as “our common home.”²⁹ Critiquing what he calls the “technocratic paradigm” that can only imagine the planet as a scarce resource that exists solely for profit, the Pope wants us to imagine a new cosmology where everything and everyone on the planet is “brother and sister” to one another, with all the respect and protection that this implies.

The Pope reminds us that world that we have been creating has been in construction since the time of the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries. It is a world that sees and measures everything and everyone by the distance and differences between individuals and things in the universe. It is a world of *private* property and *autonomous* wills clashing and crashing into one another. It is the world described long ago by the Scottish philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, as the “war of all against all,” a world of inevitable violence and selfishness that Christianity cannot avoid and should not try to change, but should only admit, utilize and mitigate. The Pope has lamented this world, because a world exclusively designed for individualism, autonomy, and self-interests severely cheapens relationships and instrumentalizes them. In that world, individuals are only as important as what they can consume or spend in an increasingly consumptive and aggressive market-driven world.

Pope Francis has called this not so brave, new world a “throwaway culture.”³⁰ This is so because life has become so commercialized and cheapened that all relationships have become disposable. From the very beginning of his papacy, the Holy Father has lamented not only the marginalization of the poor, especially the elderly poor and unemployed youth, but also their increasing political and social exclusion. And, in his later writings, Pope Francis looks at the economic dynamics of globalization and sees signs of what he calls a “globalization of indifference.” The economic forces that now rule our lives are so strong, we are told by pundits and analysts, that we can do nothing other than put up our hands in a resigned submission. There is nothing we can do differently or better. We are at the mercy of the invisible hand of the marketplace, even as the marginalization and exclusion once reserved for the poor is now transferred over to the planet, which cries in agony because of severe climate change and impending ecological disasters.

The world we have created over the last two to three hundred years is at the very least an ambiguous one of dangerous and contradictory impulses. On the one hand, we have seen unparalleled scientific breakthroughs in fields as diverse as medicine, astronomy, physics, engineering and chemistry, to name just a few. At the same time, the world (as we know it) is significantly more dangerous to the human spirit. While we can create amazing drugs with lightning speed, as we did during the pandemic, we also know that our polarization, our anger and violence is now rooted in a profound and deep distrust of one another that can undermine and threaten the benefits even of

²⁹ Agostino Giovagnoli, “Pope Francis: a new way of looking at the world,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 24:3 (2019), 456-467, DOI: [10.1080/1354571X.2019.1605728](https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2019.1605728) ³⁰ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* (May 24, 2015), Chapter 2.

unparalleled scientific breakthroughs. This mistrust is significant and consequential. Hundreds of thousands in our own country and in countries around the world died unnecessarily, as we squabbled over ideologies on the left and the right.

Pope Francis notes that we live today in a world saturated with conflict and fear because of wars, terrorist attacks, increasing global inequality, religious and racial persecutions that have become so commonplace that we are in fact living what he calls a real “third world war” being fought piecemeal. We do so because, he says, we have lost our common horizon and traded it in for a mentality of fear and mistrust:

This should not be surprising, if we realize that we no longer have common horizons that unite us; indeed, the first victim of every war is “the human family’s innate vocation to fraternity”. As a result, “every threatening situation breeds mistrust and leads people to withdraw into their own safety zone”.[24] Our world is trapped in a strange contradiction: we believe that we can “ensure stability and peace through a false sense of security sustained by a mentality of fear and mistrust”. [25]³⁰

Pope Francis enumerates the distinct social challenges of our age: new forms of cultural colonialism, polarization and special interest economics, a “throwaway world” that marginalizes and then excludes both young people (through unemployment), the elderly and then the planet itself, insufficiently universal human rights, globalization without a shared roadmap, pandemics and the globalization of indifference, an absence of human dignity on the borders creating fear, violence, trafficking, psychological and physical abuse, as well as increasing and irrational levels of xenophobia.³¹ Each of these individually and all of them together create a severe and turbulent climate of mistrust in our personal, social, cultural and political lives.³²

How different things seem in the world of the Gospel, to which we have professed our lives as Franciscans. Anglican theologian John Milbank has eloquently spoken about the centrality of trust in the mission of Jesus both in the inner life of God and in His saving ministry for the world. He writes:

In the infinite divine realm itself, we only see the Father's justice expressed in the infinite work that is the Son, and yet this work of justice expresses nothing but the infinite Paternal fount and inspiration of just deeds. The spirit of justice which is the Holy Spirit is the spirit that proceeds from both - if you like, *both* from the concrete example of justice *and* from the misty impulse that makes us creatively

³⁰ Fratelli Tutti, 26.

³¹ Fratelli Tutti, Chapter One, 9-55.

³² Pope Francis refers to the problems of trust, mistrust, and distrust 19 times in his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*.

seek out new modes of the just - for they are but one and inseparable. In this way God in himself is justice, an infinite community of trust.³³

And it is the Church built not on the “ontology of violence” of ancient Greek and Roman politics, but on the ontology of peace and harmonious relations of trust within the Trinity that models the path of escape beyond the labyrinth of solitude, isolation, and exclusion that Milbank and Pope Francis, each in their own way, find in modern culture. Once again, Milbank writes:

The Church is itself precisely a new sort of community of trust which seeks harmony and friendship beyond even the observance of legality. This alone fulfils the requirement of justice, because to be just to the other would mean an infinite concern for her - it would mean becoming her friend in love.

And therefore being part of this new community - putting trust before the law and going beyond the law in trust - must sometimes come before loyalty to friends and family, if they themselves are not a part of the new practice. This is what Jesus meant when he said in Matthew 10.35-36, "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household." This practice of mutual trust establishes the boundaries of the new community and sets new priorities for those who would be part of it.³⁴

It is Milbank himself who is both fascinated and disturbed by the “conundrum” of Francis of Assisi’s radical trust in the providence of God.

For if there was a *novum* about Francis, then it concerned his revolutionary attempt more closely to follow Jesus and the apostles in their restoration of a paradisaical life on earth as far as possible. For Francis this meant adoption of *altissima povertà*, the “most high poverty,” refusing not just private property, like the traditional monastic orders, but even any notion of property shared in common. This refusal undergirded the new ideal of a mendicant, wandering, begging way of life, in which truly one became like the birds of the air and lilies of the field, trusting solely to the providence of the heavenly Father.³⁵

The *novum* or dramatically new for Francis and his followers is a trust that goes beyond family, law and even beyond the boundaries of culture. Having cast off his clothes in the marketplace, Francis aligns himself not with culture but with nature itself. When he leaves the public square, he

³³ John Milbank, “Recovering Trust in the Labyrinth of Solitude,” ABC Religion and Ethics (January 31, 2011), accessed at: <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/recovering-trust-in-a-labyrinth-of-solitude/10101742>.

³⁴ Milbank, “Recovering Trust.”

³⁵ John Milbank, “The Franciscan Conundrum,” *Communio* 42 (Fall 2015), 466.

does not search out a monastery, a desert hermitage, a radical community of rebels or hermits. That is not where he will place his trust anymore. He goes instead to nature, the vestige of God's image, in order to undergo a primal new birth and incarnation. In this way, he starts a new "civilization of love" outside the conventions, customs, and laws of Assisi. Milbank writes about Francis' radical step.

First, he did not simply react against the new urban civilization by returning to the desert of the fields or fleeing to a monastic asylum. Rather, he did a new thing by fleeing to "everywhere," that is to say, to nature as such, rather than culture, and yet in such a way that his path of continuous flight now possibly passes through every street of every town.³⁶

Thus, poverty for the Franciscan imagination is not primarily an ascetical exercise. Francis' poverty is not a negation that cancels culture, builds defensive walls, condemns a wicked world or silences those who are wrong. It is not a flight into protected spaces where we simply wait for heaven to liberate us from all that is bad, whether desert or monastery. It is not a flight from the world at all. The Franciscan vocation is not an escape from the "evils of mortality" or temptations of the flesh. It is a flight into the relational space of "everywhere," where only domination and deprivation are excluded. Dispossession is the Franciscan key to freedom, where *use substitutes for ownership* so that relationships may thrive on service of others rather than control over others.³⁷ Francis gave up everything in order to have the one thing he wanted – Christ and those whom Christ loves. Francis emptied himself of everything he formerly owned or controlled so as to be grasped and held by the only love that could satisfy his heart, that of his Lord.

Francis chose poverty as his way of life, because poverty was the only way to create a new community of men and women who would develop a radical trust in a provident God and a radical trust in one another. Poverty was not an ascetical exercise, but a relational requirement for a community dedicated to gospel brotherhood and sisterhood.

Francis of Assisi sets out the vision for a fraternity of radical trust, by creating communities of men and women who would renounce their claims of ownership and, by their practice of "most high poverty," open themselves to ever-widening circles of concern and action for peace, justice and the care of creation. In the world, through every street of every town, Franciscans would trust in the providential abundance of God and attempt to create relationships of trust with all men and women, beyond the boundaries and social limits of class, race, tribe, ethnicity, religion, culture, and status.

Secular Franciscans as a Community of Caring Encounters in the World Today

³⁶ Milbank, "The Franciscan Conundrum," 470.

³⁷ Willem Marie Speelman, "The Franciscan *Usus Pauper* As The Gateway Towards An Aesthetic Economy." *Franciscan Studies* 74 (2016): 185-205. doi:10.1353/frc.2016.0001.

How then do Secular Franciscans build a fraternal world? As I have suggested above, the building of a fraternal world is more than the creation of fraternities in a local area or the intensification of fraternal relationships with a select group of individuals who join your communities and profess vows or promises. It must start with the conversion of our imaginations, a shift in our mentality and our horizon of expectations of what we want from our world, with God's grace. In Franciscan terms, it means building up a radical trust in God and with one another and all others in and for the love of God.

I want to suggest that Secular Franciscan Order will build a fraternal world by developing itself into a worldwide community of caring and trusting encounters in the world today.

Recently, scholars from around the world met at Georgetown University to discuss the meaning of Pope Francis' term "a culture of encounter." Pope Francis uses that term seven times in his critical encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, and speaks of the importance of encounter about forty times more in the encyclical.³⁸ In a world of fragmentation, isolation, inequality, polarization and mistrust, Pope Francis is recommending that we turn to a new and consistent exercise of "encountering" other people.

Too often and for far too many people, their experience of the poor and vulnerable "others" in the world is more like a Perillo tour of Italy. We see others, we know their cultures, their lives and their problems, from the safe distance of our tour bus going from place to place in rapid succession and creating snapshots and a catalogue of brief memories of a global world. Mostly we drive by seeing others through a window, stopping only occasionally to dip our toes into the safe and sanitized world of others for memorabilia and then we move on. This is not the call to "encounter" of which Pope Francis speaks.

There are two models for Pope Francis' understanding of "encounter": The Good Samaritan and Francis of Assisi.

The Good Samaritan doesn't walk by the Jew bleeding in the ditch. He does not simply offer prayers and good thoughts as he passes on. He stops, lifts the despised "other" onto his animal and carries him to the nearest place for assistance. He turns the vehicle he was using for business purposes into a primitive "ambulance" and use his limited funds meant for trade to secure medical care for a Jew who was his sworn enemy. He did more than just sympathize or empathize with the man in the ditch. He "encountered" him.

Similarly, Francis of Assisi doesn't simply embrace the leper and walk away. One might say he "encounters" him. He joins in the life of the lepers, sharing in their fears, hopes, joys and anxieties. Francis' encounter with the leper collapses the distance that Francis had created between lepers

³⁸ Paul Elie, "Close Encounters," *Commonweal* (August-September, 2022), 12.

and himself when he was a very young man. We know the story told about Francis: that he could not go within two miles of a leper colony without putting his fingers to his nose in absolute disgust. The distance that Francis created between himself and lepers is measured not just in miles. It is a distance that is political, social, psychological, cultural and religious. It is a barrier to companionship, friendship, dialogue, mutual engagement and fraternal love.

Having received mercy from Christ at San Damiano, Francis realizes that he must “make mercy” with the lepers. He must break down the distances he has created between himself and those suffering from the dreaded disease. A symbolic handshake would not be enough, nor would an embrace on the side of the road. The arrogant young man from Assisi had to humbly receive the friendship of the lepers in order to turn his bitterness to sweetness.

Pope Francis describes what he means by a “culture of encounter”:

There is always movement in an encounter. If we all stand still, we will never meet. “Life, for all its confrontations, is the art of encounter” (Fratelli Tutti, 215). This is what life is: the art of encounter. Encounter is, as it were, the oxygen of life. And this is why we need a culture of encounter, because “we, the people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone” (216).

According to Thomas Banchoff, the vice president for global engagement and professor of government at Georgetown University, there are four elements to Pope Francis’ notion of a “culture of encounter,”:

1. **Humility** – the culture of encounter requires a spirit of kenosis, of bending low, one toward the other. It is about recognizing the responsibilities that we have toward one another, seeing things from the other’s perspective, in a spirit of openness to increase one’s understanding.
2. **Generosity** – the culture of encounter begins in a spirit of generosity rather than defensiveness. It intends to give more than expected as a sign of compassionate mutuality. As Archbishop Paul Gallagher indicated: “A culture of encounter is a call to responsibility in an age of entitlement.”³⁹
3. **Realism** – the culture of encounter is now informing spirituality, church diplomacy, interreligious dialogue and a theology of the arts. There is an atmosphere of truth-telling over status-seeking. It is an honest recognition of limits, as well as a frank assessment of opportunities conducted in mutual dialogue.

³⁹ Elie, 14.

4. **Patience** – the culture of encounter is neither sporadic or immediate. One doesn't create a culture by a glance or a relationship that is nurtured only occasionally. It takes attention, active listening, and grateful receptivity. Most of all, it takes time to develop.⁴⁰

Most critically today, Pope Francis advises us that for our spiritual health both as individuals and as a nation, we must develop a new encounter with the poor. It is not enough to provide charity or grudgingly pay taxes to meet what we know are not even basic necessities or a living wage. It is not even enough to practice justice, participating in rallies or legislative networking. All of this can be formal but abstract generosity. What Pope Francis calls for is a caring encounter. He makes it plain for us.

When a poor person “knocks on the door of our house, it is very different because we are no longer facing an image but are personally involved,” he explained.

“In these instances, what is my reaction? Do I turn away? Do I move on? Or do I stop to talk and take an interest? If you do this, there will always be someone who says, ‘This one is crazy, talking to a poor person,’” the pope said.

Recalling St. James's affirmation that “faith without works is dead,” Pope Francis said that Christians cannot “delegate” feeding the hungry to others ...⁴¹

More specifically and visually, the Pope also said this:

He told the religious sisters that when he hears confessions, he likes to ask the penitent if they give to the poor. When the person answers that he or she gives to charity, he said he likes to follow-up with the question, “when you give alms, do you touch the hand of the person asking, do you look them in the eyes?”

“If you are able to touch, to look in the eyes, it is beautiful like that,” Francis explained, adding that it is important not to “balconize” one's self, remaining aloof and indifferent, but to approach people and care for them in their humanity.

“Every time we approach a person with charity, with love, we restore his dignity. The dignity of Christ, who comes with our gesture of charity,” he said.⁴³

⁴⁰ Referenced by Elie, 14.

⁴¹ Juno Arrocho Esteves, “Pope says contributions to the poor are great, but need a personal touch,” *Crux* (October 19, 2016) at: <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2016/10/pope-says-contributions-great-charity-needs-personal-touch>.⁴³ Hannah Brockhaus, “Pope Francis wants us to do this when we give to the poor,” *Crux* (March 26, 2022) at: <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2022/03/26/pope-francis-wants-us-to-do-this-when-we-give-to-the-poor/>.

The task before us, brothers and sisters, is as difficult as holding hands and looking into the eyes of the poor but it is a far greater challenge than even this. Francis embraced and encountered the leper. He looked into his eyes and what was bitterness in his life became sweet. But, Francis of Assisi did more than this. He inspired brothers and sisters to live a new economic lifestyle based on radical trust.

He developed a new economic model that challenged the major assumptions of his day.⁴² He challenged the absolute necessity and inevitability of greed and violence. He took himself out of the arms race of his day and rejected the “common sense” notion that everyone must have a weapon. (He had seen how that mentality had fractured his family and nearly cost him his life.) He rejected the emerging consumptive nature of the economy of his day, that the only way to be happy and to flourish was by competition, aggression, and having more and more. Francis instead built his economics on radical trust and a sharing economy or what some modern-day economists would call a “wealth sustainability model,” one that provides for the needs of all but doesn’t trap us in deeper and deeper pits of debt.

For the past twenty years, I have been working on how Franciscans came to challenge the economic presuppositions of their day and ours as part of their authentic Franciscan vocation. The early friars knew and we must learn again that Francis accomplished his radical trust among his brothers by developing a “fraternal economy,” a model of economic living not based on the greedy and violent social norms of his day, but by principles of transparency, accountability, equity, dialogue, humility, forgiveness and austerity. Francis would replace the competition and anxieties of his age with the assurances that come from the dynamics of mutual caring and forgiving.

I have been writing and speaking about these unique fraternal social and psychological dynamics, since I first published my book, *The Fraternal Economy: A Pastoral Psychology of Franciscan Economics* back in 2007 and *Franciscans and their Finances: Economics in a Disenchanted World* in 2015.

But today I don’t want to talk about my books, but (too briefly) of the very recent book of someone who has taken these Franciscan thoughts to a higher and deeper level. I am speaking of the work of Dr. Roderic Hewlett, who has a doctorate in economics and presently teaches in the MBA program at Western Governors University and is a Secular Franciscan in Omaha, Nebraska. And, best of all, he just published that new book with *Franciscan Institute Publications*. It is entitled *The Virtuous Economy: Reforms in the Franciscan Tradition* (2022).

With a superb writing style and a loving understanding of Franciscan spirituality, he tells us what we must do together if we are ever going to participate in the “virtuous economy” that Francis and

⁴² David B. Couturier, *A Fraternal Economy: A Pastoral Psychology of Franciscan Economics* (South Bend, IN: Cloverdale Books, 2007).

the early friars intended in order to ease the deep frictions of his age and ours. Hewlett reminds us that our present economic models do not prioritize or maintain the social bonds we hold dear and need so badly. Our connections to one another are deteriorating and our relationship to the earth itself is reaching a crisis point. We need a third way of dealing with money and working out the way we buy and sell. We need a model based not on growth alone, but sustainability and one that places the needs of people ahead of the need for profit. Hewlett outlines what an economy would look like when it respected the Franciscan tradition's emphasis on fraternity, the dignity of all creation, and a society that elevates all humans.

Conclusion

Sisters and brothers, your task then is to build a fraternal world. In all that you do you must develop the bonds and connections of being a brother and sister to everyone in the world, at the same time as you develop a new intimacy and respect for all God's creatures. We can no longer plunder the earth for profit, leaving the earth gasping for air, to become only a toxic wasteland that we will leave to our children and grandchildren as our legacy.

All our lives we have been trained otherwise. We have inherited the dark legacy of racism and white supremacy that has leaked into every American system and created subtle biases in our hearts, minds and actions. We have been trained in a politics of competition instead of a politics of caring. Our consciences have been numbed by the mantras of the rich and powerful that escalating violence and increasing income equality are inevitable and just collateral damage of a free-market economy. There is nothing we can do and there is nothing much we are able to do to make a difference in the lives of the poor and vulnerable. We have been trained by the profitdriven moguls of today that we must accept the laws and consequences of an increasingly violent and greedy world as "just the way things are." There is nothing we can do.

As Franciscans there is so much we can do and must do. We have a call, a vocation and a divine charge to build a fraternal world. We must reflect on the incarnational implications that Jesus became our Brother and the world was created through Him and for Him to be a network of interdependent creatures, a fraternal cosmology of sisters and brothers building peace "on earth as it is in heaven."

That fraternal world is now threatened by a new culture of mistrust. We are losing our trust in our core institutions and in one another as Americans at alarming rates. This widespread mistrust leads to an angry and defensive culture of polarization, gun violence, racial antagonism, and individualism. We turn to the consumption of goods to relieve the emptiness caused by our fractured and fragile relationships.

As Secular Franciscans, you have a higher calling and a more prophetic charge. You are being called to build a more fraternal world. This is not a mission you can accomplish individually. It is not one that will be achieved only by fraternity meetings held once a month for an hour or two.

This is not a vocation that would leave us only wanting to get to heaven. The Secular Franciscan vocation is not a temporary weigh-station, where I can save my soul and only have to wait to be jettisoned to heaven. The Gospel imperative “on earth as it is in heaven” gives you and me a more earthly charge for the promotion of peace, justice and the care of creation.

Yours is a call to become “communities of caring encounters.”⁴³ All of us need care throughout our lives, when we are young and when we are old and, in fact, at every stage of our lives. But, care has become a rare and difficult resource to come by in our consumerized world. We have become a profit-driven world. We need to become a caring culture.

In our profit-obsessed world, we have cheapened care and privatized it. We have made day care and elder care enormously expensive and thrown these tasks back on families already burdened by economic policies and practices that require them to work harder for less, making quality care more and more out of reach for those who need it most.

Our task is to make every encounter meaningful by humility, generosity, realism and patience. We need to help the world transition from its market-driven obsessions with profit and power and take up the challenge of caring encounters. Imagine a world where every encounter in a bank, restaurant, and doctor’s office is handled not with eyes on the clock but with the eyes of genuine care. Imagine a world where call centers are genuinely care centers, where questions are answered genuinely, truthfully, and patiently. Imagine a world where we don’t feel as we have a price tag on our back and that we are not just another commodity for someone else’s profit. Imagine a world where our workplaces actually and genuinely want us and encourage us to develop time with our children and grandchildren because the company really believes in the flourishing of its workers and customers.

This is the world that St. Francis and St. Clare once imagined in the violent and greedy world of their youth. They left us a legacy of radical trust to be the foundation of our new Gospel world. May that be our mission and our joy in the love of Christ, who is the Lord, now and forever. Amen.

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⁴³ For an analysis of caring, see David B. Couturier, “Trust and the Fraternal Economy: Franciscan Foundations for Economic Justice,” In Krijn Pansters and David B. Couturier, eds., *Lesser Ethics: Morality as Goodness in Relationship* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, forthcoming).

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