



FORO INTERNACIONAL ACCIÓN CATÓLICA
INTERNATIONAL FORUM CATHOLIC ACTION

10 of March 2021
11.30 (India) - 15.00 (Philippines)

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A global irresistible desire for brotherhood is growing: the paradigm shift of human brotherhood without borders is seen as the foundation of human dignity

by Sandro Calvani¹

*We have learned to fly like birds, to swim like fish,
but we have not learned the art of living as brothers.*
Martin Luther King

The ancient utopia of brotherhood, 500 years ago, 50 years ago and today

Human history, Christian humanism and human brotherhood paradigms were born and grew together across centuries and millennia. An inspiring example was "Utopia, The Happy Republic" by the holy martyr Thomas More (the original version in English was published in of 1518). The novel describes the lifestyles of fifty-four cities where **everyone lived in harmony as brothers**, helping each other on the island of Utopia. 500 years later, on February 4th 2019 in a meeting in Abu Dhabi, pope Francis and the Muslim Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb jointly signed a similar inter-religious plan on human brotherhood for world peace, holistic cooperation and common coexistence. The *Fratelli Tutti* encyclical reiterates the incipit of the Abu Dhabi document which recalls that "**God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters**". The founding sentence is almost identical to Article 1 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the obligation of the spirit of brotherhood.

In our times of change of era, the paradigm shift of human brotherhood and the fraternity of the children of God is inescapable and undeniable. Pope Francis is preaching brotherhood since the very first day of becoming Pope. And the very first moment of accepting the election he became an apostle of fraternity by choosing the name he gave himself of St. Francis of Assisi. *Fratelli Tutti* does not leave room for a devotional interpretation of the Gospel and does not want to become another page of catechesis. It goes much deeper: the encyclical is a work of spiritual discernment. It demands a paradigm shift in our

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lives defined by **the two essential dimensions of the brotherhood described by St. Francis of Assisi toward all humanity: custody (taking care) and tenderness to each other.** Those two definitions were inscribed in the first homily pope Francis pronounced the day after his election eight years ago.

The vocation of being a "protector", however, is not just something involving us Christians alone; it also has a prior dimension which is simply human, involving everyone. It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as Saint Francis of Assisi showed us. It means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live. It is caring for people, caring for everyone, for each person, with love, especially for children, for the old, for those who are most fragile and who are often on the periphery of our hearts.²

In the same short homily, the Pope mentioned tenderness six times (which also in FT is mentioned and described in five passages, and six times as "kindness") as an effective methodology "to care for the whole people of God and to welcome with affection and tenderness the whole of humanity, especially the poorest, the weakest, the smallest". In his three encyclicals, the Pope has then specified and deepened his vision of the world, which comes with great evidence from the Gospel story of the Good Samaritan.

Moreover, it is certainly not the first time that the Popes have recalled the common human nature, the brotherhood that unites us all indissolubly. As Paul VI recalled in March 1967, the social teaching of the popes to define the essence of Catholic social doctrine has always reiterated the same definition of Christian humanism for centuries:

"In their great encyclicals, "*Rerum novarum*" of Leo XIII, "*Quadragesimo anno*", of Pius XI, "*Mater et magistra*" and "*Pacem in terris*" of John XXIII - not to mention the messages to the world of Pius XII -, our predecessors did not fail in the duty, proper to their office, to project on the social questions of their time the light of the Gospel.

Ten years later in 1978, at the height of the drama of Italian politics that most disturbed and wounded him, Paul VI appealed to the supreme law of humanity, addressing the Red Brigades:

"I beg you on my knees, release the Honorable Moro, simply, unconditionally, not so much because of my humble and affectionate intercession, but by virtue of his dignity as a common brother in humanity.

In *Fratelli Tutti (FT)*, Pope Francis points out that his vision is inspired and confirmed by many other religious leaders, among whom, in addition to the Muslim Grand Imam, he mentions Rabbi Hillel (first century b. C), Hindu leader Mahatma Gandhi, three non-Catholic Christian leaders, Turkish Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew, South African Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu and African-American Baptist pastor Martin Luther King, whose "I Have a Dream" speech on brotherhood as the foundation of freedom and justice remains to this day the most widely read, heard and quoted in human history. Very similar monitions and encouragements for universal brotherhood have also been reiterated many times

² Pope Francis' homily at Inauguration, Saint Peter's Square, Tuesday, 19 March 2013
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/homilies/2013/documents/papafrancesco_20130319_omelia-inizio-pontificato_en.html

by Buddhist leaders, including the Dalai Lama and several other religious leaders (not mentioned in FT). For example, Zen Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh, highly revered in France, has written over 100 books and preached extensively on the urgency of "awakening and liberating humanity from its illusions of separation." Daisaku Ikeda, Japanese philosopher and Buddhist teacher, third president of the Soka Gakkai world Buddhist community, has mobilized millions of people and institutions around the world for intercultural and interreligious dialogue and for a politics centered on peace and brotherhood of peoples.

The new illuminating icons of fraternity as the foundation of human dignity

I would like to highlight two "illuminating icons" of fraternity in the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* that have been less observed by others. They are particularly useful and necessary new visions, which I also perceived as the most misunderstood in many parts of the world: **the definition of brotherhood without borders and its inescapability in this era of profound and unexpected changes.**

In the first lines of the introduction of *Fratelli Tutti* we read that Saint Francis of Assisi

Saint Francis of Assisi declares blessed all those who love their brother "as much when he is far away from him as when he is with him". In his simple and direct way, Saint Francis expressed the essence of a fraternal openness that allows us to acknowledge, appreciate and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, regardless of where he or she was born or lives (FT, 1).

Therefore, the borderless characteristic of love among brothers is essential, on a global level, on par with the brothers of our culture and those of another culture, no matter how distant. **This cosmopolitan openness of the fraternity is essential, and not complementary or optional** as it is sometimes described. In fact, "Without Borders" is the first subtitle of the encyclical that calls for a complete paradigm shift in the Christian way of living and loving others. And not only that: borders are also recognized as an impediment built by men and to be overcome:

If only we might rediscover once for all that we need one another, and that in this way our human family can experience a rebirth, with all its faces, all its hands and all its voices, beyond the walls that we have erected (FT 35).

Five other subtitles of the encyclical are dedicated to the icon "without borders" which is thus the most recurring theme in the *Fratelli Tutti*. They are: An absence of human dignity on the borders (FT 37); Neighbours without borders (FT 79); A love capable of transcending borders (FT 99); Rights without borders (FT 121); and The Limits of borders (FT 129).

The second illuminating icon, the inescapability of fraternity, is revealed thus:

The Good Samaritan showed that "the existence of each and every individual is deeply tied to that of others: life is not simply time that passes; life is a time for interactions" (FT, 66).

The Pope specifies that it is "the basic option that we need to make in order to rebuild this world that gives us pain" (FT, 67). And he adds **a new essential definition of human dignity.** Indeed, the account of the Good Samaritan:

" [...] does not indulge in abstract moralizing, nor is its message merely social and ethical. It speaks to us of an essential and often forgotten aspect of our common humanity: we were

created for a fulfillment that can only be found in love. We cannot be indifferent to suffering; we cannot allow anyone to go through life as an outcast. Instead, we should feel indignant, challenged to emerge from our comfortable isolation and to be changed by our contact with human suffering. That is the meaning of dignity. (FT 68).

The Pope's heartfelt appeal in *Fratelli tutti* speaks to the chaos, fear, and loss that pervade the 2020s, while resonating a timeless call to become better citizens of our communities, our nations, and the globe, to come to the rescue of ourselves, our dignity, and all humanity. The inescapability of brotherhood is in fact revealed as an inseparable and uncrastinable condition of human dignity, described 69 times in the encyclical (the words brothers and brotherhood appear 67 times, in addition to 59 times for fraternity and brotherhood).

We all know -and obviously the Pope knows it too- that for two millennia, for a large part of the baptized, being a believer has meant a special relationship with God, with Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit and perhaps also with the Virgin Mary and many Saints, but not always an equally special relationship with our christian brothers and sisters and with all the other brothers and sisters of all humanity. Many think that the relationship of brotherhood with humanity is a virtuous aspiration, a service opportunity for a few Christians dedicated to serving the poor or the sick, perhaps even an option, at best a preferential option.

The result before everyone's eyes is that quite a few "people do not take on the inescapable demands of human reality" (FT 149). To emphasize this priority, the most frequent words and concepts in FT are loving and love (125 times), human, men and humanity (267 times).

In our time, inclusion (a word mentioned nine times in the encyclical) or exclusion of those who suffer along the way define all economic, political, social, and religious projects (FT 69). So, **every person born into a given context knows that he or she belongs to a larger family, without which it is not possible to have a full understanding of self** (FT 149). The word "walls" appears 14 times in FT as a symbol of our temptation to isolate ourselves from the needs of others. Hence the Pope's clear and strong condemnation of all forms of nationalism and populism.

Burning changes cannot be avoided

Inescapability, the inescapable state of being, is a situation that cannot be avoided; it is the new situation of each person's life interdependent with the rest of humanity and all of creation. Inescapable, is a crude word: we cannot escape. Not entirely surprisingly (there had been warnings), today the comedy of aspirations and options is over: we have this interdependence from which we can no longer escape. We are all interlinked, we can no longer evade it. In reality, there is a way to free oneself, at least superficially, from this situation perceived as an annoyance; it is not a secret, and many people know in a way or another. It is enough to never talk about this relationship, to keep quiet, to pretend nothing is happening, to keep our mouths shut, our ears and eyes closed; a method that is also the way to keep our conscience asleep and quiet. After all, if we keep the embers under the ashes, we can keep the fire burning, without it being seen and without it causing flames and fires. This was the risk that worried Cardinal Martini the most before his death:

I see in today's Church so much ashes above the embers that a sense of impotence often assails me. How can the embers be freed from the ashes so as to revive the flame of love? First we

must search for these embers. Where are the individuals full of generosity like the Good Samaritan? Who have faith like the Roman centurion? Who are enthusiastic like John the Baptist? Who dare the new like Paul? Who are as faithful as Mary of Magdala? I recommend that the Pope and the bishops look for twelve people outside the lines for leadership positions. Men who are close to the poorest and who are surrounded by young people and who experience new things. We need the confrontation with men who are on fire so that the spirit can spread everywhere.³

The burning, disruptive and passionate force of Fratelli Tutti, which will leave a mark for times to come in Christianity and in all of humanity, is precisely this: **to have breathed on the embers and pulled the flames out of the ashes**, to have reminded us that we truly live in a world without borders and that we can only live well in this situation if we understand that true brotherhood is inescapable. Either we light up again with the fire of Christian love and stand with the Good Samaritan or we stay hidden under the ashes of our past, together with those who pretend not to see the social challenges.

To all Catholics around the world, Pope Francis requests to make a demanding but ultimately quite easy spiritual discernment:

Each day we have to decide whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders. And if we extend our gaze to the history of our own lives and that of the entire world, all of us are, or have been, like each of the characters in the parable. All of us have in ourselves something of the wounded man, something of the robber, something of the passers-by, and something of the Good Samaritan. (FT 69)

Now there are only two kinds of people: those who care for someone who is hurting and those who pass by; those who bend down to help and those who look the other way and hurry off. Here, all our distinctions, labels and masks fall away: it is the moment of truth. Will we bend down to touch and heal the wounds of others? Will we bend down and help another to get up? This is today's challenge, and we should not be afraid to face it. In moments of crisis, decisions become urgent. It could be said that, here and now, anyone who is neither a robber nor a passer-by is either injured himself or bearing an injured person on his shoulders. (FT 70)

In the encyclical, the Pope asks his readers, especially Catholics, fifty questions, and they are all about this same discernment. Everyone can know if his/her baptism has changed him/her or not; so it will be evident if the paradigm shift of human brotherhood will come true and if the Christian humanism without borders, -expressly desired by Jesus Christ as a priority of life and conversion of his followers- will be realized or will have failed.

³ G. Sporschill SJ, F. Radice Fossati Confalonieri, Chiesa indietro di 200 anni (last interview of Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini SJ before his death), in "Corriere della Sera" (September 1, 2012). In the last words of the interview, Martini said: "The Church has fallen behind by 200 years. Why don't we shake up? Are we afraid? Fear instead of courage?" The interview was reviewed and approved by Martini (bit.ly/3rcAmsT).