Opinion
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Flora x. Tang named her second foster kitty Iggy — after St. Ignatius of Loyola. (Courtesy of Flora x. Tang)



by Flora x. Tang

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I named my second foster kitten, a seven-week-old brown tabby cat, after St. Ignatius of Loyola — Iggy for short — having welcomed him home on the feast of all Jesuit saints in November 2021. Iggy would stay with us for a mere three weeks, until he was old enough to be neutered and then adopted by a forever family. When Iggy fell asleep on my bed shortly after we got home, I took the opportunity to snap as many pictures of the sleeping kitten as possible, then obnoxiously texted them to any friend who seemed like a cat person.

"What a cute kitten! He is definitely going to be a foster fail this time!" my friends responded.

"Foster fail," far from referring to an actual failure, is an affectionate term that describes when a foster pet parent falls in love with their foster pet so much that they end up adopting them.

But I do not want to keep my foster kittens forever. Nor am I able to. Owning pets is a privilege that I, as a non-U.S. citizen and a graduate student, do not yet have. As a visa holder in this country, how long I'm able to stay in the U.S. — and whether I am able to even reenter the country — is highly dependent on current visa and immigration policies, various travel bans and other border policies, despite the fact that I have been living and going to school in the U.S. since I was 12. Owning pets with these uncertainties is probably not a good idea.

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Similar considerations, albeit at much higher stakes, will also factor into my decision of whether or not to have children one day. I recall when I was 15 and was separated from my own parents for half a year due to flawed American visa and border policies that granted me a visa but denied a visa to my parents. Similar visa policies are still in place today, arbitrarily separating non-American parents and children for much

longer than half a year at times. Whether I and many other non-Americans who live in the U.S. would be able to start a family, and what rights our children might have in this country, depend on whether such policies continue.

Because of these and other complex circumstances in my own life, family — as well as fulfilling my maternal instincts of loving small animals — will always look different for me.

I no longer look to pet ownership or parenthood as necessary milestones in my own life. Rather, in discovering new and creative ways to love others (animal or human), I learn daily that our universal calling toward fruitful love may look a myriad of ways for each one of us. Fostering cats, mentoring college students and teaching catechesis to neighborhood children have become not temporary placeholders of motherhood for me, but equally fulfilling as vocations in themselves.

During a Jan. 12 speech about St. Joseph’s fatherhood, Pope Francis said that couples who choose pets over having children are "selfish." Pet owners and animal lovers in the English-speaking world, Catholic and otherwise, responded with anger and sarcasm in defense of their pets.

The pope's mentality is not entirely foreign to me. My parents, born in China at a time when few people had sufficient resources to feed their children, let alone pets, have also often balked at American families' spoiled pets, recognizing that many Chinese families today cannot afford to spend nearly as much on their children. "This dog has more toys than my siblings and I did growing up," they would comment. Owning pets, especially expensive pets from breeders, is a privilege that demands examination in light of the world's ever rising inequality.

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For most, however, it was not just about the pets. Rather, in a seemingly anti-pet statement, the Catholic Church's narrow view on reproduction and marriage is again reinforced by a pope who himself is outspoken about gender equality and LGBT inclusion. While church teaching on marriage theoretically leaves room for couples

who are unable to conceive children, childbirth (and sometimes as an afterthought, adoption) is still upheld on a pedestal as the highest way for a Catholic marriage to be "fruitful."

The church's view of childbirth, or intention to conceive children, as a central and crucial part of marriage continues to contribute to its theological justifications against lesbian and gay relationships, its prohibition on artificial contraception and its views on gender complementarity. While the church acknowledges the life-giving vocations of celibate religious men and women who dedicate their lives in service of others, it does not honor that option for married couples who choose to dedicate their lives to service in ways other than childbirth or adoption.

The pope's view that couples who choose not to have children are selfish also fails to acknowledge the many barriers that prevent single people and couples from raising children. This includes people who live in poverty or unsafe conditions and people who work multiple jobs to make ends meet for themselves. The absence of a nationwide paid maternity and paternity leave, as well as rising cost of pediatric healthcare, likewise prevents many from giving birth to and caring for their newborn children without going into debt. The decision to have children is further complicated for those who live in areas of the world most significantly affected by climate change. Barriers as such may prevent families from having children of their own, but do not prevent them from demonstrating much courage, love and discernment to which we are all called.

Some married couples may simply not feel called to have children, and may prefer dedicating their lives to other forms of work and service. The Catholic Church, which is marked by its universality and diversity, can and should recognize these families as enough in themselves.

In fact, the story of St. Joseph, who himself also never had biological children, represents just one example of the complexity and diversity of families present within and beyond the church. Leaning on the radical non-normativity of the Holy Family as model and guide, I too continue to discern what family looks like for me as I navigate my own life's many contingencies.

My Catholic faith teaches me that all are called to service and self-gift. All are called to pour out their love for others, especially for those who are vulnerable in our society. Rather than a unilateral obligation, biological or adoptive parenthood is but one sacred way to fulfill this universal calling. As much as the church looks to large

families as models of love, families who do not have children for a variety of reasons may also serve as examples through the creative ways they love themselves and their communities as the church together navigates the ever-complex circumstances of life.

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