

THE CORE THEMES OF THE ENCYCLICAL *FRATELLI TUTTI*

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Preamble

Let us begin from a spiritual account drawn from Tibetan Buddhism, a different world from that of the encyclical, but significant nonetheless. A man walks alone on a desert track that dissolves into the distance on the horizon. He suddenly realises that there is another being, difficult to make out, on the same path. It may be a beast that inhabits these deserted spaces; the traveller's heart beats faster and faster out of fear, as the wilderness does not offer any shelter or help, so he must continue to walk. As he advances, he discerns the profile: a man's. However, fear does not leave him; in fact, that man could be a fierce bandit. He has no choice but to go on, as the fear of an assault grips his soul. The traveller no longer has the courage to look up. He can hear the other man's steps approaching. The two men are now face to face: he looks up and stares at the person before him. In his surprise he cries out: "This is my brother whom I haven't seen for many years!"

We wish to refer to this ancient parable from a different religion and culture at the beginning of this presentation to show that the yearning pervading Pope Francis's new encyclical *Fratelli tutti* is an essential component of the spiritual breadth of all humanity. In fact, we find a few unexpected "secular" quotations in the text, such as the 1962 album *Samba da Bênção* by Brazilian poet and musician Vinicius de Moraes (1913-1980) in which he sang: "Life, for all its confrontations, is the art of encounter" (n. 215). We also acknowledge the inspiration and the impetus offered by Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew and by Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb of Cairo (n. 5). In addition, it may be surprising that the film *Pope Francis: A Man of His Word* (2018) by German director Wim Wenders is referred to three times. In the movie, the

protagonist's voice overlaps with that of Saint Francis (n. 48), exalts creative differences (n. 203), and ends with an enlightening passage: "God does not see with his eyes, God sees with his heart. And God's love is the same for everyone, regardless of religion. Even if they are atheists, his love is the same. When the last day comes, and there is sufficient light to see things as they really are, we are going to find ourselves quite surprised" (n. 281).

A triptych of themes

After this introduction, we may now dive into the papal text that begins in the wake of the call of Francis of Assisi in his *Admonitions*: the pontiff addresses all "his brothers and sisters and proposes to them a way of life marked by the flavour of the Gospel". The encyclical's style is like the movement of the sea's currents as waves break on the beach: if we contemplate them under the moonlight, we discover that they hit roughly the same spots, but in a new way, as shown by the motion of the waves and their moonlit crests. Themes are continuously recalled, but are never mere repetitions; rather new views, unique evolutions, and unexpected recreations reassert the dominant themes more incisively and reveal further glimpses of that human, spiritual, and socio-cultural ocean that is "fraternity and social friendship", as stated by the subheading of the encyclical.

Our journey will cross the 8 chapters and 287 paragraphs of the Pope's text, up to its ending with two intense prayers: one to the Creator of the Universe, "Father of our Human Family" and another of an ecumenical Christian nature. However, we will only point out some core themes rather than offer a systematic exegesis of the document. We shall propose a sort of triptych to summarise and simplify a very long text, while urging those interested in grasping its many rich nuances to read the complete document. We shall limit direct quotations of the encyclical, while highlighting its themes.

First painting of the triptych: "Dark clouds over a closed world"

The first painting in our triptych is obscure and corresponds to the first chapter in which, with great realism, the Pope depicts the dark atmosphere in which we are plunged. The title itself is emblematic: *Dark clouds over a closed world*. These are only some of the signs of the darkness that grips our planet and modern times. Dreams of a united Europe, hopes for integration, and globalization itself are collapsing under the weight of nationalism and sovereignism, individualism and egoism. Words and even fundamental values like democracy, freedom, and justice are manipulated. The ranks of those who are “rejected”, marginalized by an increasingly uncontrolled acceleration and a consumerism that fuels illusory needs, are swelling fast. Regional conflicts (“a real ‘third world war’ fought piecemeal”) are on the rise, triggering fears and poverty.

The internet is home to burgeoning attacks, hate speech, brazen fake news, manipulation, and fanaticism. Instead of uniting, as its communicative structure would suggest, digital culture divides and generates inequality and confusion. However, this and the following chapters never separate this realistic view from hope and trust in humankind. Quite the opposite: the rest of the encyclical brims with suggestions, and it develops into a concrete call to venture out onto the paths available before us to rebuild “fraternity and social friendship”.

It is in this perspective that a unique figure is introduced in Chapter 2 to address the “closed world”. Chapter 2 is suggestively entitled “*A stranger on the road*”, which refers to a well-known passage of Luke’s Gospel (10:25-37): the parable of the Good Samaritan. A track winds its way through the barren mountains of the Judean desert and descends from its 800-metre height at Jerusalem to more than 300 metres below sea level at the oasis of Jericho. A body covered in blood lies on the side of that road: assault by robbers has reduced it to this state, abandoned in the solitude of the wilderness. We readers follow the scene as if listening to Jesus’s narration, and wait impatiently for a passer-by to arrive. Finally, along comes a priest of the temple of Zion who is returning after his prayers to Jericho, a residential city of priests.

However, disappointment immediately sets in: “When he saw him, he passed by on the other side”, concerned as he was not to let the blood of an injured man or, even worse, a corpse, contaminate him. In fact, according to the biblical law, this contact would have made him “impure” and prevented him from worshipping for a certain period.

Other footsteps approach: those of a Levite, consecrated to the liturgical service at the temple of Jerusalem. Disappointment again: he too saw him and “passed by on the other side”. Tension reaches its peak. All hope disappears for this poor man, left half-dead along the road.

However, a third traveller, a Samaritan man, passes by: can we expect anything good from a “heretic” — an enemy of the Jews, even though they inhabit the same earth? Yet he is the only one who approaches the victim: he looks at him and is moved to “compassion”. This word should not mislead us, as it does not refer to a healthcare worker’s generic mercy: in his Gospel, Luke uses the Greek verb that expresses the “passionate” rather than “compassionate” nature of merciful love. In fact, the Greek word *splanchnízomai* indicates the maternal womb, a more intimate, intense, and delicate emotion.

The Samaritan man’s love is dynamic and affectionate: he bandages the man’s wounds as best he can, pouring wine and oil on them, according to ancient first-aid methods; then lifts him up onto his animal and takes him to a caravanserai that operates as an inn, and cares for him. Twice, Jesus recalls that he “cared for” this poor man, without hesitating to pay a sum of money personally to cover the costs of the man’s stay at the inn. The Gospel passage highlights very carefully the pastoral dimension of these actions. This is what is indicated in the passage through the insistent repetition of the Greek personal pronoun *autós*: “came upon *him*, approached *the victim*, poured oil and wine over *his* wounds and bandaged he lifted *him* up on his own animal, took *him* to an inn and cared for *him*... Take care of *him!*”.

The priest and the Levite exhibit a rigid and formal religiosity that separates us from our neighbour, while the Samaritan man represents true faith that

compassionately shares in another's suffering in order to mitigate it. If we wanted to modernize the parable to understand fully the impact it had on Jesus's audience, we might rewrite this passage as a biblical exegete did. "Imagine that you are a white racist, maybe a Ku Klux Klan member. You raise your voice in public places if a person of colour enters, and you never miss the opportunity to show your contempt and repulsion towards them. Imagine that you find yourself involved in a car accident on an isolated road and you are there, bleeding to death, while the rare cars that pass by, driven by white persons, slow down without stopping. Imagine that at some point a Black doctor comes up and stops to help you..."

In addition, it is important to note the context in which the account of Jesus takes place, and the question asked by the doctor of the law: "Who is my neighbour?". This is an abstract, academic question, seeking to define who a neighbour worthy of this name really is. In the end, it is Jesus who poses the question again, but in very different terms: "Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbour to the robbers' victim?" The reversal is clear, and the pope remarks on it as he refers to the parable: instead of discussing "objectively" the definition of neighbour (Italian, European, African), Christ urges us to behave "subjectively" as neighbours towards those in need and appeals to our humanity and mercy.

Consequently, Pope Francis urges us once again to reach out to the "abandoned" person, so that we can detach ourselves from the indifference of a society unable to cope with the suffering and wounds of many; a society that turns its gaze away; a society that passes by and ignores the poor, like the priest and the Levite in the parable. In contrast, the Church must be at the forefront, along the pathways of history, where the marginalised live, in slums, in the peripheries of large cities, where violence and abuse proliferate. That is where the bright horizon of commitment and fraternity opens up.

Second painting of the triptych: "Engendering an open world"

This is the second painting in the triptych: it is placed in the middle section, because it is the broadest and richest, occupying chapters 3 to 6 of the encyclical. The title might encompass chapters 3 and 4: *Envisaging and engendering an open world, a heart open to the world*. The key words here are clearly “open world”. The aim is to dissipate the darkness from the gloomy horizon, to draw back the bolts of the locked doors of a “closed world”. Of the very many action points and general and specific exhortations, we can only give a few. What is proposed is not only opening in a geographical sense, but above all, an existential opening that transcends borders. Thus, the verbal tetralogy often repeated by Pope Francis in his speeches asserts itself: "welcome, protect, promote, and integrate" (for instance, read the very moving paragraph 130 on migratory phenomena).

Politics comes in for special mention throughout all of ch. 5 where we find a plan of action expressed in concrete commitments as expressions of care for the common good. Many issues are raised, starting from the protection of human dignity — the real cornerstone of political agency — which has as a necessary corollary the involvement of the marginalized in the construction of society and, on a general level, the topic of work. One theme that has provoked a variety of reactions is the criticism of populism: populist leaders exploit the culture and sensibility of a nation. On a par with this is the criticism of a radical economic liberalism that proves incapable of balanced social justice. Thus we note with interest the observation that politics must not be subject to the economy, especially when this is reduced to the paradigm of financial technocracy (n. 177).

Next, we move straight on to the theme of *society* heralded by the two banners that entitle ch. 6: *Dialogue and friendship*. Practically speaking, we find here the culture of encounter weaving together various themes: popular, academic, artistic, technological, family, media, economic, youth, and so on. Pope Francis depicts the pluralist society in its yearning for authentic truth with a beautiful image dear to him, that of the multi-faceted polyhedron that rejects the exclusivist monolith. Another

image suggests the construction of bridges that produce dialogue and permit encounter between opposing shores with their different perspectives. Hence, the call to "recover kindness" which Saint Paul considers a fruit of the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:22) is significant, and the Pope applies it already to our humble daily lives in the small gestures we can accompany with "please", "thank you", and "sorry".

It is opportune here to underscore an element that has attracted incomprehensible criticism. In line with the entire Church tradition, Pope Francis reasserts the primacy of the universal destination of the earth's goods, to which private property should be subject as a means, whereas it is often seen as a supreme dogma. He quotes explicitly a passage from Saint John Paul II's *Centesimus annus* (1991): "The earth, by reason of its fruitfulness and its capacity to satisfy human needs, is God's first gift for the sustenance of human life." At the same time, we would like to mention the powerful words of Saint Ambrose in his *De Nabuthe*: "The earth was created as a common good for all, for rich and poor alike. Why then do rich people claim the right to its exclusive use? When a rich person helps a poor one, he does not give him his own property, but gives the other what he is entitled to. In fact, property was given in common to all, but is only used by the rich. The earth belongs to all, not only to the rich, so when the rich help the poor, they return to the poor what they are entitled to, it is not a gift from their own property."

In keeping with the analysis of economic ethics offered in the encyclical, we must highlight the Pope's frequent evangelical criticism of the abuses of the financial models and market laws that are considered normative. Equally interesting is the call addressed to the business world, "a noble vocation, directed to producing wealth and improving our world" (n. 123), to create work opportunities, housing and development, and to eliminate poverty. The availability of digital media to a growing number of people is a goal to achieve in the modern social context, without losing sight of the condemnation, already mentioned, of "digital campaigns of hatred and destruction". "The bigger risk does not come from specific objects, material realities or institutions, but from the way that they are used" (n. 166).

The third painting in the triptych: intercultural and interreligious dialogue

After laying out and scrutinizing the two main themes of politics and society, the encyclical devotes its two final chapters, 7 and 8, to a perspective of both collective and universal breadth, encompassing the main values of all cultures and religions. In fact, though respecting the autonomy of politics and social structures, faith should not remain on the margins when it comes to building a better world, but rather it should engage in the integral human development of all. In this case too, we shall limit ourselves to some hints only, urging the reader to go to the text itself.

Special attention, for instance, is devoted to the *peace* that blossoms when we overcome the “inequalities” of the distribution of goods, the injustice of war, the denial of rights, and attacks on the natural environment. The pope issues an urgent call to eliminate nuclear weapons totally and to reject the theory of “just war” (“Never again war!”). That is why the themes of *forgiveness* and *reconciliation* are imperative, alongside considerations of *justice* when warranted. This is not about renouncing one’s rights before a corrupt politician, a criminal, or anyone degrading human dignity. It does not mean impunity: “Justice is properly sought solely out of love of justice itself, out of respect for the victims, as a means of preventing new crimes and protecting the common good, not as an alleged outlet for personal anger. Forgiveness is precisely what enables us to pursue justice without falling into a spiral of revenge or the injustice of forgetting” (n. 252).

From this perspective, it is clear that the *death penalty* is morally unacceptable and illegitimate on account of its disproportion, just like a life sentence, which is a sort of covert death penalty. A decisive contribution in promoting the values of peace, life, justice, and forgiveness is naturally offered by Christianity. The pope mentions a beautiful passage of the speech he delivered at the ecumenical encounter in Riga, Latvia, in September 2018: “If the music of the Gospel ceases to sound in our homes, our public squares, our workplaces, our political and financial life, then we will no

longer hear the strains that challenge us to defend the dignity of every man and woman” (n. 277).

However, “different religions, based on their respect for each human person as a creature called to be a child of God, contribute significantly to building fraternity and defending justice in society” (n. 271). As believers, we are encouraged to return to our spiritual sources, i.e. worship of God and love for our neighbour; therefore, any violence perpetrated in the name of God is blasphemy, like any other hypocrisy that conceals contempt, hatred, xenophobia, and negation of the other.

At the completion of the encyclical’s imposing conceptual, religious, moral, and social edifice, the pope quotes Blessed Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916), the martyr of intercultural and interreligious dialogue in the Algerian Sahara, whose process of canonisation is underway. This is his testimony, presented in the last paragraph: he “directed his ideal of total surrender to God towards an identification with the poor, abandoned in the depths of the African desert. In that setting, he expressed his desire to feel himself a brother to every human being, and asked a friend to ‘pray to God that I truly be the brother of all’. He wanted to be, in the end, ‘the universal brother’. Yet only by identifying with the least did he come at last to be the brother of all. May God inspire that dream in each one of us. Amen” (n. 287).