

ON THE USE OF THE WORD VULNERABILITY

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Abstract

This text reflects on the progress and hesitations surrounding the word "vulnerability" in contemporary discourse, particularly in Pope Francis' encyclicals "Laudato Si'" and "Fratelli Tutti."

Keywords

Vulnerability. Global community and pandemic. Social Doctrine of the Church.

Summary

1. Introduction; 2. Vulnerability: a term still unstable? 3. Mapping the encyclicals; 4. The pandemic and the use of the term vulnerability.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In *Les mots et les choses*, Foucault drew attention to the importance of the epistemic subsoil of language. In fact, as he helped us to see, the concepts that shape the spirit of an era function, in essence, as "a great network," that is, a complex mechanism of representations, identities, orders, needs, desires, or interests². Along these lines, he suggested a shift in the focus of research, promoting a kind of archaeology of this system of relationships. When a word emerges or disappears from the lexicon of an era, when it gains or loses centrality, we are faced with a symptom. In words, we can dig deeper than "words, words, words," and Hamlet already knew this. They give us access to the internal work underlying the various seasons of history and their transitions. A single word, with its inherent movements, can tell us as much as an entire library.

This short text aims to observe the progress and hesitations that have surrounded the use of the term "vulnerability" in contemporary public discourse, using the example of Pope Francis' two encyclicals, *Laudato Si'* (2015) and *Fratelli Tutti* (2020). In this specific case, the figure of the previous Pope may be of particular significance because, he is a protagonist who is known for his commitment to making issues associated with vulnerability visible and audible.

2. VULNERABILITY: A TERM THAT IS STILL UNSTABLE?

It may be useful to recall that the term vulnerability has a relatively recent origin. The Latin language has, within what we would call the semantic field

² FOUCAULT 1966, 314.

of vulnerability, the noun *vulnus*, the adjective *vulnerabilis*, and the verb *vulnerare*. The word vulnerability is unknown to it. In modern languages, the first attestations date only from the 19th and 20th centuries³, and in several cases, only through the influence of literary discourse. We can therefore assume that, before existing as a word, vulnerability began by describing an experience, thus signaling only concrete cases (the so-called vulnerable and the corresponding wounds), and only more recently, through a process of conceptualization, has it gradually become established. With this conceptualization, it gained greater plasticity and transversality, which justify, for example, the evident fortune of the word in various fields of the human sciences. But the problem of terminological instability remains unresolved. As Marogna recalls, "the notion, subject to various attempts at assessment by philosophical debate, is still highly indeterminate"⁴. Resistance to the implementation of the term can be summarized as having two orientations: one that denounces the stigmatizing effects that the designation can have on individuals, circumscribing them to a category centered on the problem and not on the person (hence the insistence on distinguishing, for example, the person from the situations of vulnerability in which they may find themselves); and another that sees the excessive breadth of the term as useless for responding to the concrete needs of particular groups within specific contexts⁵.

3. MAPPING THE ENCYCLICALS

Lexicographical research applied to Pope Francis' two encyclicals confirms this indeterminacy. But not only that: it also opens perspectives for evolution that must be considered. Let us focus on the first of the documents. *Laudato Si'* is

³ See the historical review presented in MAROGNA 2018, 13-14.

⁴ MAROGNA 2018, 14.

⁵ See PARIOTTI 2018, 155.

part of the line of so-called social encyclicals, thus joining the genre inaugurated by Pope Leo XIII with *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which is unanimously considered to be the embryo of the modern social doctrine of the Church. The 20th century saw several notable social encyclicals, such as John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* (1963), Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967), and John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* (1991). The same historical role seems to be reserved for this encyclical. Howard speaks of it as a "seismic event"⁶ capable not only of formulating a new synthesis of Catholic theology in the face of ecological problems, but also of contributing to a change in political and social mentality. This hope is reinforced by the intense critical reception that continues⁷. The pontiff's own reference to *the making of* the encyclical *Laudato Si'* is curious, as it is quite revealing of the potential for change that is implicit in it. Pope Bergoglio recounts:

"In 2007, the Latin American Episcopal Conference took place in Aparecida, Brazil. I was part of the group that drafted the final document, and proposals about the Amazon were coming in. I said, 'But these Brazilians, how they bother with this Amazon! What does the Amazon have to do with evangelization?' That's how I was in 2007. Then, in 2015, *Laudato Si'* came out. I went through a process of conversion, of understanding the ecological problem. Before, I didn't understand anything! [...] When I started thinking about this Encyclical, I called the scientists—a good group—and told them, "Tell me clear and proven things, not hypotheses, but realities." And they brought what you read here today. Then I called a group of philosophers and theologians [and said to them]: 'I would like to reflect on this. Work on it and discuss it with me'. And

⁶ HOWARD S.J. 2015.

⁷ Cf. YÁÑEZ 2017; TURKSON 2016, 1091-1096.

they did the initial work, then I intervened. And, in the end, I wrote the final draft. That is the origin... We must work so that everyone follows this path of ecological conversion"⁸.

The ecological conversion that Francis proposes is much more than a pragmatic "new green deal." It is about moving beyond the anthropocentric model of thinking and understanding that everything in creation is systemically related. The situation of human beings cannot be viewed without considering the vulnerability of the planet.

"Everything is interconnected. Therefore, concern for the environment is required, together with sincere love for human beings"⁹. Now, if the Pope sets out to diagnose the pathologies of the present, regarding this binomial, one might expect that one of the most frequent terms would be "vulnerability." In fact, the semantic field of vulnerability is widely represented, whether in the recurrence of the terms "weak/weakness" (18x), "wounded/wounded" (6x), "fragile/fragile/fragility" (15x) and, above all, in the designation "poor/poverty" (58 times). "Vulnerability" does not appear. Only once, but quoting a document from the American bishops, does the term "vulnerable" appear, paired with poor and weak: "as the bishops of the United States have said, it is appropriate to focus 'especially on the needs of the poor, weak, and vulnerable in a debate often dominated by the most powerful interests'"¹⁰.

Five years later, when the world was dramatically grappling with the emergence of the pandemic, the Pope published another encyclical, and once again it was a social encyclical. *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) offers Francis the opportunity to revisit, in a timely and incisive manner, central themes of the Church's social doctrine: human rights, citizenship, the common good,

⁸ FRANCESCO 2020.

⁹ FRANCESCO 2015, n° 91.

¹⁰ FRANCESCO 2015, n° 52.

work, models of development, the universal destination of goods, the construction of justice and peace, migration, the impact of globalization, economic regulation, the rehabilitation of politics, the condemnation of racism, technological advancement, the challenges posed by information in the digital age, etc. As the unifying theme of the encyclical, Bergoglio revives a category that (still) has no political status and has been systematically relegated. Indeed, of the triad of liberty, equality, and fraternity, our societies have integrated the first two, but have left out fraternity as if it were a strictly private matter on which it is impossible to build a social consensus. But, as Pope Francis says, without fraternity and social friendship, the vision of liberty and equality risks becoming inconclusive and abstract. The recognition of fraternity is therefore one of the most pressing tasks of our time: "Let us dream as one humanity, as fellow travelers of the same human flesh, as children of this same earth that shelters us all, each with the richness of their faith or convictions, each with their own voice, but all brothers and sisters"¹¹. This dream requires a realistic exercise in awareness of the current obstacles to the development of universal fraternity. It is not surprising that, in this encyclical too, the semantic field of vulnerability plays a central role. We can find lexical entries parallel to those listed in *Laudato Si'*: "weak/weakness" (21x), "wounded/wounds" (35x), "fragile/fragile" (16x), "poor/poverty" (57x). What is new is that in this encyclical, we find more explicit, though not dominant, use of the words "vulnerable" (3x) and "vulnerability" (1x).

4. THE PANDEMIC AND THE USE OF THE TERM VULNERABILITY

¹¹ FRANCESCO 2020, n° 8.

It is worth noting the passage in *Fratelli Tutti* where the term "vulnerability" appears.

It is true that a global tragedy such as the Covid-19 pandemic has, for some time, awakened our awareness that we are a global community traveling in the same boat, where the harm done to one affects us all. We remember that no one is saved alone, that it is only possible to save ourselves together. Therefore, "the storm," I said, "unmasks our vulnerability and exposes the false and superfluous securities with which we build our programs, our projects, our habits, and our priorities"¹².

It is no coincidence that the use of the word in the encyclical echoes the text of the Pope's homily at one of the most dramatic and symbolic moments of the pandemic that is ravaging us and universalizing the perception of vulnerability. Francis delivered this homily in an empty St. Peter's Square in March, a month that will not be forgotten by those who lived through it. Pope Francis dared to inhabit vulnerability there. He did not talk about the vulnerability of the world as if he were exempt from it. By choosing to expose himself as just another person, he emerged with the symbolic capacity to represent everyone. Rufini, head of the Holy See's communication department, writes about this event:

“The emptiness of the square and the Pope's prayer. His arrival. His walk in the rain. The crucifix that seems to weep. The clouds in the sky. The shreds of light. The Pope praying. The sound of sirens breaking the silence. The whole world watching. [...] The extraordinary nature of March 27 lies precisely in this. Its communicative power stems from truth. The Pope was alone, just like any one of us.

¹² FRANCESCO 2020, n°. 32.

All alone before God. All united before God. All fragile and in His hands."¹³.

The pandemic has imploded geographical, political, and economic borders and forced us to think in terms of totality. It is true that vulnerability is, above all, our ontological condition. As Lévinas explains, the reason for our vulnerability lies in the fact that we cannot close ourselves off internally: human beings are openness. Therefore, our skin is exposed to injury (to *vulnus*). Therefore, our openness represents our common vulnerability¹⁴. However, this vulnerability is (or was), as the Pope says, masked in very unequal ways.

In summary, the use of the term vulnerability, even by an actor strongly committed to this field, as Pope Bergoglio was recognized to be, continues to serve more as a phenomenological statement of reality¹⁵ than as a lexical precision. But, for this reason too, it will be interesting to see the impact of global experiences such as the pandemic on the fate of the word "vulnerability" and how the history of its application will continue.

¹³ RUFINI 2021, 19.21.

¹⁴ According to LÉVINAS 1972.

¹⁵ According to CAPANTINI; GRONCHI 2018, 8.

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