

The Pope's Pet Subject.



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A Catholic friend said she wouldn't allow her children to have pets as they might 'distract their affection away from people.' I disagreed but recognised that she was expressing a cultural view. I'd noticed that in Catholic and Orthodox countries people seemed friendlier to each other, but not so good with animals. In Spain I attended a bull fight which made me feel sick, in Ireland I saw dogs tied up outside in freezing rain. In 2004 at the time of the Olympics in Athens I participated in a demonstration outside the Greek embassy in London, after stray animals in Syntagma Square were poisoned because the Greeks believed that visitors wouldn't want to see them. It was tourists who'd been keeping them alive.

I wasn't surprised by the recent comments from Argentinian Pope Francis. In 2014 he told an Italian newspaper that people were favouring 'easier bonds' with pets rather than forming the more complex bonds needed with children. Perhaps this is a criticism of current levels of maturity. He castigated 'selfish' couples who 'substitute dogs for children,' who he said were, 'taking away our humanity.' That could be a reference to the declining western birth-rate. He mentioned the amount spent on petfood, 2.9 billion in the UK alone, rather than on hungry children. The pet care industry is worth £8 billion, up from £2.9 billion in 2005. Half of that is in medical bills, pet insurance is now almost mandatory as vets start to rival dentists, energy providers and lawyers for greed. The rather inappropriately named Francis makes some valid points, but what he really wants to say about modern life remains strangely nebulous, perhaps because he is also a committed socialist.

His 2013 apostolic letter attacked the idea that reducing tax on high earners can stimulate investment as a 'crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralised workings of the prevailing economic system.' His plea for reduced capitalism called for 'structural transformation' that would 'restore to the poor what belongs to them,' apparently without economic growth; the great conundrum of socialism everywhere. His 2015 encyclical implied that wealth creation automatically meant oppression of the poor.

His suspicion of pets has a long pedigree on the hard-left. In the 1950s Chairman Mao declared them a bourgeois affection that used up food and medicine while peasants starved. I heard variations of that argument when I was a left-wing student. Dogs were banned in Beijing until 1990. By 2021 a million were registered by members of the burgeoning middle-class who want a dog along with their car and flat screen TV, but a recent message in The Peoples Daily stated that unlike decadent Westerners, Chinese people had only ever kept dogs for hunting or as food. It decried the 'dog infestation' in cities. In Beijing there's a new ban on dogs taller than fourteen inches, whilst in Shanghai, if a neighbour decides they don't like your mutt it can be removed by the state. A notice has been posted around high-rise blocks warning: 'Deal with it on your own, or else the committee will organize people to enter your home and club the dog to death.' During the Russian revolution, a mainly rural population didn't keep pets but the type of urbanites who did were exterminated or left. When I lived in communist Poland in the 1970s I never saw any pet food for sale.

The Pope is also a bit of a tree if not a dog hugger; recently attacking, the ‘Mentality of profit at any price with no concern for the destruction of nature.’ Many climate activists do not like pets either. They may have a point about agricultural land twice the size of the UK now being used globally to produce cat food. In 1975, philosopher Peter Singer coined the term ‘Animal Liberation,’ for a social movement that proposes to free animals from human oppression. That’s now an umbrella term for ‘animal welfare,’ ‘animal rights,’ and ‘animal abolitionism.’ The first promotes what activists see as a ‘paternalistic’ model of human-animal affairs; that people owe a duty of kindness to animals even if they still kill them for food. Will Kymlicka and Sue Donaldson argued in their 2011 book *Zoopolis*, that domestic and semi-wild animals such as squirrels and raccoons should be granted limited citizenship rights in order to ensure their well-being. The result would be a co-operative community ensuring that all creatures perform fulfilling work with adequate leisure time for self-development. ‘Abolitionism’ means the end of all ownership of animals for food, clothing, medical research, transplants, guide-dogs and pets. That believes that if animals are bred to be dependent on humans the relationship is flawed because of the difference in power. In a sort of Stockholm syndrome, animals are forced to love their owners in order to get affection and food, neglecting their animal nature to do so. Given a vote on it, as they soon might be, your cat would rather be out in the cold desperately hunting for a rodent lunch and squirrels would prefer to reject all those seductive bird-feeders, if that meant parity of power.

That view is shared by the animal rights activist groups such as PETA who oppose keeping pets. Their website states that companion animals lead, ‘Lives restricted to human homes where they must obey commands and can only eat, drink and even urinate when humans allow them to.’ Its list of common ‘mistreatments’ includes ‘scolding any creature to get off the furniture or hurry up on its walk.’ They seem to have missed many pets’ ability to be completely deaf to their owners; particularly, ‘get off the sofa, come in,’ and ‘please eat that up.’

The Pope is chiefly interesting for what he didn’t say. He could have genuinely supported the family by emphasising Christian marriage, even the responsibility of men to support their children. That is almost unthinkable in this woke climate; amongst the constant reports about food banks, with mothers claiming to go hungry rather than their offspring, reporters never ask, where is the father of those children?

The term ‘mother’ once sacred in the image of Mary, is being gradually replaced by ‘care-giver.’ The Biden administration, great fans of this pope, recently tried to replace, ‘Mothers’ with ‘Birthing People,’ in their maternal health guidance. Francis could have commented on the deleterious effect of radical feminism on children put into nurseries while their mothers work full time. It’s a socialist shibboleth that women must work, even in boring, mundane jobs. If a Pope suggested that women who want to, could be paid to stay at home with their little ones, he would probably be called a ‘fascist.’

The left is suspicious of the family particularly because of the bond between mother and child. Francis might have asserted the effects of ‘Attachment Disorder,’ adult insecurity and mental illness, caused by separating infants from their mothers, established by psychologists John Bowlby after he studied children in nurseries during the war, by David Winnicott and Harry Harlow in the US who observed monkeys and primates. Their ideas are now rejected by sociologists and ‘feminist scholars,’ as inherently conservative.

A 2013 feature in The Guardian stated that ‘Parenting manuals based on Bowlby's work prioritise the bond between mother and child, side-line the father and keep women away from work.’ It explained that ‘Widespread criticism of attachment theory is that it constructs biological imperatives and is ‘Politically retrograde.’ A Pope doctrinally bound to biological determinism as he officially is, might favour theories which, as the Guardian piece put it, ‘Presented the image of ‘The natural’ to circumscribe the structures of society and particularly the position of women in relation to children.’ Nebulous remarks about pets are easier and safer for him to dish out than any real scrutiny of what is going wrong with the modern family. As a socialist he’s trapped by a contempt for the family based on what is seen as its unequal ‘power relationships,’ based on biology, a science which is now highly contentious, and the old requirement on men to provide and women to spend at least five years focussed on their infant.

The lack of the initial strong maternal bond may be a key to why so many people now grow up unable to form close relations with other humans and lack the emotional resilience the Pope recognises are needed to tackle complex adult relationships such as being parents. We are all sad, lonely children now, needing our teddy bears and our puppy for comfort. If he really wants to change that, he must either speak out for the Christian family and motherhood as we once knew it, or stick with the Left. He can’t do both.

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ⁱ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Kelly_\(artist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Kelly_(artist))