



# The Catholic Church in the Fight Against Corruption

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## Abstract

The Church must prioritize the prevention of corruption as an integral component of its mission to proclaim the Gospel and defend the value of social justice. The widespread presence of corruption has led to its deep integration into the fabric of society, resulting in public scandals that have tarnished the nation's reputation. The root causes of corruption are often seen as structures of sin, driven by an insatiable pursuit of profit and a lust for power. This study examines the problem of corruption from the perspectives of Church Fathers, the teaching of the Church, and the insights of Pope Francis. The church must implement policies and

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protocols to ensure adherence to the principles of transparency and maintain independence from conflicts of interest.

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### Keywords

Clericalism · Corruption · *Motu Proprio* · Structures of sin · Social justice

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## Introduction

Corruption can take many forms, including direct bribes to government officials and judges, bribes from contractors to public officials who award them projects, theft of public funds by insiders, and donations to individuals in positions of public decision-making that benefit the donors. Whatever form corruption takes, the Catholic Church considers it a serious crime. During his apostolic journeys in various countries, Pope Francis called on Catholics to demonstrate fortitude in their efforts to combat corruption. During his visit to Chile and Peru from January 15 to 21, 2018, the Pope publicly denounced the dangers of corruption. He emphasized the importance of transparency among public bodies, the private sector, and civil society.

During the International Conference on Corruption in June of 2017, Pope Francis articulated his stance on the issue, stating, “Corruption is not countered by silence. We must speak about it, denounce its evils, and try to understand it to show our resolve to make mercy reign over meanness, beauty over nothingness.” Additionally, the Pope emphasized that corruption catalyzes the proliferation of a culture that fosters death, highlighting that the insatiable pursuit of power and material wealth is devoid of moral boundaries. As stated in the 2018 YouTube video titled “Say No to Corruption,”

Despite the persistent call for action against the pernicious nature of corruption and the formulation of various Church teachings to address this issue, corruption remains a significant challenge for the Church. During the transition of leadership from Pope Benedict XVI to Pope Francis, the latter received various documents containing unresolved issues from the former’s tenure. The documents contained a multitude of cases related to sexual abuse, corruption, unsavory dealings, and wrongdoings committed by Church clergy and lay people working in Catholic Church organizations (Pepinster, 2025). The Vatican-owned bank known as the Work of Religion (IOR) has been accused of facilitating embezzlement and money laundering by the world’s wealthy elite. Pope Benedict endeavored to enhance the banking system by establishing the Vatican’s inaugural “financial watchdog,” the Financial Intelligence Authority (AIF), and promulgating its initial anti-money laundering regulations in conjunction with the European Union. Pope Francis expanded this initiative by establishing a Pontifical Commission to assess the bank’s activities in June 2013. Subsequently, Italian media reported that the IOR had closed over 1000 customer accounts in the autumn. By 2014, Pope Francis had decided to permit the IOR to continue operating, provided that it commit to reforming itself (Vatican News, 2018).

This chapter on corruption, as viewed by the Catholic Church, will examine the theological implications of corruption. Moreover, this study will reflect the perspectives of the Church Fathers, the Church's tenets, and the Pope's encyclicals in theological discourse concerning the repudiation of corruption. The final section of this chapter will address the moral actions and tangible efforts of the Church in preventing and eradicating corruption.

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## Theological Meaning of Corruption

According to its etymology, the term "corruption" is derived from the Latin noun "corruptio," which can be translated as "rotteness," "corruption," "degeneration," or "decay." The verb "corrumpere" is derived from the Latin root "corrump-" and is defined as "to destroy, corrupt, decay, defile, or tarnish". The perpetrator is referred to as "corruptor," an appellation that can be interpreted as "rotter," "briber," "cheat," or "violator." This etymological meaning reveals a picture of the degenerated condition of goodness and original truth, and this degeneration is caused by actions such as cheating, bribery, falsification, and destruction (Priyono, 2018, p. 23).

In Greek, the word corruption is called *Kapeleuo*, which means "to sell retail or peddle stolen goods." Peddling stolen goods means the act of profiting from trading in unauthorized/dirty goods. The word *kapeleuo* also appears in 2 Cor 2:17, "For we are not like many others who profit by the word of God." Thus, the Greek word *Kapeleuo* has a broader meaning of deceit for dishonest gain and destruction through deception (Monye, 2016, p. 102). In a theological sense, the narrative of the fall of the first man from paradise represents the inaugural expression of the concept of corruption, signifying the deterioration of humankind from a state of purity and originality to one of decay. Humans who were initially created in the image of God experienced a blurring of identity as they desired power and knowledge to be like God.

Thomas Hong Soon Han, an Asian theological ethicist, interprets corruption as a consequence of the "structures of sin" as described by St. John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, No. 36. Corruption has detrimental effects on individuals and society, thereby compromising the human environment. The root causes of corruption are often seen as structures of sin, driven by an insatiable pursuit of profit and a lust for power. The prevalence of fraud and deception poses a significant obstacle to the advancement of political modernization. Corruption also undermines the moral foundation of the market economy, which is predicated on a basic level of honesty and trustworthiness. In addition to its ethical concerns, recent studies have demonstrated that corruption can hurt economic growth. Therefore, it is evident that various forms of corruption contribute to the prevalence of poverty (Han, 2007).

Pope Francis reflected that corruption constitutes a grave sin, as it endangers the fundamental tenets of individual and community existence. This phenomenon has the potential to thwart the aspirations and ambitions of those grappling with adversity, thereby exacerbating their already dire circumstances (Francis, 2015, p. 14). The pervasiveness of corruption has led to its profound integration into the fabric of

society, giving rise to public scandals that have tarnished the nation's reputation. In such contexts, corruption often becomes the prevailing standard of conduct, particularly in scenarios where the probability of detection and severe sanction is low. The act of corruption, in this theological context, has been defined as the substitution of a divine desire with the pursuit of transient, worldly material gratification.

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## Corruption in the Thought of the Church Fathers

### Augustine: Corruption as Humans' Original Sin

Augustine's thinking was heavily influenced by his personal experiences as a young man seeking the truth of life through philosophy. The guidance of Bishop Ambrosius of Milan, Italy, later enlightened it. Augustine later became an accomplished bishop and theologian of the Church. In addition to studying Roman and Greek philosophy, Augustine also drew inspiration from the writings of St. Paul: "At the moment when I came to the sentence (Paul's letter), a ray of conviction seemed to invade my heart and all the darkness that comes from doubt disappeared" (Augustine, 1968, p. 465). In his spiritual and philosophical struggles, Augustine developed his political theology.

He did not address the specifics of corruption. At that time, corruption was understood as a degeneration in human life. Augustine incorporated theological values in his view of corruption. That which is not corrupt is in a transcendent and pure state, which is the true perfection of God. He made many contrasts between the pure God (*in corruptus Deus*) and corrupt man (*corruptus homo*). This dualism separates the divine world, characterized by spiritual qualities, from the material world, characterized by corporal qualities. In the context of Greek cities at that time, Augustine mentioned the city of God (*civitas Dei*) and the city of the world (*civitas terrena*) (Augustine, 1950, pp. 58–59).

If God created all the worlds of goodness out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), where does evil and sin come from? Evil is understood as the absence of good in created beings. Augustine argued that evil acts stem from the fallacy of judgment (*phantasma*) that is potentially inherent in human free will. In his freedom, man chooses between what is good and evil, wrong and right. Misguidance leads man to sin. The original model of human life's perversity is revealed in the story of Adam and Eve. "The evil that contains the arrogance to equal God is called original sin (*peccatum originale*), the corrupt root (*velut radice corrupta*) that imprisons man in the chains of death" (Augustine, 1950, p. 10).

Augustine argued that within a person can be found the truth that comes from God: "Do not go out, go home into the chamber of the self, in the person that leads to the depths resides the truth" (Priyono 2018, p. 129). Within the inner person is the human will that can lead to the truth of reason and the lust of sinfulness. It can also be corrupt because people are trapped in the choices and habits of their past lives. A corrupt will leads people away from divine truth. Augustine understood the words of St. Paul, who struggled with the same issue: "It is not what I will, that I

do good, but what I do not will, that I do evil” (Rom 7:19). The hallmark of the corruptibility of human action lies in its opposition to the purity of the divine essence.

In the public sphere, Augustine observed that the involvement of people in public office does not depend on the actions taken, but on the wrongness of the judgment or the goodness of the person who holds the office. Augustine, in this case, distinguished between the principle of the “divine city,” which is filled with goodness, and the person who does it based on the principle of the “earthly city.” Both seem to be the same in their actions, but are driven by different values:

How do we know or see that it is not arrogance that drives good deeds? Where is the evidence? See the poor are fed by the merciful, but they are also fed by the proud. The stranger is entertained by compassion, but also by pride. Simplicity is lived by the upright, but simplicity is also impressed by the arrogant. In the deed itself, we see no difference. (Parrish, 2007, p. 78)

Augustine saw that public officials had a heavy duty and acted in a mixed-up world. Bad political life and public office are the result of man’s original sin. People can maintain their moral integrity by making the right choices and decisions among many wrong and sinful options. This situation is like the life of a good man among many evil men, or the difference between the wheat seed and the weeds living together in the same soil.

## **Thomas Aquinas: Corruption Is Contrary to the Common Good**

Thomas Aquinas drew from the thought of Aristotle and the Augustinian tradition, integrating the reasoning power of the mind in the Greek tradition with the concept of morality in Christian moral theology. Aquinas’s writings encompass a broad spectrum of subjects, including theology, philosophy, ethics, law, religion, and politics, among others. Aquinas’s position was that the human rational faculty was not inherently corrupted by original sin from the outset. By engaging with divine law, individuals can develop the capacity to comprehend God’s will, which is exemplified in the moral framework of life in community. From his perspective, government and politics are primarily intended to establish the common goals of society and improve life, not to eradicate evil tendencies due to sin, as Augustine believed (Priyono, 2018, p. 112).

Aquinas considered that government and communal life are manifestations of reason, a natural gift from God, and not corrupt, as Augustine thought. Aquinas understood corruption on a sociological level, no longer centered on the theology of original sin. Corruption is a misuse of government power that has its authority and is not always related to divine power. There are three meanings of corruption in Aquinas’ thinking (Priyono, 2018, pp. 113–115). First, corruption is linked to the erosion of one’s moral integrity and the decay of one’s character. Aquinas understood it in the ethical context as expressed in the phrases “moral corruption of

citizens,” “the lives of citizens decay,” “clarity of judgment becomes corrupt,” “rotten habits,” and “morals are corrupt because of sin.” The root of it all lies in the lust for self-advantage (cupidity) and greed (avaritia). Second, corruption is a deterioration in the quality of governance. The terms used to describe it are “monarchy decays into tyranny,” “tyranny is the most corrupt government,” and “corruption of the few infects the whole.” Third, corruption as public misappropriation and abuse of positions of power. Aquinas addressed this in his writings:

Governmental authority is said to be incompatible with God’s will for two reasons: how it is acquired and how it is exercised. About the former,... . Because it is obtained by foul means, such as through violence, the purchase of office, or other despicable means. Citizens can resist such a rule as the situation demands. Meanwhile, abuse of power can take two forms. First, what is ordered and done is contrary to the purpose/reason of government as an institution that preserves and develops the common good. Second, demanding what is beyond authority, for example, a superior demanding from a subordinate something. (Aquinas 2002, pp. 73–74)

The context of Aquinas’ thinking was during the Middle Ages when the patronage system was strongly embedded in the life of a person who would rise to office and must be assisted by a higher position. Nepotism and patronage were also strong when the Catholic Church at that time strongly influenced the government, for example, in the purchase of positions, privileges, and pardons (simony) in the Church, which occurred widely and rampantly.

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## Corruption in Church Teachings

### Social Teachings of the Church

The Compendium of Social Teaching of the Catholic Church explains that there is a glaring gap between developed and developing countries. The difference in the condition of these countries is because “inequalities marked by various forms of exploitation, oppression and corruption have a negative influence on the internal and international life of many states” and that “corruption readily distorts the role of representative institutions” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, no.192). Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church no. 477 gives a view on corruption by saying that various social problems in developing countries are partly caused by corruption, instability of institutions, and political life.

The detrimental impact of corruption is evident on the quality of democratic institutions and societies. In democratic governance, the Church states that “political corruption is one of the most serious [disorders] because it simultaneously betrays moral principles and norms of social justice... . Corruption radically distorts the role of representative institutions,” as it turns politics into a place where interests are exchanged between the rich and influential, and overrides the concern and common good to put the poor first (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, no 441).

Corrupt behavior can ultimately destroy the very fabric of society. It will not only impoverish people but also undermine all aspects of integral human development. Acts of corruption will damage peaceful living, communal order, morality, and general welfare. Rampant and entrenched corruption can be so deep-rooted that it is very difficult to eradicate. Good people who want to work for the common good and eradicate corruption will face pressure and threats from influential individuals who benefit from an already unjust social network. Deep-rooted corruption will create a structure of sin, making people unable to escape the behavior of the corrupt circle (Alves & Booth, 2022, p. 13).

The Catholic Church acknowledges that its internal environment and that of its institutions are not immune to corruption. The Church continues to grapple with several significant challenges, including allegations of sexual abuse by priests, money laundering, and corruption among church officials. In its reflection, “the Church realizes that its essential religious mission includes the defense and promotion of human rights ... deeply feeling the need to respect justice and human rights within its ranks” (Compendium of Social Teaching of the Church, no. 159).

## **Catechism of the Catholic Church**

As outlined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the topic of corruption is addressed in the section of the Ten Commandments that pertains to the prohibition against stealing, specifically Commandment number 7. The Catechism suggests that all worldly goods should be used for the common good and the benefit of the people. It says that:

The seventh commandment forbids unjustly taking or keeping the goods of one's neighbor and wronging him in any way concerning his goods. It commands justice and charity in the care of earthly goods and the fruits of men's labor. For the sake of the common good, it requires respect for the universal destination of goods and respect for the right to private property. Christian life strives to order the world's goods for God and for fraternal charity. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no 4001)

The Catechism also affirms that any form of unjust taking and keeping of another's property is contrary to this seventh commandment of God. Other acts that are also offenses are business fraud, paying wages unfairly, and raising prices by taking advantage of people's hardships. In more detail it says:

The following are also morally illicit: speculation in which one contrives to manipulate the price of goods artificially to gain an advantage to the detriment of others; corruption in which one influences the judgment of those who must make decisions according to law; appropriation and use for private purposes of the common goods of an enterprise; work poorly done; tax evasion; forgery of checks and invoices; excessive expenses and waste. Willfully damaging private or public property is contrary to the moral law and requires reparation. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no 2409)

Christian actions should be grounded in the principles of loving one's neighbor and God, which foster qualities such as fairness, honesty, and selflessness. According to the Catechism, fraud and corruption, which are directly related to one's neighbor, are considered grave sins. The acceptance of bribes constitutes an act of extortion that is in direct violation of the golden rule of Scripture. As per the principles of reciprocity, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:15). Additionally, John's letter outlines three primary forms of corruption, both personal and societal, stemming from three distinct yet interconnected sinful desires. He defines them as "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16). These desires manifest in various forms of corruption, including sexual immorality, a love of money, and a pursuit of power. In many cases, including the clergy sexual abuse crisis, all three sins are displayed simultaneously and visibly.

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## **Corruption in the Thought of Pope Francis**

### **Apostolic Letter "Motu Proprio"**

Pope Francis issued an apostolic letter *Motu Proprio* on May 19, 2020. This letter discusses the "Norms on Transparency, Control, and Competition in Public Contracts of the Holy See and Vatican City State," which aim to prevent and combat corruption in the Vatican administration. In his letter, Francis underscored the importance of transparency by public officials to prevent and eradicate corruption in every sector. He firmly rejected conflicts of interest and patronage. The *Motu Proprio* imposes specific demands on all individuals serving in the departments of the Roman Curia, the institutions associated with the Holy See, and the administrative offices of the Vatican City State. All individuals must assume a special responsibility to the public and the Church. This responsibility entails acting with fidelity under Gospel values, adhering to principles of transparency, and maintaining independence from conflicts of interest.

The *Motu Proprio* is the implementation of the UN agreement on combating corruption signed in Merida in December 2005. Pope Francis has been pushing for the implementation of the agreement since October 2016 when Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state, presented the Pope's letter of approval for the implementation of the anti-corruption movement at the UN (Trezza, 2020, p. 95). The Pope realized that today's world needs honest public officials and trustworthy stewards in managing Church property as stated in Church canon law 1284 which speaks of Church property:

§1 All administrators are to perform their duties with the diligence of a good householder.

§2 Therefore, they must:

1° be vigilant that no goods placed in their care in any way perish or suffer damage; to this end they are, to the extent necessary, to arrange insurance contracts;

2° ensure that the ownership of ecclesiastical goods is safeguarded in ways which are valid in civil law;

The *Motu Proprio* emphasizes that all Vatican public officials should follow basic principles such as acting ethically in economic choices, in deciding public contracts, should be based on transparency, objectivity, impartiality, no conflict of interest, and no corruption. All public contract approval documents must be free from manipulation, modification, alteration, destruction, and misappropriation. An appointed Church official must be free from public convictions and not subject to scandal, “They are not subject to pending criminal proceedings or, to the best of the declarant’s knowledge, to investigations for offences of participation in a criminal organization; corruption; fraud; terrorism or connections to terrorist activities; laundering of profits of criminal activities; exploitation of minors, forms of trafficking in or exploitation of human beings, tax evasion or avoidance” (*Motu Proprio* §1b).

On the issue of conflict of interest, the document states that all Church public bodies should prevent and detect conflicts of interest arising during the procurement process to prevent fraud and corruption. They need to ensure equal access and participation. A conflict of interest situation can occur when a Church official or contractor representative, participating in a tender, influences the outcome. They must not have a direct or indirect financial interest in the outcome of the tender, which could affect the independence of the tender process. If there is a potential conflict of interest, the official must inform the authorized public body and not participate in the tender. Violation of these requirements may result in disciplinary sanctions subject to administrative sanctions and criminal penalties (Trezza, 2020, pp. 99–100).

Article 75 of the *Motu Proprio* also provides for other measures used to prevent corruption and abuse in public procurement. For example, when a company submits a bid, it must submit a list of organizations it intends to engage as subcontractors along with a detailed description of the work to be performed. Such requirements make it possible to minimize the potential for corrupt practices. In addition the Secretariat of the Economy and the Office of the Auditor General can exercise control over procurement. These control powers will take action against fraud, nepotism and corruption and organize the prevention, detection and management of conflict of interest situations that arise in the public procurement process. If in the course of the investigation there are indications of fraud, fraud, financial transactions related to corruption and nepotism, the Office of the Auditor General will report to the Judicial Authority of the Vatican City State.

## **Corruption in the Encyclical *Laudato Si***

Faced with various crises such as the environmental crisis, energy crisis and water crisis, the Pope issued the encyclical *Laudato Si* on June 18, 2015. The encyclical emphasizes that the earth is a common home that has been damaged due to the domination of human life over nature:

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have

come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air, and all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters. (Laudato Si art. 2)

The Pope warned that the quality of human life is declining due to various reasons, one of which is corruption that destroys social systems. At the same time, he rejected the culture of throwing food away, was concerned about biodiversity becoming scarce, and the gap between rich and poor countries. All these problems make the poor the ones who bear the brunt of the consequences.

Pope Francis noted that many countries are making significant progress in the fight against corruption. However, the Pope also emphasized the problems that exist in poor countries. The priority of action in developing countries needs to be on eradicating extreme poverty and promoting the social development of their people, as well as finding effective ways to curb corruption more strictly. Laudato Si art. 179 reveals that the lack of rule of law in a country often makes the government less able to combat corruption. The Pope encouraged individuals to exert public pressure on public officials to develop more transparent anti-corruption protocols and practices.

Pope Francis pointed to corruption as part of the problem in today’s environmental issues. He also raised the issue of lobbying—a practice that is also an avenue for corruption. The Pope emphasized that with respect to the principle of subsidiarity, a country’s government needs to act when there are problems that individuals, civil society and business alone cannot solve. However, the problem becomes more complicated if the government itself is corrupt, and government policies are sabotaged by the interests of certain people. On the issue of corruption, Pope Francis pointed out that “when the culture itself is corrupt and objective truth and universally valid principles are no longer upheld, then laws can only be seen as arbitrary impositions or obstacles to be avoided” (Laudato Si art. 123).

Acute and rampant corruption can compound the sins of market economy and governance. It will lead to social disaster. Corruption in political and economic life can be so destructive that neither business nor the political system can function properly to serve the interests of the people and defend justice and promote prosperity. The Pope reminded the need for cooperation between developed and developing countries to eradicate corruption and improve the life of creation. Developing countries need to fight corruption more effectively. By cooperating with other countries and transferring technology, developing countries are obliged to develop more environmentally friendly forms of energy production. All such endeavors are essentially ethical decisions, rooted in solidarity among all nations (Laudato Si art. 172).

## Pope Francis' Homilies on Corruption

Pope Francis repeatedly emphasized in his sermons that the Church is a leader in efforts to promote peace, justice, and the full development of humanity as an integral part of the Gospel's proclamation. The condemnation of evil and injustice is one of the Church's efforts in the social proclamation of the Gospel. In his 2013 sermon, the Pope condemned corruption as a crime worthy of punishment. Individuals who receive financial support from state entities and subsequently donate a portion of it to the Church may be engaging in a practice that some consider a transgression, deserving of disciplinary action. Corruption, according to the Pope, is a tomb that is well-decorated on the outside but rotten on the inside (Aman, 2017, pp. 31–32).

Parents who support their children and families with corrupt money will lose their human dignity because they help their children with unclean bread. The crime of corruption is everywhere. Those who are corrupt are not numerous, but the adverse effects of their actions can undermine the fabric of life in society. "These poor people (corruptors) lose their dignity because they steal, they don't get money, but they lose their dignity." Corruption is the "sin of the hand," the Pope said, meaning the sin of grasping power, of being in a position of decisive authority (Francis' homily on Nov 11, 2013).

Corruption is a crime of hubris and arrogance. They prey on the small, thus scandalizing especially the small and poor. Hence, the Pope stated that they deserve to be punished with millstones and drowned (Mt 18:6). he considered corruption the greatest evil of our time. The corrupt build their relationship with God and others on lies. We, too, can become corrupt along with our sense of comfort. From comfort, the good life, money, and then power, vanity, and pride, and from there killing (Agasso, 2014).

The Holy Father again raised the serious issue of corruption based on the reading of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings. The Pope said to a corrupt person, "sells himself to do evil, but he does not know this: he believes that he will sell himself for more money, more power." Then he continued:

The corrupt are traitors, even more so. The first definition of 'corrupt' is a thief, or one who is morally or ethically flawed. The second thing: what is in store for the corrupt? This is the curse of God, because they exploited the innocent, those who cannot defend themselves, and they did it with kid gloves, from a distance, without getting their hands dirty. The third thing: is there a way out, a door for the corrupt? Yes! "When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put sackcloth over his body, and fasted. He slept on sackcloth, and walked with his head down. He began to do penance. (Agasso, 2014)

During his visit to the Philippines, Pope Francis also addressed the government on the need to combat corruption and promote justice. During his meeting with President Benigno Aquino III of the Philippines, the Pope reiterated his call for the government to combat corruption, abuse of power by public officials, and to prioritize social justice and the well-being of the economically disadvantaged. The pope said, "Today, more than ever, political leaders need to demonstrate extraordinary honesty, integrity, and commitment to the common good".

The Pope also emphasized that the defense of the poor is the basis for rejecting corruption. In today's consumerist society, people tend to have the latest technological goods. Sometimes this is obtained through any means that can pave the way for corruption. People of faith can fight the sin of corruption by living the values of love, simplicity, and honesty. The Pope also said that corruption is a crime greater than sin and can kill a person's conscience

Corruption is like bad breath... It is hard for the one who has it to realize it; others know it and have to tell them. The corrupt person goes through life taking the shortcuts of opportunism, with an air of innocence, wearing the mask of an honest person, which he begins to believe. [The corrupt person] cannot accept criticism, discredits anyone who criticizes him, tries to belittle any moral authority who would question him, does not value others and insults anyone who thinks differently. If the balance of power permits, he persecutes anyone who contradicts him. ... The corrupt person does not perceive his corruption. For this reason, it is difficult for a corrupt person to escape their state through remorse of conscience. More than forgiven, this evil must be cured.

Pope Francis has also criticized Church leaders who exhibit a mentality of "clericalism," defined as an excessive sense of clerical privilege, a feeling of power and pride, and a reluctance to repent. He distinguished between "sinners" and "corrupt people." A sinner is regarded as a believer who has strayed, yet is committed to repentance and making amends to live a virtuous life. In contrast, a corrupt individual is perceived as someone who exhibits no remorse for their transgressions, experiences difficulty in repentance, and becomes "solidified in sin," akin to "varnished decay," appearing attractive on the surface but internally dead. This kind of person is often accused of being hypocritical and deceitful, leading a double life "with good manners but bad habits." This group of people needs an antidote because they worship the idol of money. They are reminded of the promise of a life of chastity as a remedy for lust and of obedience to God as a means of counteracting the poison of pride and power.

In the African hemisphere, during Pope Leo's visit to the Central African nation on April 16, 2026, the Pope called on political leaders to work hard to break the "chain of corruption" that afflicts so many people. He condemned "moral, social, and political corruption, particularly evident in the management of wealth, which hinders the development of institutions and infrastructure" in Cameroon. He appealed to the entire African region to strive for peace amidst the rampant culture of violence that has plagued the region. He recalled that many people have suffered greatly as a result of a few who seek profit and exploit and plunder the people's wealth (McLellan, 2026).

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## **Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences on Corruption**

Since 1986, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has acknowledged the significant challenges faced by the Christian laity in Asia, particularly as a minority. According to the FABC Papers (No. 47, 1986, pp. 16–25), the laity faces

various challenges, including poverty, bribery, exploitation, corruption, and injustice. Corruption in Southeast Asia can take different forms, including bribery and cronyism, and affects multiple sectors, such as political parties, churches, and civil organizations. This widespread corruption leads to substantial financial losses and erodes organizational transparency. Most importantly, it infringes upon individuals' rights, impacting all aspects of daily life (Aryanto & Lelono, 2021a, p. 22).

The 1996 FABC also underscored the pervasive problem of corruption in many Asian countries. Many countries experienced rapid industrialization and the transfer of information technology. This economic development has had a significant impact on Asian countries, resulting in substantial financial influxes and a prevalent "get-rich-quick" mentality among the Asian population. "The result is that corruption at all levels of society increases: in administration, business, and educational facilities, down to the private sector. This pervasive corruption endangers the effective functioning of political life in several Asian countries and erodes the public's trust in government officials at all levels" (FABC Papers 75, 1996).

Corruption poses a significant challenge globally, characterized by a pervasive "get rich quickly" mentality. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) notes that in Asia, corruption has eroded the effectiveness of political systems, resulting in diminished public confidence in leadership and authority (FABC Papers 75, 1996). This erosion prompts critical reflection on the role of religion in fostering moral values. Although it is commonly argued that religious teachings promote personal morality, hence potentially preventing unethical behavior, the actual impact of religious influence in mitigating corruption remains ambiguous and warrants further scrutiny.

In the African continent's anti-corruption movement, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences in Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) issued a Pastoral Letter dated February 20, 2013. The African bishops have issued a call to action, urging local churches to play an active role in society's profound transformation. This call encompasses the maintenance of a clean government and the implementation of anti-corruption measures (Monye, 2016, p. 121). The Pastoral Letter addressed Benedict XVI's Post-Synod *Africae Munus* Apostolic Exhortation, which stated that "the Church cannot remain indifferent and isolated in the face of Africa's socio-political and economic challenges," emphasizing that "the common good, respect for human rights, and the promotion of good governance are essential elements of the Gospel message" (Benedict XVI, 2011).

Within the context of the local church, corruption is a significant concern that must be addressed. For instance, the Church of Indonesia is seeking to address the question of why, in a country with such a strong religious tradition, corruption persists. In 2005, the Indonesian Bishops' Conference (Supreme Council of the Indonesian Catholic Church, SAGKI) introduced the concept of "religious formalism." This term refers to a formalistic or legalistic approach to practicing the Catholic faith, where adherents meticulously observe religious rituals but largely ignore the underlying moral and ethical tenets in their everyday lives. This manifestation of faith, characterized by a form of pseudo-piety, poses a potential threat to the Church's integrity. While numerous rituals are integrated into daily practices, a

conspicuous misalignment remains between these practices and the foundational values of religious morality.

In 2016, the Indonesian Bishop Conference (KWI) publicly recognized that corruption is eroding the sacred institution of the Church. According to Peter C. Aman (2017, p. 25), church officials have engaged in corrupt practices, and the consequences of these actions have fallen disproportionately upon the same group of small and impoverished people, depriving them of what they need to live humanely. The KWI Pastoral Letter 2016 aims to educate the faithful and cultivate their moral awareness to combat corruption and safeguard public funds for the benefit of the community. Addressing corruption is a complex challenge. "Corrupt behavior is so destructive and undermines people's lives, occurring everywhere, whether in the business world, government, State institutions, even in religious institutions, including the Church. Corruption in all its forms has become a systemic, structured, dynamic, and widespread crime from the center to the regions" (KWI, 2016).

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## Concrete Efforts to Prevent and Fight Corruption

The Church must prioritize the prevention of corruption as an integral component of its mission to proclaim the Gospel and defend the value of social justice. Two levels have been identified as mechanisms for preventing corruption: the personal level of believers and the organizational system level for creating good governance. In the personal realm, individuals are invited to embrace the Gospel values. Within the organizational structure of the Church, the development and implementation of effective policies and protocols can serve as a crucial strategy for preventing corruption.

One strategy for preventing corruption at the problem level is through education. Specifically, the Catholic education curriculum should incorporate the theme of corruption. Education is a strategic area for cultivating the character of an anti-corruption advocate. In various Asian countries, Christian education has played a constructive role, as Christian educational institutions in former colonial countries continue to hold significant influence. Therefore, the academic curriculum must be adjusted to address the social issues of society. The theological sources discussed in this paper can be a valuable addition to the anti-corruption literature in the Christian education curriculum (Wijaya, 2014, p. 235).

Catholic families, as *ecclesia domestica*, have the responsibility to educate their children in the values of honesty, commitment, hard work, and discipline (Aryanto & Lelono, 2021b, p. 340). By instilling these values in children, they can develop into individuals who are obedient, law-abiding, and thoughtful in their daily lives. It is essential to instill in them the understanding that exhibiting disciplined behavior will yield favorable outcomes in the future. Furthermore, a well-disciplined child is actively developing the qualities that will enable them to thrive in the future. Furthermore, maintaining discipline and integrity empowers an individual to exercise self-control and refrain from unethical conduct, including corruption. In 2024, Pope Francis formally beatified Floribert Bwana Chui Bin Kositi, a Congolese

customs officer, in a ceremony held on June 15, 2025. Kositi, who was assassinated in 2007, earned recognition for his refusal to accept bribes and his resistance to permitting the entry of contaminated rice into the consumer market. His beatification significantly reflects Pope Francis' expansive interpretation of martyrdom, which includes a social justice dimension. This broader conceptualization permits individuals who are perceived to have sacrificed their lives in adherence to religious principles and in the execution of divine duties to be eligible for sainthood.

In the previous year, Transparency International assigned the Democratic Republic of Congo a notably low position within its Corruption Perceptions Index, placing it 163rd among the 180 countries evaluated. These ranking places the nation toward the lower end of the spectrum, emphasizing significant challenges related to corruption. Kositi's life is an inspiration for Catholics to follow his example and reject corruption. He also serves as a source of inspiration for local churches, encouraging them to continue their efforts to combat corruption as a social disease. The loss of Kositi's life serves as a lesson for all generations, both past and future. Everyone has a responsibility to prevent corruption, which is often overlooked, and this responsibility must be acknowledged and addressed.

The organizational structure of the Catholic Church necessitates the implementation of regulations that mandate transparent operations and rigorous oversight for Church officials. The *Codex Iuris Canonici* (1983) stipulates the formation of designated administrative entities by diocesan bishops to ensure effective governance within the Church. These entities include the finance, presbyteral, and pastoral councils. Among these, the finance council plays a pivotal role. Its composition necessitates the inclusion of a minimum of three members from the laity who are not only deeply versed in financial affairs and civil law but are also distinguished by their integrity. These members are to be directly appointed by the bishop. The finance council's responsibilities include, among other things, the annual preparation of financial plans and budgets as directed by the bishop (Canon 493). The underlying intention of the relevant sections of the Code is clearly to ensure accountability and transparency within ecclesiastical management (Edet, 2009, pp. 646–647).

In the broader organizational setting, Pope Francis has stipulated that the Vatican Secretariat for the Economy, in collaboration with the Office of the Auditor General, has adopted specific guidelines under international law to combat fraud, cronyism, and corruption. These guidelines are implemented to prevent, identify, and effectively resolve conflicts of interest, thereby ensuring transparency in the decision-making process of Catholic Church officials. Additionally, the Church's cooperation with external parties is subject to the principle of openness, which requires that all data and documents related to these partnerships be published in electronic format. The Supervisory Board has the authority to view and examine the documents. The Financial Intelligence Authority is responsible for the formal and substantive supervision of the examinations, as outlined in a special report evaluated by the relevant authorities. This procedure enhances the transparency and accountability of all public projects (Trezza, 2020, p. 106).

## Conclusion

Corruption and bribery are significant concerns that demand the attention of the Church, given its mission to promote social justice and uphold evangelical values. However, this initiative is not without its challenges, as many countries have a long-standing history of corruption. Furthermore, various related parties, including government officials, church officials, businesspeople, and legislators, appear reluctant to eradicate corruption because many have profited significantly from it. The Church has made significant efforts to prevent and combat corruption through its social teachings, encyclicals, and local Church recommendations.

The prevention of corruption can be achieved through family education, the school curriculum, and the implementation of various rules in church organizations. The Church must undergo a period of self-reflection and restructuring to combat the issues of corruption and bribery that have come to light. The sermons of priests in the pulpit of the Church on the anti-corruption movement need to be continuously echoed so that the faithful can increasingly overcome the corrupt mentality. Individuals who embody integrity and self-discipline will have the opportunity to make meaningful contributions to the construction of a just and prosperous society. When the Catholic Church exhibits greater integrity and transparency, its prophetic voice in the fight against corruption will be more effective and influential in a world grappling with the consequences of corruption.

**Competing Interest Declaration** The author(s) has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

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