

Fratelli Tutti: seeking the common good

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07 October 2020

[Pope Francis' latest encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*](#) is, as we might have anticipated, a reflection on our times. Its timing was fortuitous, bridging the inarticulate hostility of the presidential debate and Joe Biden's decision to forego negative campaigning in the aftermath of Donald Trump's COVID-19 diagnosis. The burden of the encyclical is to commend fraternity and social friendship and deplore selfishness and hostility in the response to the crisis.



Main image: Pope Francis (Catholic Church England and Wales/Flickr)

The first words of the encyclical are part of a quotation from St Francis of Assisi, in which he commends a fraternity that crosses all boundaries of distance and culture as central to his followers. Social friendship — which refers to the privileging of respect for persons and so for the common good over individual interests in social, economic and institutional relationships — flows from an attitude of fraternity.

St Francis has deeply influenced the Pope, who took his name, has attended gatherings of religious leaders in Assisi to pray, and signed this encyclical there. Francis of Assisi, who had a deep sense of God's presence in nature, also undertook a dangerous journey to meet the Sultan in Egypt and dissuaded his Friars from dispute when meeting Saracens. In an encyclical initially intended to focus on the fraternal relationships between religions, exemplified in the common statement Pope Francis signed in Abu Dhabi with Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the association with the saint was apposite.

As the encyclical developed, Pope Francis expanded its scope to reflect on the COVID-19 crisis and on the dangers and opportunities created by the need to respond to it. Stylistically, the change of focus makes for a baggy elephant of a document. The influence of Francis of Assisi, however, hangs over it. He was contemplative, radical in his poverty and his association with people who were poor, was a standing reproach to the greed and violence of his own society, and had an influence out of proportion to his social standing.

The encyclical begins by examining the signs of a lack of fraternity in society that contribute to a closed world. The list is long and comprehensive, including the erosion of human rights, the dominance of ideologies of economic self-interest over the common good, the treatment of refugees, the poisoning of public conversation and communication, and the many forms of discrimination. All these evils find expression in disrespect for vulnerable human beings.

The moral compass of the document is then provided by an exposition of the Parable of the Good Samaritan with its emphasis on practical friendship for the wounded stranger. The love that looks to the good of the other represents a counterpoint to the attitude that underlies the dehumanising signs of a closed world, and a bridge to an open world. Pope Francis describes this bridge of fraternity in terms of the central principles of Catholic Social Teaching, recently elaborated in his recent [General Audience](#): respect for human beings for their intrinsic value and not for their use, solidarity based on their social nature and the primacy of the common good.

These principles are then drawn on in the body of the document to propose a better way to deal with the aspects of public life which the CV crisis has shown to be at risk. It encompasses relationships between nations and particularly the need to open closed borders that hurt refugees and minorities, and to strengthen international conventions and institutions to make possible the remission of debt. It calls also for a reform of political life based on respect for persons, respect for law and for human rights, and attention to the common good rather than to individual and sectional interests. All these things call for a culture marked by the search for truth and openness to others. They must also be built on a commitment to peace, the rejection of war and capital punishment, and the encouragement of processes of forgiveness and reconciliation within societies.

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The encyclical opens up little new ground in its argument, except perhaps in the priority it gives to the common good over private interest in the ownership of goods. It reflects the emphases of Pope Francis's life and writings, with a passionate assertion of the dignity of each human being and the respect owed to and expected from each other and society, and an equally passionate denunciation of the greed, violence and inequality that threaten the future of the world. Its detailed analysis of the world situation merits a close reading.

The tone of the *Fratelli Tutti* is urgent. It echoes the vision of a world at the crossroads where the path we take will decide whether the inheritance that we leave to our grandchildren will be wasted or saved. The way in which we set about rebuilding society in the face of coronavirus will be crucial. Its outcome will depend on the choice we make between individual greed and

the commitment to the common good. Given the evidence that many governments throughout the world are attempting to return to tried and failed economic and social models, urgency is appropriate.

The apparently limited space given to the environment in the encyclical deserves mention, given Pope Francis' constant insistence on its importance. In fact, the broader understanding of integral ecology evident in *Laudato Si'* to include social and institutional relationships flows easily into the emphasis in *Fratelli Tutti* on social friendship. The document also emphasises attention to the world outside ourselves, the friendship to it imaged in the stories of Francis of Assisi, and the need to maintain this attention and altruistic care in all human relationships — institutional and transnational as well as personal and local. The perspective adopted here could enrich reflection on the environment.

In this cantankerous time the emphasis on fraternity in public conversation and advocacy will surely be welcomed. The encyclical strongly endorses the human rights of people made vulnerable by society — of women and children, of racial minorities, of refugees, of the aged and others. It views the public conversation about rights as one of engagement and persuasion in seeking the common good, not as a closed and adversarial struggle between allies and enemies. That at least would be an improvement upon the public discourse to which we have become accustomed.



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