

LA CIVILTÀ CATTOLICA

Fratelli Tutti: An encyclical for other believers?

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19

Benedict XVI gave us a new expression to describe a Jewish or Muslim person: “other believer.” It indicates a person who does not believe exactly what we believe, but who is also a believer. Benedict XVI said: “May Jews, Christians and Muslims find in *other believers* brothers and sisters to be respected and loved, and in this way, beginning in their own lands, give the beautiful witness of serenity and concord between the children of Abraham.”¹ The question then arises for us: Are we able to speak in such a way that other believers understand us?

When we present our social doctrine we should ensure that other believers understand what we mean. Pope Francis has written a social encyclical based on the fundamental principle that all people are called to fraternity. What does Francis suggest so that brothers and sisters who are not Christians will understand us? It is in its very form that the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (FT) demonstrates how we can speak and operate with other believers without hiding the specifics of our witness. In other words, and stated more technically, Francis overcomes the dilemma between particularity and universality in a performative way, and this happens in three forms: the style of contemplation, the articulation of an anthropology and theology of religion, and his choice of vocabulary.

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1. Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* (September 14, 2012), No. 19; italics in the text.

Contemplation

The encyclical is imbued with a specifically Christian approach, that of contemplation. Obviously, a contemplative attitude can be found in other religions as well. In the mode chosen by the pope, however, contemplation invites the reader to follow an original and originally Christian path: Francis contemplates the situation of the world. He does so critically, but not without hope (cf. Ch. 1). He then interrupts his contemplation of our time to present us with a passage from the Bible, a narrative that first speaks to us about Jesus and then shows us Jesus narrating himself; we hear from his mouth a parable or, more precisely, an exemplary story. Here there is a multiple passage which moves from seeing to hearing, and then to seeing again; from the outside to the inside and vice versa. Thus Pope Francis follows the method of approaching the Scriptures that is congenial to him, the Ignatian method.²

All the analytical elements seem to enter a new context, all the bustle seems to stop when a poetic and ambiguous title announces a change of language, rhythm and approach: “A Stranger On The Road” (Ch. 2). The story is well known: a man is attacked and lies half dead; he is not helped by the priest, who passes by, nor by the Levite, but by a non-Jew, the Good Samaritan (cf. *Luke* 10:25-37).

Who is the “stranger on the road” indicated in the title? The man beaten and left on the ground by robbers, or the seemingly foreign man who helps him? The Lucan Jesus overcomes established *affiliations*: your neighbor is not simply the one you are close to, but every person who now needs your help. The narrative, however, then goes on to overturn the *dependencies* that seem evident: your neighbor, whom you are called to love as yourself, is not only the recipient of your help, but the one who may be a stranger to you and at the same time is active, exemplary and capable of helping you.

Francis makes us listen to the entire parable. He also makes us listen to it as the scribe listens to it (cf. FT 56-62), that is,

2.Cf. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, Nos. 2; 103. See also A. Spadaro, “Interview with Pope Francis”, in iaciviltacattolica.com

as it is perceived against a Jewish background, and he makes us relive it. But then he exhorts his readers in this way: “Let us look to the example of the Good Samaritan” (FT 66). Here “example” means both “model” and “fundamental option, worldview, example for life.” Because what our eyes are opened to here is not only a biblical scene, nor only the obvious human suffering that surrounds us that we tend to overlook out of fear or self-absorption: the gaze starts from the individual story, but it widens to a new perspective.

What we come to see through the contemplation of Pope Francis is nothing less than a different world. What we come to hear is a vocation: the invitation to help shape the alternative. “Jesus’ parable summons us to rediscover our vocation as citizens of our respective nations and of the entire world, builders of a new social bond. This summons is ever new, yet it is grounded in a fundamental law of our being: we are called to direct society to the pursuit of the common good and, with this purpose in mind, to persevere in consolidating its political and social order, its fabric of relations, its human goals” (FT 66).

Pope Francis has thus found and used a specifically Christian form to make his social encyclical not just an analysis and an appeal, but an attractive possibility which involves contemplation, but in a form that every person, regardless of their faith, can follow. Everyone can be touched by contemplating:

- the scene that presents itself to our eyes, recounted by the Lucan Jesus: a man who is bleeding to death, despite which the priest and the Levite reveal themselves only as passers-by (cf. FT 69);

- the present: a need that challenges us today, because the story opens our ears and eyes (cf. *ibid.*);

- a model that is presented to me: the freedom with which the Samaritan commits himself and gives his time, binds up wounds, gives his money, thus creating the conditions in which healing can take place (cf. FT 63);

- but readers can also allow themselves to be touched by the idea of a different possible world, a society formed by people who serve the common good and who are co-responsible for its renewal (cf. FT 66).

What Francis wants to convey in a particular way is an intuition that must be received both rationally and affectively: we belong to each other, and therefore we find our fulfillment in a culture of encounter (cf. FT 216). It should be noted that the pope presents his contemplation in a way that does not merely arouse personal emotion. A lonely man on the road – stranger and wounded, or stranger and willing to help – is the starting point of the contemplation, which then goes on to consider the broader context: the structures that bring distress and death, the vision of a more humane world, the institutions that guarantee justice and security (cf. FT 165). Without a social analysis, an economic focus and a political perspective the text would not have become a social encyclical at all. But without the approach through contemplation of Scripture it would have remained a programmatic text, like those being written by many political parties, research institutes and intellectuals.

However, we have not yet sufficiently explored how Pope Francis manages at the same time to emphasize what is distinctively Christian and to reach out to people of other religions, indeed, to engage all people of good will (cf. FT 268; 285) on the path of social friendship (cf. FT 6; 99). His *approach*, as has been said, is “contemplation” as a form of individual perception, which is then contextualized, and also of a critical social and politically oriented perception. However, we are not there yet. A closer look shows that its foundation is to be found in his articulation of anthropology and the theology of religion. It is this relationship that we now examine.

Articulation of anthropology and the theology of religion

Pope Francis takes as his starting point the fact that there are extremely different voices and opinions, agendas and factions in our societies. How then can we find harmony? Here the pope develops his particular vision of a “social dialogue” (FT 203) as a dynamic reality (cf. FT 211). He stresses that such a dialogue aims at a contextual and consensual definition of our principles of action, which would mean that people build their own foundations by themselves. Instead, the foundation of values must flow from recognition. It must be recognized

that our lives, as well as the fundamental principles that guide action in shaping the world, are not subject to human will. It is not we who judge the foundations, but rather they judge us. We must therefore recognize that these foundations “rise above consensus” (FT 211): we cannot establish them, but only discern them. They are not to be created by us, but respected, “acknowledged and adopted” (*ibid.*).

Here, however, an objection may arise: whoever appeals to such foundations that underlie every search for social consensus is practicing a fundamentalism of values! In this way every development of knowledge is blocked! Who can see so clearly what is the ground on which our consensus must rest? In addition to taking a stand against wanting to build a foundation from oneself, Francis also takes a stand against what might be called “value fundamentalism.” It is no coincidence that the pope sees the unity of the world as colorful, in contrast to a homogenizing globalization (cf. FT 100). He sees the unity of nations as multiform, in contrast to the mistaken human project premised on the uniformity of Babel (cf. FT 144); he sees the unity of cultures as polyhedral (cf. FT 215) and unity in society as a “democratic process” (FT 45). “What is important is to create *processes* of encounter, processes that build a people that can accept differences” (FT 217).

Instead of asserting, with a fundamentalist attitude, that he knows in detail the foundation of values, Francis sees the unity to be found in a *search* for consensus, precisely as a dialogue. “Such dialogue needs to be enriched and illumined by clear thinking, rational arguments, a variety of perspectives and the contribution of different fields of knowledge and points of view” (FT 211). Indeed, the foundations on which we must build are expressly “enduring values, however demanding it may be to discern them” (*ibid.*). Because of this, “our understanding of their meaning and scope can increase” (*ibid.*).

But, without adopting a fundamentalist approach, one could still ask: Can we not, or rather should we not, express more precisely what this foundation of values is? Francis answers this question by pointing to what in the human being is inalienable, what is prior to any recognition, regardless of

any status *or* even any culture: human dignity (cf. FT 213). This is not surprising. For in the concept of dignity we find the Stoic image of man as worthy (*dignitas*), the biblical understanding of man as the image of God (*hādār*, “glory, honor,” *Psalms* 8:6), and the Quranic affirmation that God has distinguished human beings in a special way (*karrama*, “has conferred dignity,” *Sura* 17:70).

The concept of dignity has proven useful in recent decades in exposing injustice and grounding law across cultural boundaries. However, four relative aspects must be taken into account:

1) Concrete conclusions remain controversial. Because of their different perspectives, people will derive and emphasize on the basis of human dignity different individual rights, since “fundamental and universally valid moral principles can be embodied in different practical rules. Thus, room for dialogue will always exist “ (FT 214).

2) It is not a question of vocabulary. Different traditions can indicate the absolute foundation of the rights that belong to every human being as such with terms other than “dignity,” such as the “sacredness of the person.”

3) Reference to God can be a guarantee of rights. In this regard, John Paul II had warned, probably because of his experience of having had to live under two atheistic regimes: “The root of modern totalitarianism is to be found in the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person, the visible image of the invisible God” (*Centesimus Annus*, No. 44, cited by FT 273). Instead, Francis sees at least the possibility of a non-religious, and yet stable, guarantee of human rights on the basis of recognized human dignity: “To agnostics, this foundation might seem sufficient to confer a solid and stable universal validity for the basic and non-negotiable ethical principles, so as to prevent further catastrophes” (FT 214).

4) Reference to God can also motivate violations of dignity. All religions – with their claim to involve the whole person – can be misused as a motive and motivation for violent acts of injustice. *Fratelli Tutti* considers this possibility as well (cf. FT 237).

According to the encyclical, and expressed in slightly different terms, the human being as such has an inviolable

dignity. This means that no one can or should violate it. Even those who think they can deprive a person of their dignity cannot take away what makes that person the bearer of all human rights. This, therefore, obliges everyone to guarantee those rights. The anthropology of *Fratelli Tutti* is also based on the recognition of human dignity, which, however, is not conditioned by its recognition by human beings. So now we come to the crux of the matter: How does the anthropology of the encyclical relate to the theology of religion?

In the text, one can perceive what role being a Christian plays in Pope Francis' life, what his religion means to him. Despite all the misinterpretations and misunderstandings – which indeed have occurred – he is convinced that the Christian faith is the strength of Christians, their joyful readiness to love, help and forgive. And now he repeats in *Fratelli Tutti* what in 2018, at the ecumenical meeting in Riga Cathedral with its magnificent organ, he had testified about not only himself, but also about all people who live in friendship with Christ: “If the music of the Gospel ceases to resonate in our very being, we will lose the joy born of compassion, the tender love born of trust, the capacity for reconciliation that has its source in our knowledge that we have been forgiven and sent forth. 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” (FT 277).

In other words, Christians always receive new encouragement from the Gospel to strive with strength and tenderness (cf. FT 188) for this dignity to be recognized by all. Why should the Gospel give such power?

The encyclical presents four dynamics that explain why the Gospel should give, or rather should be, this power (cf. *Rom* 1:16), this “melody” (FT 277):

1) *Promise*. The Gospel speaks to me of my peace, of my reconciliation with God (cf. FT 277). Thus it makes me experience how good it is to be able to live reconciled, and it frees me with the consolation with which I myself can console other people (cf. *2 Cor* 1:4).

2) *Identification*. A contemplation interrupted the analytical part of *Fratelli Tutti* in an *original way*, under the heading “A Stranger On The Road.” We asked ourselves: Is the stranger the person who bleeds or the one who helps? Like the Gospel of Luke, so too Francis left the question open. But now it becomes clear that the stranger on the road may even be someone else (cf. *Luke* 24:15-16), Jesus. He says to those who help, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (*Matt* 25:35). Jesus identifies with the afflicted: How? He feels that his suffering is not just about himself (cf. *Matt* 20:28), and people can recognize his presence, the dawn of God’s kingdom, precisely where they do not take care of themselves but serve without reservation (cf. *Matt* 16:25). For this reason, Christians today too can identify with the needs of others: to feel a mutual bond and thus be freed from selfishness (cf. *1 Cor* 12:26; *1 Thess* 3:12), but also can commit themselves publicly to those who are treated unjustly or are forgotten (advocacy).

3) *Adoration*. The Gospel, the fundamental Christian message, offers us a special opportunity to approach God by reflecting, contemplating and adoring: the Trinity introduces us, through the Spirit, into its very life. The love that is recognized and experienced there makes us co-lovers: “If we go to the ultimate source of that love which is the very life of the triune God, we encounter in the community of the three divine Persons the origin and perfect model of all life in society” (FT 85).

4) *Vocation*. The Gospel is the message that concerns all human beings. It affirms in fact that all are called to become children of God (cf. FT 271). Human dignity is therefore no longer just something static and theoretical, something that must be notionally recognized. If all are called to be children of God, then human dignity has its own history of growth, because in the course of time we become increasingly aware that we are essentially linked to one another and that, despite all distances, we want to live together and have a common goal.

Our inquiry has thus reached the point where we can conceptually connect Pope Francis’ anthropology with his theology of religion and reformulate them synthetically.

All people, from their different perspectives, can recognize the dignity of every human being; however, many draw from a variety of traditional, testable, and meaningful motivational foundations the energy and creativity to recognize and implement what follows: religions are the various “sources” from which people nourish themselves for their commitment to human dignity; “others drink from other sources” (FT 277).

This, in conclusion, is how we can describe the third way that *Fratelli Tutti* presents a social doctrine that both affirms what is intrinsically Christian and is also a point of possible contact with the other believer.

Vocabulary

In its vocabulary, too, the encyclical shows how, starting from a specific Christian perspective, it is possible to speak in a way that is comprehensible to all. *Fratelli Tutti*, in fact, consistently and clearly uses words that are familiar to many cultures and philosophies, traditions and religions; but, at the same time, they are key words of the Bible that, in the light of the Gospel, reveal new dynamics.

It should come as no surprise that there are such words and that they can be found in a social encyclical. Commonly used political vocabulary owes much to Christian concepts. Words like “man” and “person,” “love” and “forgiveness,” “conscience” and “dignity,” “justice” and “common good,” “friendship” and “dialogue,” “kindness” and “benevolence,” “other” and “unity,” “solidarity” and “subsidiarity” are familiar outside of Christianity, but have taken on clearer meanings and further content through the history of Christian revelation and reflection.

Whoever uses these concepts in social doctrine, while elaborating their characteristic Christian emphases, remains faithful both to the witness to be given to Christ and to the need to become more comprehensible to others. The encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* does this repeatedly and impressively. We will explain it below, setting forth this one idea: all human beings are “brothers and sisters.” The concept of fraternity clearly plays a key role in the encyclical. It even became its title based on a term from the *Admonitions* of Francis of Assisi.

In order to trace the concept of fraternity in its universality and specificity, three questions must be answered: 1) How did the idea that all human beings are brothers and sisters become the leading motif of a social encyclical? 2) Is this idea truly Christian? 3) *If so* does it have its own specific function in Christian understanding?

1) *How did the idea that all human beings are brothers and sisters become the leading motif of a social encyclical?* Since the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has spoken often about fraternity among all human beings: “The earth is our common home and we are all brothers and sisters” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 183). But this idea became the main theme and an element of the document on human brotherhood that the pope wrote and signed together with Ahmed al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar.³ Now the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* develops in detail the fundamental ideas that were contained in that document. Indeed, here the pope even says that in his reflections leading to the encyclical he “felt stimulated in a special way” by his Muslim brother (cf. FT 5).

The idea of fraternity is particularly apt as the underlying motif of a social encyclical, for many reasons. Benedict XVI had already complained that “as society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbors but does not make us brothers.”⁴ Those who perceive others as their own “flesh” (FT 84) are automatically in solidarity with them, and therefore other religions can often share so convincingly the idea of brotherhood among all people. It is, for example, because of the common ancestry of all human beings that the Quran opposes claims to supremacy artificially based on kinship (cf. *Sura* 49:13).

2) *Is the idea that all human beings are brothers and sisters truly Christian?* In reality, the New Testament speaks of sisters and

3.Cf. Francis - A. Al-Tayyeb, *Document on Human Brotherhood for World Peace and Common Coexistence* (Abu Dhabi, February 4, 2019). See also F. Körner, “Human fraternity. A Commentary on the Abu Dhabi Document”, in *Civ. Catt. En.* July 2019 <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/human-fraternity-commentary-on-the-2019-abu-dhabi-document/>

4.Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, No. 19.

brothers above all when it comes to the relationship between Christians (cf. *Matt* 18:15–17). But the vision is always widening beyond the confines of the community. In this regard, *Fratelli Tutti* expressly quotes a passage from the earliest New Testament writing: “Saint Paul, recognizing the temptation of the earliest Christian communities to form closed and isolated groups, urged his disciples to abound in love ‘for one another and for all’ (*1 Thess* 3:12)” (FT 62). Jesus had already warned against the improper use of kinship to assert privileges: his true brothers and sisters are not those who claim the same lineage as he did, but “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (*Matt* 12:50).

Consequently, brotherhood among all persons has often been present in the Vatican magisterial tradition of recent decades.⁵ “We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God” (*Nostra Aetate*, No. 5). John Paul II, in his pastoral visit to Paris in 1980, had emphasized that “fraternity” is by no means just a legacy of the Enlightenment; he had recognized the great importance that “liberty, equality, fraternity” have in French culture, immediately adding, “at the roots of it are Christian ideas.”⁶

The discourse on universal brotherhood is undoubtedly familiar to the Franciscan tradition, but it is also found in other Christian spiritualities, such as in the teachings of Blessed Charles de Foucauld, whom *Fratelli Tutti* expressly mentions. He wanted to be a *frère universel*, “universal brother.” That is why he went to the Muslims in the Algerian desert and “only by identifying himself with the least ones did he come to be a brother to all” (FT 287).

3) *If the idea of fraternity among all human beings is perfectly coherent from a Christian perspective, does it have its own specific Christian function?* “Fratelli Tutti” was Francis of Assisi’s way of addressing his own. With Pope Francis, however, the two

5.Cf. F. Körner, “Das Dokument von Abu Dhabi. Eine politisch–theologische Debatte”, in *Communio* 326–312 (2020) 49 (cf. www.felixkoerner.de).

6.John Paul II, *Homily*, Le Bourget, June 1, 1980.

words become a declaration. But what exactly do they mean? That all human beings *are* brothers and sisters? Or, that they *must become* so? The question leads us to an underlying Gospel dynamic. The Gospel is a promise that immediately adds what effect it should have: “Now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light” (*Eph* 5:8). The Gospel is *paraklesis*: it is at once consolation and exhortation, declaration and vocation. That is why all generations of Christians have formulated in ever new ways the paradoxical formula: “Become what you are!” With his discourse on the fraternity of God’s children, Pope Francis, like the New Testament already, seems to unite promise and demand: let what you are become real in the relationships of this world; you are equal in that you depend on each other; you are bound to each other and responsible for each other, so you also live as brothers and sisters. In fact, the encyclical says that fraternity is a certainty that must be further realized: “If the conviction that all human beings are brothers and sisters is not to remain an abstract idea but to find concrete embodiment, then numerous related issues emerge, forcing us to see things in a new light and to develop new responses” (FT 128).

Pope Francis explains that all human beings belong to the one family of sisters and brothers, beginning with the fact that we all share the same God, the “heavenly Father who ‘makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good’ (*Matt* 5:45).” Hence the summons to ‘be merciful, as your Father is merciful’ (*Luke* 6:36)” (FT 60). But even the paternity of God must first be recognized if it is to have full value. From a Christian point of view, the fraternity of all human beings derives from their being children of God. Our divine filiation, however, is a promised certainty. This promised certainty is the source that orients us and impels us to fully recognize the fraternity – the dignity – of all human beings.

Conclusion

For a social encyclical to speak, if it starts from the brotherhood of all human beings across religious boundaries, it must realize that brotherly bond with others to which it witnesses. Even many non-Christians can recognize the world

as God's creation. For Christians, the origin and the future of the world must always be seen together: God is not only the answer to the question of where we come from, but also to the question of where we are going. Our classic expression of this idea is the confession of our being sons and daughters of God. This means what we are and ought to be. The idea that every human being is created with a vocation to become a child of God seems to Francis so able to be shared that he considers it to be the central content of various religions (cf. FT 271).

Here, however, Muslims have some difficulty understanding what is being said, because their fundamental texts reject any expression that attributes a son to God. This would seem to them to be a humanization of God and an instance of polytheism. Can one then also illustrate in language understandable beyond the boundaries of Christianity what is meant by the vocation to become children of God? It is about our mutual respect for one another and in the name of God: for Christians, recognizing God as Father means living as children like Jesus, in trust and obedience to Him, because He will never let us down. To be sons and daughters of God is a "vocation" in a threefold sense: Christian witness confesses that God wants all people to experience Him, that He is their Creator full of love and that He wants to lead them to fullness of life; therefore, all are invited and destined – designed – to recognize Him as such and to recognize each other as brothers and sisters; and in this perspective they must and can shape the world.⁷

⁷Cf. F. Körner, *Politische Religion. Theologie der Weltgestaltung - Christentum und Islam*, Freiburg, Herder, 2020 (in English: *Political Religion. How Islam and Christianity Shape the World*, New York, Paulist Press, 2020).

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