

Are Childless People Who Adopt Pets Selfish?

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On January 5, 2022, Pope Francis spoke in Rome and described people who have pets instead of children as selfish. He went on to say that pet keeping was “a denial of fatherhood and motherhood and diminishes us, takes away our humanity.”

There's so much that is wrong about his statement.

1. Spoken by someone who himself chose not to have children, presumably for a higher good, the criticism is ironic. Many people forgo having children *precisely because they are acting unselfishly* and recognize the imperative of Laudato si', the Pope's second encyclical that calls all people of the world to take "swift and unified global action" on environmental degradation and climate change. Such people choose not to have children because they do not want to contribute to more resource depletion and carbon emissions.
2. People don't have biological children because they are unselfish. In a world full of children in need of homes and foster care, and in the midst of a climate change and biodiversity crisis caused by habitat destruction and carbon emissions, the choice to have biological children (rather than adopt) is selfish, full stop. I should know. I chose to have a biological child. Evolution has “programmed” every species on Earth to reproduce. It's natural to procreate and have children despite the toll doing so has taken on us over history – the high incidence of pregnancy and delivery complications, maternal death in childbirth, infant mortality, and much more. Knowing the stress, cost, and worry I would experience by having a child, I nonetheless wanted to create a new human with my husband, experience all that motherhood had to offer, and participate in this powerful aspect of the human lifecycle. But my choice was hardly unselfish. As Nandita Bajaj, the Executive Director of Population Balance who teaches an online graduate course on Overpopulation and Pronatalism through Antioch University and the Institute for Humane Education, says: “The fact that after fighting for personal and reproductive liberation for centuries, women in some countries are finally able to exercise their right to have no or fewer children is something to be celebrated.” Indeed. Calling such people selfish is selfish.
3. Many people adopt animals who need homes, rather than purchase dogs from breeders, *precisely because they are acting unselfishly*. I should know this, too. I've never purchased a dog or cat from a breeder, but have rescued 17 over my lifetime. One old dog we found running in traffic on a congested boulevard turned out to be a nightmare. Aggressive and unpredictable, Beau would occasionally chase my husband down the stairs, growling and snarling. We didn't want to keep him, but we knew that it wasn't a good idea to try to foist this problem dog on someone else. We unselfishly cared for him lovingly and compassionately until he died. Adopting animals enriches, rather than detracts from, our humanity. Unlike children, whom we often make extensions of

ourselves, take pride in, expect to care for us in old age, and brag about—there's no reflected glory in a mutt from a shelter. Yes, they shower us with love, which is great for us, but it also betters us to care for them.

4. There's no need for, and no good that comes from, the valorization of parenthood and the denigration of adopting animals. Why do that? Why create a stink about a non-issue? Declining population growth in many wealthy countries, and the subsequent economic and social impacts of an aging population, *is* an issue to address, but to think that calling people selfish for not wanting children but wanting pets solves anything or is helpful is a bit bizarre. And the reality is that many, if not most, families in Europe and the U.S. have *both* children and pets. Are such families semi-selfish and semi-unselfish?

Fortunately, there are people like Nandita Bajaj and many others who are attempting to do what the Pope did not do when he spoke on January 5: find *real* solutions to the problems we face regarding a growing human population globally and a declining birthrate in certain countries.