Can Postsecular Society Rekindle the Common Good?

The Michael Keenan Memorial Lecture 2023

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1. Acknowledgments

It's my great pleasure to be here this evening to present the 34th Michael Keenan Memorial Lecture. I am deeply grateful to Dean Tammy Marche and the Keenan Lecture Advisory Committee for the wonderful invitation, to Laura Mitchell for her terrific work arranging my visit, and to the Keenan Family for their generosity in endowing the lecture and related events. I also want to acknowledge the warm hospitality I'm enjoying while here in Saskatoon – my first time in Saskatchewan. With respect, I also acknowledge that St. Thomas More College is on Treaty Six Lands, Nehiyaw Territory, and the Homeland of the Métis. I respect and reaffirm our relationship with one another.

In preparing for my visit, I was humbled to read about the history of St. Thomas More and the remarkable trajectory of its evolution from a visionary idea of local Catholics in 1913 – seeking to integrate Catholic faith into higher education – to its actual establishment by the Basilian Fathers in 1936, during the throes of the Great Depression, as a co-ed male and female Catholic College federated with the University of Saskatchewan. I was inspired reading about the College's growth and how proactively adaptive it was to changing times; I note in particular the changes in the governance structure in the early 1970s paving the way for the inclusion of lay faculty, non-Catholics and non-Saskatchewan residents – and the appointment of Dr. Michael Keenan as its first Dean (in 1975).

[1] A recording of this lecture can be viewed at: http://youtu.be/qFdD3Hph52I.

It is truly an honor for me to participate in recalling Dean Keenan's legacy, especially at a time when liberal arts are under multiple threats and the value of higher education is increasingly questioned. Yet, the complexities and uncertainties of the present moment – fueled by the war in Ukraine, terror in the Middle East, intensified geopolitical conflicts, resurging authoritarianism, poverty, climate change, and the specter of generative AI displacing human creativity – illuminate how necessary it is for people to be taught, and learn to develop, the disciplined habits of mind and heart that empower them to be thoughtfully independent, critically informed, and civically engaged local and global citizens. In the words of Cardinal John Henry Newman (1852/1996), the founder of my *alma mater* University College Dublin, "It is the fault of all of us, till we have duly practised our minds, to be unreal in our sentiments and crude in our judgments, and to be carried off by fancies, instead of being at the trouble of acquiring sound knowledge."

2. Retrieving the Common Good

Turning to the topic at hand, "Can Postsecular Society Rekindle the Common Good?", the readiness to tackle the immense challenges that mark our current era is severely undermined by the politicized polarization that has entwined itself into so many issues. Take, for example, climate change. Across a broad range of countries, the public's concern about climate change has grown over the past decade (Pew Research Center 2022a: 10). Nevertheless, individuals' views of climate change – and, more generally, of science and scientists – are largely correlated with their political views and affiliations (e.g., Pew Research Center 2022b). As Figure 1 shows, while 54 percent of Americans say that global climate change is a major threat, Democrats (85 percent) are far more likely than Republicans (22 percent) to express this view. A parallel, though much less polarized, political division is evident in Canada and in several other western countries, with left-leaning individuals more likely than their right-leaning peers to regard climate change as a threat (see Table 1; Pew Research Center 2022a: 9).

The idea that an overlapping consensus might be forged that would seek to move us forward to realize, however thinly, a

Table 1: Percentage of respondents who say that global climate change is a major threat to their country.

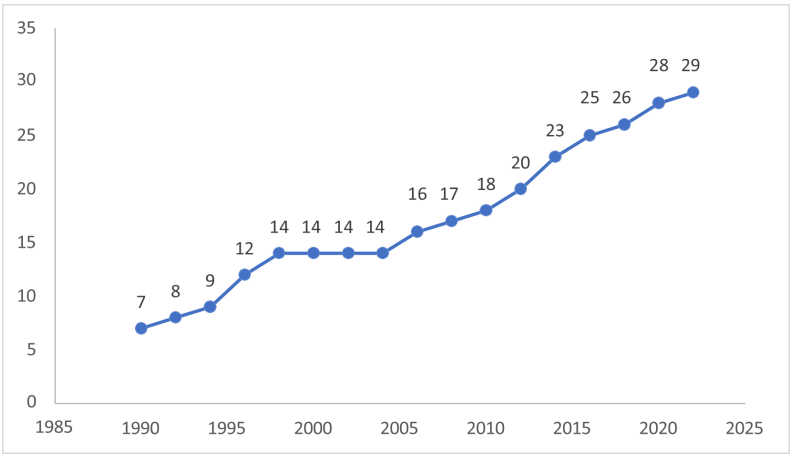
	Right-Leaning	Left-Leaning	Gap
US	22	85	+63
Canada	46	80	+34
Australia	47	91	+44
UK	68	84	+16
Germany	59	83	+24
France	75	86	+11
Spain	70	86	+16

practical understanding of the common good may seem farfetched today. Indeed – polarization aside – the notion of the common good may sound naïve amid the predominance of neo-liberalism and the dilution of the supportive role of the state and social institutions (e.g., education, health care) in ensuring individual and societal well-being.

The common good has a distinctly Catholic meaning. In church teaching it is defined "as the sum total of social conditions which allow people either as groups or as individuals to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1906). As has long been articulated in papal encyclicals since the late nineteenth century, the common good presupposes the dignity and inalienable rights of all persons, and requires the advancement of the prosperity, well-being and social development of every community (e.g., providing employees a just wage that enables them to live a "truly human life" with education, health care, etc.), and the promotion of peace, i.e., political stability and security (*Catechism*, Nos. 1905-1927). In the Catholic paradigm, while every individual, family and community are obliged to participate in advancing the common good, the state and its institutions have a particular responsibility to ensure the common good of society as a whole.

Though it has specific salience in Catholicism, the notion of the common good also inheres in a great deal of secular thinking. Its moral centrality to the foundational principles of American society has been eloquently elaborated by the late, Canadian-born, Berkeley sociologist Robert Bellah. In the bestselling books, *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*, Bellah and co-authors outline ideas about engaged, community-oriented citizenship that go beyond the excessively self-interested, utilitarian individualism celebrated in contemporary culture – and increasingly in contemporary politics – to identify how amid differences and conflicting interests Americans have historically "been able to discover enough common interests across the discontinuities of region, class, religion, race and sex" to order and regulate societal affairs (Bellah et al. 1985: 201). As they affirm, "the individual self finds its fulfillment in relationships with others in a society organized through public dialogue. The necessary dialogue can be sustained only by communities of memory, whether religious or civic…" (ibid. 218).

Figure 1: Religious unaffiliation in the U.S., 1990-2022 (%)



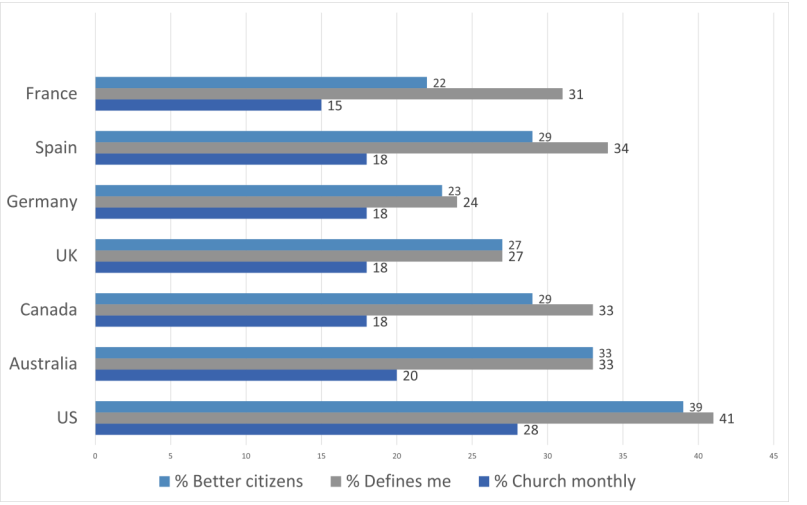
Source: Pew Research Center, various years.

3. Postsecular Society

In the 1980s and 90s, when Bellah and colleagues (1985; 1991) were writing, they were especially concerned about the emerging evidence of declining church participation – what had

long served as a well-established anchor of community engagement and of fostering communal-oriented virtues. In the decades since, secularization has become even more extensive. Indeed, one of the most sociologically striking trends in the US over the past twenty-five years is the robustness of the trajectory of religious disaffiliation: after being a stable 7 percent during the 1970s and 1980s, religious disaffiliation began to increase in the early 1990s and has continued to steadily do so such that today almost one in three Americans (29 percent) report no religious affiliation (see Figure 1), and this figure rises to approximately 40 percent among younger age cohorts. Long distinguished for the exceptional strength of its religiosity, America today across several measures of religious engagement shows that its secularism is catching up with that of Canada and western Europe, even as it is still comparatively more religious (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Cross-country comparisons on key religious indicators



Note: % = percentage agreeing strongly or somewhat with specific statements:
Better citizens: "People with a religious faith are better citizens."
Defines me: "My religion defines me as a person."
Church monthly: "Respondent goes to a place of worship once a month or more often." Source: IPSOS Global Religion, 2023.

Increased secularism, however, does not mean the end of religion or the demise of its public relevance. Indeed, as also illuminated by Figure 2, approximately one-fifth to a third of individuals in well-settled secular countries have opinions or practices conveying the continuing personal and cultural salience of religion. Theoretically, it is fortunate that we have a new concept with which to think about the current situation wherein both the secular and the religious empirically comingle and are not seen as contradictory. That concept is the *postsecular*. It was introduced in the early 2000s by the German social theorist Jurgen Habermas in trying to make sense of the current state of modernity. Habermas is renowned for his writings on the transformative impact of the Enlightenment in placing reason and rationality as the foundational principles of modernity. These principles institutionalized reason and relatedly, human equality (by virtue of the recognition of individual reasoning capacity) in the expectations and procedures of democracy. Modernity similarly elevated rational scientific inquiry and celebrated the anticipated human-social progress that would be facilitated by advances in scientific discovery. Further, the dominance of reason and science would displace religious belief and the hold of religious authority and set in motion the secularization processes that have come to characterize western modernity.

Yet, for all the extensive progress that has been achieved by modernity, its positive effects have been uneven and in some instances the failures of modernity are glaring. The persistence of poverty, global warming, the cultural exclusion of refugees driven by war and environmental disasters, and political polarization underpinned by raw emotions and tribalism rather than reasoned disagreements, are cases in point. This evidence of the failures of modernity does not mean that modernity itself has failed. Rather, Habermas argues (2006), these failures convey that reason alone – or the strategic way in which it has been used – has fallen short of the Enlightenment promise of human equality and social progress. To help remedy these failures, Habermas (2006; 2010) calls on us to rescue reason from its one-sidedness and deploy it along with what he sees as the culturally

under-used ethical resources and values found in public religions such as Catholicism.

In calling for a new awareness that religion – what was supposed to lose its relevance with modernity – may be a key resource in getting modernity back on track so that it can fulfill its promises of equality and inclusive social participation, Habermas (2006: 26) advocates a "contrite modernity." A contrite modernity, like a contrite heart, does not give into despair over its failings. Rather, it acknowledges its failures and misperceptions, including the empirical fact of religion's persistence, and commits to an amended way forward. The term "postsecular society" gives voice, therefore, to the fact that western countries are (for the most part) well-settled secular societies; that religion had not disappeared in these countries but continues to matter; and, moreover, that the longstanding ethics, values, and affectual pull of religion can be deployed to help (contrite) society move toward a better future (cf. Habermas 2008).

In essence, postsecular society recognizes the mutual relevance of the religious and the secular, and is open to exploring how their reflexive dialogue might lead to fruitful remedial outcomes for contemporary society. The conduct of postsecular dialogue comes with clear expectations (Habermas 2008). It requires religious and secular actors to sincerely engage with and be respectful of each other; this means, for example, that the church must be willing to speak *with* and not merely *about* secular society (an important point I elaborate in *Postsecular Catholicism*). And because secularism is the settled reality, religious actors are required to translate their religiously grounded ethics into an accessible, culturally resonant discourse. By the same token, the persuasiveness of the arguments articulated do not rest on the authority or rank of the religious or secular actor, but on the reasonableness of the claims they articulate and how attuned they are with the everyday social and emotional realities of the intended audience(s).

In turn, precisely because of the fact that modernity has fallen short of its normative commitment to advance societal progress in an inclusive and sustainable way, the postsecular turn requires those individuals and institutions that have been

skeptical or downright dismissive of the relevance of religion for contemporary society to reassess their view. While the rationality of science alerts us to the problems that confront us – such as climate change – it is insufficient to motivate society to take remedial action. Science, as Max Weber elaborated (1919/1946: 147-148), cannot tell us what values to prioritize nor what choices to make. "'Scientific' pleading is meaningless in principle because the various value spheres [e.g., economic development, environmental preservation] … stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other … different gods struggle with one another, now and for all times to come." Our fate is to decide which of the warring gods to serve. And as Weber argued, only prophets or saviors (e.g., political and religious leaders), can help us with this, not bureaucrats or scientists whose credentialed, professional expertise requires them to maintain value neutrality. The ethical stances embedded in longstanding religious traditions, therefore, required new or renewed attention from – with, and in – secular society. These principles transcend, and are in tension with, the accumulative disposition and consumerist mindset propelled by our one-sided embrace of modernity, and thus can help illuminate the task needed to create an inclusive and sustainable society.

As a normative stance, postsecular society offers hope for change. It rejects a defeatism that sees the problems of modernity as being beyond reason, beyond fixing (notwithstanding that reason itself is undermined by the populist rejection of empirical findings and the legitimacy given to "alternate facts"). It similarly rejects remedies that, while relying on technical or scientific solutions, pay little attention to ethics, values, and affectual commitments.

4. Postsecular Catholicism

The postsecular opportunity for religious actors to play a key role in helping a contrite modernity refocus its values and recommit to a more inclusive and caring society coincides with a time of contrition and renewed openness in the Catholic Church. Pope Benedict's formal public apology in 2010 for the church's sex abuse scandals might well be viewed as the annunciation of a contrite church. He sincerely apologized for the grievous

suffering caused to victims and their families. And of particular significance, he owned up to the church's own failings in leadership. Benedict (2010) admitted "serious mistakes…grave errors of judgment… [and] failures of leadership" on the part of bishops. Failures in leadership had previously been conceded by bishops in the US and some other countries, and as fall-out from the sex abuse crisis continues still today, additional bishops are admitting their failures too. Benedict's apology, however – coming from the pope himself, the embodiment of magisterial authority – marked a significant symbolic moment of contrition for the church after many years of institutional evasion.

Pope Francis is significantly carrying forward Benedict's recognition that the church needs to engage in "honest self-examination" toward its renewal. Among other important initiatives such as a series of synods (on family, youth, and synodality) with the goal of ensuring a more pastorally inclusive church, he has apologized to specific groups for the past actions of the church. Notably, his penitential pilgrimage to Canada in July 2022 focused specifically on apologizing to, and begging forgiveness from, indigenous peoples for the systematic marginalization and evil committed by church authorities against indigenous children and families primarily through the residential school system. In *Querida Amazonia* ("Beloved Amazon"), Francis (2020: #19) similarly apologizes "for the offenses of the church [and] the crimes committed against native peoples during the so-called conquest of America."

5. Francis's Postsecular Framing of Climate Change and Economic Inequality

The postsecular capacity of the church is most visible in Francis's consistent attentiveness to the pressing societal problems of economic inequality and climate change. His groundbreaking encyclical, *Laudato Si'* (*LS*; On Care for Our Common Home), published in June 2015, marks the Vatican's first extensive discussion of environmental issues, though previous popes frequently pointed to the negative consequences of climate change. Indeed, his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI was known as the "green pope" for both his theological and

practical emphasis on care for the environment. The trenchant analysis Francis offers in *Laudato Si'* builds on the sharp critique of global economic inequality he elaborated two years earlier (Francis 2013a) in *Evangelii Gaudium* (*EG;* The Joy of the Gospel), a document that calls out our "economy of exclusion and inequality" (*EG* #53) as a fundamental societal ill, and which forcefully argues that "the inclusion of the poor in society" is fundamental to shaping "the future of humanity" (*EG* #185). As he argues in *Laudato Si'* (Francis 2015), given the wide-ranging ways in which human economic activity and the environment interact, these are not two separate problems but a singular societal crisis demanding intertwined solutions. In his clear framing of the issues at stake:

> We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis that is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded and at the same time protecting nature. (*LS* #139)

Francis (2023) further invokes crisis language in his recently published exhortation, *Laudate Deum* (*LD*; Praise God), and expresses intensified concern that "with the passage of time [since *Laudato Si'*]…our responses have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point" (*LD* #2).

5.1 Translating Religious Idioms into an Accessible Secular Vocabulary

Bridging religious and secular ideas, Francis's advocacy for the social inclusion of the poor is at the heart of Catholic social justice teaching and is also in keeping with the secular democratic ethos that all citizens should be able to actively participate in social and political life. Yet, as Francis recognizes, the realization of this goal requires a "new mindset." Using accessible, frequently heard political language, he elaborates that what is required is a shift in worldview away from belief in the invisible hand of the market, trickle-down economics, the

idolatry of money, and the overvaluing of consumption and profit (*EG* #202, 204). For Francis, the remediation of the ills of modernity:

> means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs we encounter. The word solidarity is a little worn and at times poorly understood, but it refers to something more than a few sporadic acts of generosity. It presumes the creation of a new mindset that thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few [*EG* #188] ….The private ownership of goods is justified by the need to protect and increase them, so that they can better serve the common good; for this reason, solidarity must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them. (*EG* #189)

In this framing, if we are to tackle the pressing problems of inequality – including the manifestations and consequences of climate change – the solidarity needed must urgently embrace the radicalness of structural and cultural transformation in the service of the common good, notwithstanding the press of capitalism.

Specifically discussing climate change, Francis argues for "a new and universal solidarity" (*LS* 14) and, applying the church's long-held ethical emphasis on the "common good," he articulates the relatively novel idea that the "natural environment" and "climate" are a common good. Thus,

> The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all. At the global level, it is a complex system linked to many of the essential conditions for human life" [*LS* 23]….The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone. If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all. If we do not, we burden our consciences with the weight of having denied the existence of others. (*LS* 95)

Thus, humanity, he states, "is called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption in order to combat . . . [global] warming or at least the human causes that produce or aggravate it" (*LS* #23). In line with his broader critique of contemporary capitalism, he is highly critical of "compulsive" consumerism (*LS* #203). He denounces a "throwaway culture" that prioritizes short-term gain and quick profits, and that significantly impacts pollution and "despoils nature" (*LS* #20-22, 184, 192). (Similar themes are expressed in *Querida Amazonia*.)

Retrieving religious language to outline the obligation humanity faces, Francis deftly translates the biblical story of the Creation and other scriptural passages into the secular language of environmental stewardship. Making extensive reference to biblical passages, he emphasizes that "dominion" over the earth means to "till it and keep it," not to exploit it (*LS* #67); it entails "responsible stewardship" (*LS* #116). Further, as he elaborates, "The laws found in the Bible dwell on relationships not only among individuals but also with other living beings." And quoting Deuteronomy (about the nurturance occurring in a bird's nest), he insists that "the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures." (#68)

5.2 Scientific and Poetic Reasoning

Building on his religiously grounded reasoning, Francis seamlessly links the natural environment as a common good to the accessible, secular authority of scientific reasoning. He is critical of those who deny or who are indifferent to the scientific reality of global warming (*LS* #14, 92, 115), and ties the ethical responsibility of care for the planet to the accumulating scientific data on climate change. He states, for example,

> A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system. In recent decades this warming has been accompanied by a constant rise in the sea level and, it would appear, by an increase of extreme weather events, even if a scientifically

> determinable cause cannot be assigned to each particular phenomenon. (*LS* #23)

Moreover, substantiating his argument that there is "an intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet" (*LS* #16), he provides several empirical examples showing how the poverty of individuals, as well as of whole communities, countries, and geopolitical regions, correlates with environmental degradation. As also evident across several other of Francis's statements, he is particularly attentive to ecological exploitation and its empirically demonstrated impact in the global South and in forcing the migration of so many people, whether due to natural disasters or war. Francis concludes:

> The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet: Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest. (*LS* #48)

Scientific findings alone, however – as Weber elaborated, are insufficient. Indeed, as scientists and environmental activists themselves frequently lament – scientific studies are not – and Weber would state, cannot be – persuasive in convincing the public or specific policymakers and stakeholders of the significance of global warming. Francis, nonetheless, is highly critical of those who deny the evidence of climate change and its impacts (*LD* #s 5-6). Yet, given the fact that reason falls short in changing minds, the church can turn to other resources in its repertoire. Faith-based poems and well-known hymns and literary references can have an emotional appeal that transcends any scientific reasoning. Notably, Francis opens *Laudato Si'* quoting the twelfth/thirteenth-century St. Francis's popular canticle:

> In the words of this beautiful canticle, St. Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful

> mother who opens her arms to embrace us. "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs."

And he returns to its verse, subsequently invoking "Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother River, Mother Earth" (#92). Francis also deftly connects Mother Earth to faith in the Mary, the Mother of Jesus, highly revered both in Catholic theology and popular devotion. He notes that Mary, the queen of all creation is a grieving mother: "Mary, the mother who cared for Jesus, now cares with maternal affection and pain for this wounded world. Just as her pierced heart mourned the death of Jesus, so now she grieves for the sufferings of the crucified poor and for the creatures of this world laid waste by human power." (#241) In *Querida Amazonia*, Francis (2020: #s 43-47) similarly deploys poetic and literary references from within South America in conveying the significance of preserving the environmental riches and advancing communal well-being in the Amazon region.

The postsecular inspirational power of St. Francis, the patron saint of ecology, is amplified by the fact that the British National Gallery, grandly situated in London's Trafalgar Square – a living memorial to Protestant Britain's imperial dominance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – hosted an exhibition, St. Francis of Assisi, in summer 2023. It featured an array of classical and contemporary depictions of the saint's life and works. According to the exhibition notes, the "consistently relevant" and "radical" Francis

> "continues to be an attractive and inspirational figure for Christians and non-Christians, pacifists and environmentalists, those who campaign for social justice, utopians and revolutionaries, animal lovers and advocates of human solidarity….He is considered by many to be a patron saint, or an ally, of causes related to social justice, interreligious dialogue, socialism, feminism, the animal- right movement and ecology, among others" (Author's notes from museum visit, July 13, 2023).

5.3 Communicative Openness

Communicative openness is a hallmark of postsecularity and, further driving the postsecular reach of the church's discourse, it is frequently on display in Francis's statements. He not only affirms the importance of reciprocal dialogue with and amid differences (*EG* #227-228; 251). He also notes that such dialogue is not intended to avoid conflict or to dilute differences but to respectfully negotiate through the differences at issue. Importantly, too, especially in light of the fact that religious authority is frequently seen as distinct from or even higher than secular authority, Francis recognizes that communicative openness means that papal or clerical authority per se does not have a monopoly on truth or on the better reasoned or more persuasive argument in any given public debate. This post-secular attitude fits well with American Catholics' and Vatican II's expectations of the church as an interpretive, pluralistic community in which lay opinions and experiences matter (Dillon 1999; 2018). Indeed, Francis specifically points out that "neither the pope nor the church have a monopoly on the interpretation of social realities or the proposal of solutions to contemporary problems" (*EG* #184). Echoing Vatican II's affirmation of interpretive pluralism, he further states: "Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question that affects the church and the world" (*EG* #16; see also *EG* #3). Similarly, in *Laudato Si'* he emphasizes the importance of wide-ranging, open, and honest debate, saying:

> On many concrete questions, the church has no reason to offer a definitive opinion; she knows that honest debate must be encouraged among experts, while respecting divergent views…[*LS* #61]…I am concerned to encourage an honest and open debate so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good. (*LS* #188)

Giving realization to this understanding, Francis demonstrates an openness to look inclusively to arguments offered by others whose professional expertise or situational immersion is pertinent to the subject being addressed. As noted

earlier, he frequently affirms the objective reliability and relevance of science and specifically cites scientists and empirical studies in supporting various arguments. He is also inclusive in drawing on a range of religious-based expertise and references the geographically localized work of national bishops' conferences, other religious leaders, and theologians. Showing respect for the relevance of non-hegemonic Southern knowledge (e.g., Connell et al. 2017), in *Evangelii Gaudium*, for example, he makes several references to the statement issued by the General Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops' 2007 meeting in Aparecida, Brazil; and he also variously cites documents from the bishops' conferences in India, Brazil, Congo, and the Philippines (as well as France and the United States). Similarly, in *Laudato Si'*, he references documents from seventeen geographically diverse bishops' conferences encompassing North America, Latin America, Africa, Asia, Oceania, and Europe.

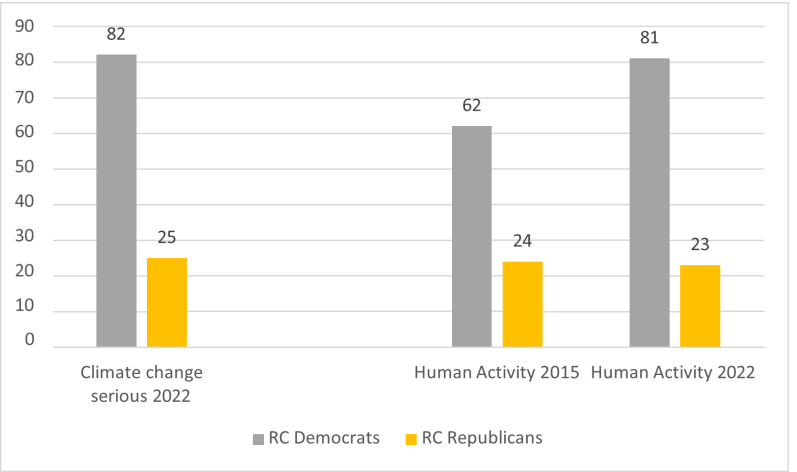
5.4 Public Reception

My illustrative discussion is intended to convey what I consider to be the church's postsecular competence: its ability to translate religious and faith-based motifs into arguments that bolster a culturally accessible, secular framing of the common good. Although Francis is particularly adept in carrying this mantle, the church's theological and cultural repertoire – as well as its institutional commitments to social justice – well positions it for a postsecular role. This is the case regardless of who is pope, even as personality and argumentative tone clearly impact the effectiveness with which any church (or secular) leader can embrace postsecular expectations.

Of course, the context of reception also matters, including especially, as noted above, the realities of consumer capitalism. And, for Catholics, there are additional institutional-contextual layers. It's well documented that Catholics are well accustomed to making up their own minds on a host of moral and political issues; they tend to take an independent view of the matter at hand regardless of who is pope or what he says (Dillon 2018). Intensified politicization today further restricts the audience reach, persuasiveness, and impact of Francis's discourse on

climate change and economic inequality, regardless of how accessible or objectively compelling his arguments may be. Not surprisingly, the intensified political polarization in America on climate change find parallel expression among Catholics (Diamant 2023). As Figure 3 shows, 82 percent of Democratic or Democratic-leaning Catholics say that global climate change is an extremely or very serious problem; but this is true of only 25 percent of Republican or Republican-leaning Catholics. Similarly, in 2015, the year *Laudato Si'* was published, 62 per cent of Catholic Democrats believed that global warming is caused by human activity, whereas only 24 per cent of Catholic Republicans shared this view (Pew Research Center 2015). Today, 81 percent of Democratic or Democratic-leaning Catholics, compared to 23 percent of Republican or Republican-leaning candidates, say that the Earth is getting warmer mostly due to human activity (Diamant 2023).

Figure 3: US Catholics' views on the seriousness and cause of climate change (percentages)



Notwithstanding these limits to Francis's influence, there is evidence of Francis's impact on climate change. His moral influence is credited with helping push approval of the Paris Climate Agreement (in December 2015), committing 195 countries including the Holy See to reduce greenhouse gas

emissions. This moral influence continues to reverberate as underscored most recently (September 2023) by Francis's conversation with Bill Clinton on climate change as part of the Clinton Global Initiative, and his scheduled participation in the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 28) in December 2023. The Vatican itself also organizes ongoing conferences on specific environmental issues; and among other official Vatican statements, Francis's support for the Pan-Amazonian Church Network in Latin America, established in 2014, and his 2020 exhortation *Querida Amazonia* further strengthens the political and religious legitimacy of environmental advocacy.

Additionally, the Vatican and several Catholic dioceses and parishes across the globe have instigated or expanded environmental sustainability policies; the synod on synodality, for example, has plans in place to reduce the assembly's carbon footprint. The work of Catholic Climate Covenant, an environmental advocacy organization established in 2006 and composed of several Catholic partner organizations; as well as that of other advocacy organizations and local grassroots chapters who are part of the cross-national Laudato Si' (Climate Change) Movement are energized by Francis's prioritization of climate change issues. An array of these groups participated in what has been described as the largest post-2019 climate change march, held in Manhattan during Climate Week, coinciding with the UN's "Climate Ambition Summit" (September 2023).

6. Conclusion: Postsecular Credibility

Notwithstanding the impediments encountered in impacting public discourse on the common good such as climate change and inequality, the postsecular strength of the church's ethical stance is bolstered by the consistency between the church's discourse and its own record of action in this domain – for example, the "green" policies implemented by the Vatican; and the extensive work of Catholic Charities in mitigating poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness in local communities as well as ameliorating the circumstances of migrants and refugees.

Consistency between talk and action on the part of any actor, whether religious or secular, bolsters their public legitimacy as moral or authentic actors and, relatedly, opens the possibility that

more people will at least take note of what they have to say. Secular or religiously unaffiliated people may not be in the habit of paying attention to the statements of the Catholic Church, a discourse that the un-immersed might reasonably presume to think of narrowly as "religious discourse." Yet, given that religiously unaffiliated individuals are, for example, also the most concerned about global warming (Diamant 2023), were they to peruse *Laudato Si'* they would find a persuasive secular discourse whose specific arguments could bolster their own convictions about climate change while also providing them with arguments to deploy in trying to persuade others of the urgency of the problem and the enormity of the solution needed.

In conclusion, the postsecular recognition of the mutual relevance of the religious and the secular fits well with Catholicism as a publicly engaged religion, an institutional identity amplified by the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962-1965). The ongoing conversation between faith and reason that is the hallmark of Catholic theology, coupled with the church's commitment to the common good as elaborated in its long-standing social justice teachings, and accompanied by its on -the-ground presence in diverse religious and secular activities (e.g., religious worship, health, education, social services, public policy), well positions the church to have postsecular relevance. Francis's communicative openness and his keen ability to translate religious ideas and sentiments into a culturally accessible discourse on economic inequality and climate change, demonstrate the church's capacity to nudge public attention to the common good, and to do so in ways that transcend varied religious and secular interests. There are limits, nonetheless, to the church's postsecular engagement. Most notably, as I discuss elsewhere (Dillon 2018; 2024), the openness the church shows in its discussion of climate change and economic inequality is substantively different to the openness it can muster in discussion of varied issues encompassing sex and gender. Significant tensions in church teachings on sexual behavior, marriage, and women's ordination call for creative approaches to developing a theology that moves away, perhaps, from a reliance on Natural Law while still reconciling individual and group self-determination with the common good.

In any event, the Catholic Church, despite the overarching presence of the pope and the hierarchy, always speaks with more than one voice; pluralism and ambiguity are part and parcel of its theological tradition and of its sociological presence. Yet, intra-religious differences and, for that matter, inter-religious and religious-secular differences do "not diminish [the Church's] significance in our [societal] common life…[rather]…The Church can educate by being a public voice" (Bellah et al. 1991: 181, 193). Amid the multiple, pressing societal problems that confront us, problems accentuated by the fracturing of consensus and the polarization of interests and affinities, the Catholic Church can seize the opportunity to bring renewed public attention to the common good. Its articulation and embrace are necessary if we are to sustain the promise of our human-social interdependence as moral citizens.

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The Michael Keenan Memorial Lecture

Michael Gregory Keenan, professor and dean of St. Thomas More College, was born in Toronto on 23 May 1937. After elementary and secondary education at Owen Sound and Toronto, he enrolled in psychology at Assumption University in Windsor, receiving his BA in 1961 and his MA the following year.

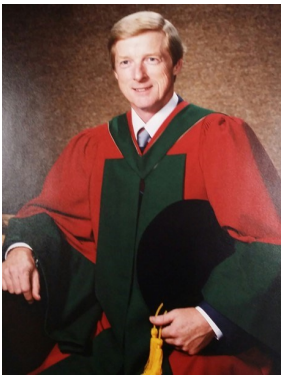
In 1962 he married Patricia Kohlmeier of Rochester, NY. They had three children, Kathleen, Kevin, and Terrence.

From 1963 to 1965 he was instructor at Christ the King College (now King's College) at the University of Western Ontario.

He came to St. Thomas More College in 1965 as a lecturer, on the invitation of the principal, Rev. Peter Swan, CSB, and held this position until 1967 when he left to take up doctoral studies at the University of Waterloo, where he received his PhD in 1971. While at Waterloo, he also served as lecturer at St. Jerome's College.

In 1971 he returned to STM as an assistant professor, and from 1974 as associate professor. In 1975 he was named first dean of the college, and he held this position for two five-year terms. After a lengthy battle with cancer, he died on 31 October 1986.

In December 1986, the Board of Governors of St. Thomas More College set up a memorial fund. In the spring of 1987, the college's faculty administration forum approved an annual public lecture by a distinguished visiting professor on topics reflecting the range of disciplines at St. Thomas More College. The lectures are held each fall on a date close to the anniversary of Dr. Keenan's death.



Dr. Michael Keenan

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