Opinion
Guest Voices
Pope Francis greets dog owners during his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatic

Pope Francis greets dog owners during his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican in this Sept. 19, 2018, file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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In his Jan. 5 general audience, Pope Francis chided people for not having enough children, accusing them of replacing children with pets. He said that parenthood provides "something fundamental, something important" in people's lives. He said there is "a form of selfishness" in couples deciding to have just one child and that this "is a denial of fatherhood and motherhood and diminishes us, takes away our humanity."

Oh, for heaven's sake.

The pope did get one thing right: Parenthood can provide "something fundamental, something important" in people's lives. (I say this as a nonparent.) Like marriage, parenthood can be a school of virtue.

In parenting, people learn to navigate the twists and turns of another person's development from the absolute dependence of infancy, to the first adventures of a toddler, to dealing with the rebelliousness that can characterize adolescence, to

"launching" a new adult into the world, and sometimes to receiving care in our own old age.

Those of us who do not parent must find other ways to learn the truths that parenting reveals about human nature. But the pope's address is so riddled with odd or wrong-headed statements that I wonder if he thought it through before launching in.

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As a theologian and a veterinarian, I have six questions I'd like to ask the pope about this speech.

1. In this time of looming climate catastrophe driven by human activity, why on earth would the pope say that one child is not enough? It is true that at present the world could support the whole burgeoning human community if we had the political will to do so. Truly, redistribution of wealth and resources could feed all God's children, for now.

However, we are rapidly reaching a point where the planet cannot handle more people. Some, including the late Harvard sociobiologist E.O. Wilson, suggest that a human population greater than 10 billion would be unsustainable. Frankly, it's about time for people in the developed world, we who gobble far more than our just share of resources, to slow down a bit as we work toward that better world where the planet's riches are shared by all.

Further, the pope has elsewhere emphasized intergenerational justice, focusing on the kind of world we'll leave our children and their children. Our responsibility to work for the common good extends not just across geographical boundaries, but across time into the future as well. Recklessly producing more kids than we can hope to feed on this planet violates intergenerational justice.

2. We are currently in a dreadful biodiversity crisis. We are in the midst of — or at best on the very brink of — the sixth mass extinction, the first since a meteor strike and other factors doomed the dinosaurs. Why does Francis call care for the animals

with whom we share this planet selfish?

One of the great insights of his 2015 encyclical Laudato Si' is that the natural world exists as an end in itself, a source of delight to its creator. It is in extending ourselves to care for the nonhuman other — yes, even dogs and cats! — that we enact a care for creation that celebrates the creator. "Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself," Francis wrote, and for some of us it is easier to start to come to that spiritual awareness with the nonhuman companions with whom we share hearth and home.

3. Why does the leader of a religion that — on a good day — proclaims that love is limitless, think that people substitute pets for children? In my work as a veterinarian, I see every day that love is NOT a zero-sum game. Loving and caring for animals can inspire people to love and care for humans, and vice versa. Children — and adults — can learn to care for vulnerable others by caring for animals. Animals can elicit love from people. Real love multiplies and is abundant.

In the field of virtue ethics, we recognize that every small step of virtue helps us grow toward more perfect virtue. That is clearly true when people extend the ambit of their concern beyond our own species, and when people learn to care for humanity more deeply when inspired by the devotion of a pet. Besides, if childless people are too selfish to parent, why would Francis want to entrust them with kids in the first place?

4. If not raising children "diminishes us, takes away our humanity," why does Francis tolerate magisterial opposition to adoption by LGBT people? Since there is no credible evidence that LGBT people are worse parents than cis and heterosexual couples — and some evidence that gay parents do a better job raising kids than straight parents — why wouldn't Francis demand that Catholic adoption agencies serve all who present themselves with the generosity and grace to raise kids in need? If parenting is a matter of human dignity, then Francis should not tolerate groundless exclusion of qualified would-be parents.

5. If parenthood provides "something fundamental, something important" in people's lives, if not parenting "diminishes us, takes away our humanity," then surely celibacy should not be required of those who would serve the church. If the pope is correct,

then why is the church deliberately damaging those who would serve it? Mandatory priestly celibacy is merely a discipline of the Western church, shored up with flimsy theological pretexts. If Francis believes what he said about parenthood, he could eliminate that obsolete rule with the stroke of a papal pen.

6. Francis warns that not having children leads to an "old age in solitude, with the bitterness of loneliness." Alas, that fate is not limited to childless seniors, but to any of us who may outlive our partners, our friends, or, tragically, our children. Our mobile society often finds families scattered across a continent, visiting rarely, or relying on virtual visits to pick up the slack. Why didn't Francis take the opportunity to remind the Catholic world of the treasure of our ecclesial communities, and call us to be especially careful to reach out to the elderly, the isolated, or those new in our neighborhoods?

Yes, having a nonhuman companion in the house can help allay loneliness — pet ownership offers a number of physical, emotional, psychological and even spiritual benefits for older folks, both those with and without strong local support networks.

Instead of answering my questions, perhaps the pope would do better to visit an animal shelter, and ask himself whether he's ready to take on the responsibility of a puppy or a kitten — especially since he's ruled out taking on responsibility for a partner or children.

At first, he should keep the pet in an area of the papal apartments where a little chewing or the occasional "accident" wouldn't ruin any priceless art. The pope might learn something about utter devotion from the warm eyes of a dog, or something about convivial companionship from sitting with a purring cat.

And in the welcome he'd receive when he gets home after a long workday, he might see hints of the boundless love of the peaceable kingdom preached by Jesus, who, after all, was born in a stable, surrounded by animals.