

POPE FRANCIS

Fratelli Tutti

On Fraternity
and Social Friendship

Introduction by

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INTRODUCTION

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During the last years of his life, Saint Francis of Assisi (ca. 1182–1226) traveled to various communities of his brother friars. Having already stepped down from leadership as the general minister of the Franciscan order in 1221, these last years were marked by both his declining health and a persistent desire to preach the gospel, particularly in a manner that challenged his fellow friars to return continually to the basics of the *vita evangelica*—the “gospel life”—which is the fundamental vocation that every baptized Christian shares and to which members of the Franciscan community had promised lifelong obedience.

We know from his writings and subsequent scholarship that Saint Francis wished to address his brother friars on topics related to two areas of concern that troubled him during these last years of his life. The first was internal, namely, that he wanted to exhort them to hold true to the essence of their calling, which *Il Poverello* regularly summarized as both “to live the Holy Gospel” and “to walk in the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹ He was always concerned that his brothers, and all Christian women and men, focus on their primary responsibility, which is to live more like Christ in all that they do.

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¹ For example, see Francis of Assisi, “The Earlier Rule,” 1.1; “The Later Rule,” 1.1; and “The Testament,” no. 14; in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short, 3 vols. (New York: New City Press, 1999–2001), 1:63–64, 100, and 125, respectively. Hereafter cited as *FAED*.

The second concern was external. Saint Francis was well aware of the shifting social, cultural, and ecclesial dynamics of his time. The early thirteenth century was a tumultuous moment in history. Describing these shifts, especially in the centuries and decades immediately preceding the birth of the Franciscan movement, the Italian historian Giacomo Todeschini writes: “From 1000 to 1200, Western Europe grew in many ways. The inhabitants of cities and countryside multiplied, more land was cultivated, the income of landowners grew and the amount of goods in circulation increased.” Reflecting on the consequences of these changes, he adds, “In the cities, families strong enough to command grew in number, while the territorial aristocrats looked for any way to turn their de facto power into a perpetual government. Struggles for power—small and large—became a daily practice.”²

With increased concentrations of wealth and power in the hands of fewer people in society, Saint Francis was concerned about the ways the shifting political and economic dynamics of the time were affecting those most vulnerable in his community—the poor, the infirm, the outcasts. A large part of his own conversion experience was tied to recognizing that another way to live was possible, and that the pattern for this alternative way of life was the gospel. This conviction about the central purpose of Christianity as the pattern for another way to be in the world led him to speak in exhortatory tones and in a manner reflecting great urgency.

Saint Francis preached this message throughout his life, and he did so in both word and deed. But it is one recorded instance of such an appeal to his friar brothers, preached sometime between 1223 and his death in 1226, that would inspire a pope centuries later; a pope who was so captivated by the story and example of this saint from Assisi that he would take the saint’s name for

² Giacomo Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth: From Voluntary Poverty to Market Society*, trans. Donatella Melucci (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2009), 11.

his own. This pope, witnessing comparable social, political, and economic upheaval early in the twenty-first century, would renew the message proclaimed by Saint Francis and admonish his sisters and brothers throughout the world to remember that Jesus Christ had called all of us to live another way.

On the feast day of Saint Francis of Assisi, October 4, 2020, Pope Francis issued the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, which is an Italian translation of the opening Latin words (*omnes fratres*, “all brothers” or “all of us, brothers”) of Saint Francis’s “Admonition VI.” Originally delivered within the context of an all-male audience of Franciscan friars (hence the gender-exclusive construction, “all *brothers*”), the message continues to speak through the ages. Retrieved by Pope Francis as a summary theme for the 287-paragraph-long document that followed, the title aimed to remind contemporary people that we are “all brothers and sisters” to one another, regardless of whatever distinctions or differences we may have or that society imposes on others. It was in the spirit of Saint Francis’s original admonition, one that exhorted his brothers to follow Christ and not shy away from the consequences of genuine Christian discipleship, that the pope exercised his universal magisterial authority in addressing all modern women and men. Saint Francis’s original admonition reads:

Let all of us, brothers, consider the Good Shepherd Who bore the suffering of the cross to save His sheep.

The Lord’s sheep followed Him in tribulation and persecution, in shame and hunger, in weakness and temptation, and in other ways; and for these things they received eternal life from the Lord.

Therefore, it is a great shame for us, the servants of God, that the saints have accomplished great things and we want only to receive glory and honor by recounting them.³

³ Francis of Assisi, “Admonition VI,” 1–3, in *FAED*, 1:131.

Although the full text of this original admonition does not appear in its entirety in *Fratelli Tutti*, the general theme of the message rings true throughout the encyclical: it is a call to action, an exhortation to renewal, an invitation to embrace ongoing conversion. As the Franciscan scholar Robert Karris notes in his commentary on “Admonition VI,” the challenge of the message is a kind of wake-up call to complacent Christians who uncritically assume that merely going to church once a week or identifying as a Christian is sufficient. On the contrary, Saint Francis expresses his concern that we do not heed the gospel imperative to live another way. Expounding on this, Karris writes: “Jesus did this; the saints followed his good example. Surely, they present us with much to imitate in our religious lives. And in all honesty, what do we do? We sit around and talk about the examples, or just preach about them from the pulpit, or tell them to students in the classroom. Indeed, shame on us!”⁴

Just as the changing circumstances of Saint Francis’s time were leading to increased suffering and inequality, so too we face unprecedented challenges in our own time, but on a greater global scale. Published in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, dramatic rises in economic inequality, increasingly overt racism and xenophobia, violence in all corners of the world, and the existential threat of global climate change, *Fratelli Tutti* takes as its starting point the need to name and respond to what Vatican II called in *Gaudium et Spes* “the signs of our times” and to do so in the “light of the Gospel” (no. 4). The starting point and guiding principle for this renewal is what we might call a Franciscan vision of the world, which is shared across the centuries by both men named Francis and is present throughout *Fratelli Tutti*.

⁴ Robert J. Karris, OFM, *The Admonitions of Saint Francis: Sources and Meanings* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1999), 92.

The Franciscan Tradition in Pope Francis's Worldview

While this is technically Pope Francis's third encyclical letter—the first was *Lumen Fidei* (2013), the second was *Laudato Si'* (2015)—this is only the second that carries the singular weight of his distinctive pastoral vision, since the drafting of the first encyclical actually began under Pope Benedict XVI's direction and was later completed by Pope Francis. This is a significant detail because it highlights the continuity of the Franciscan tradition's influence throughout Pope Francis's writings, ministry, and worldview. "Francis inspired these pages," said the pope about Saint Francis of Assisi in the opening section of *Fratelli Tutti*. Recalling that Saint Francis inspired the pope to write his last encyclical letter in 2015, *Laudato Si' (On Care for Our Common Home)*, Pope Francis situates this current teaching document again within the framework of Franciscan spirituality and theology. He also traveled to Assisi to commemorate the feast of Saint Francis and officially sign this new encyclical on the feast day of Saint Francis.

While there are many avenues we might explore that highlight the pope's Franciscan inspiration, it is worthwhile to look at four central themes arising from Saint Francis and the Franciscan tradition that inform and guide *Fratelli Tutti*.⁵

The concept of fraternitas

The English translation of the Latin term *fraternitas* as "fraternity" has garnered criticism, even before the encyclical was published.⁶ Understandably, the commonsense interpretation of

⁵ Some of the following section appeared in an earlier form in Daniel P. Horan, "Relationship Leads Us to Peace: Three Key Franciscan Themes in 'Fratelli Tutti,'" *National Catholic Reporter* (October 4, 2020).

⁶ For example, see Daniel P. Horan, "The Origin and Context of Pope Francis's Forthcoming Encyclical Title," *Medium* (September 5, 2020); Phyllis Zagano, "'Fratelli tutti' Does Not Include Women, and Neither Does 'Fraternity,'" *National Catholic Reporter* (September 21, 2020); and Joshua J.

the term views the concept as exclusively masculine, referring to the “bond among brothers” or “brotherhood.” Indeed, this is an accurate understanding, particularly when one considers that the term is most often used in the contemporary context of the United States in reference to male college students belonging to exclusive social organizations that often emphasize a party lifestyle.

However, the term takes on a slightly different and notably significant meaning when viewed through the lens of the Franciscan theological tradition. It carries at least two senses in this context. The first is not that unlike the reference to college social organizations, albeit without the implications of Bacchanalia. Dating back to Saint Francis himself, whenever the Franciscan friars refer to their local communities of men religious, the term used has been *fraternity*. It is also a term that is used by the Secular Franciscan Order in reference to the local communities or associations of women and men who have professed to live according to the Franciscan Rule in their respective secular contexts. In this way *fraternity* takes on a rather practical meaning, serving as the term for a particular group of Franciscans.

The second sense of *fraternitas* also goes back to Saint Francis himself, and it is more theological than it is practical. *Fraternity* in this sense is more expansive and has to do with the kind of relationship one has with another. The reason that Saint Francis preferred the title “brother” was simple: he truly meant that he saw himself as inherently related to all men and women, and even nonhuman creatures as part of God’s one family of creation. To talk about fraternity as a disposition or value is to talk about how you view and relate to other people, including strangers and those who may be very different from you. It is about recognizing intrinsic familial ties with all people and creatures.

McElwee, “Catholic Women Criticize ‘Mansplaining’ of Pope’s Masculine Encyclical Title,” *National Catholic Reporter* (September 24, 2020).

Pope Francis picks up on the Franciscan logic of *fraternitas* in the third chapter of *Fratelli Tutti*. He critiques societal relationships determined by affinity, preferences, status, or any other feature, and argues for a more fundamental concept of human relationship: fraternity. “Fraternity is born not only of a climate of respect for individual liberties, or even of a certain administratively guaranteed equality. Fraternity necessarily calls for something greater, which in turn enhances freedom and equality” (no. 103).

Earlier in chapter two of the encyclical, the pope uses the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37) to show how the Christian notion of relationship with others transcends the limits and qualifications we are quick to use in isolating ourselves from solidarity with others. By contrast, if we recognize that we are all sisters and brothers to one another, then we have an inherent bond with one another that demands something of us—our love, respect, and care. Pope Francis highlights the demands that a spirit of fraternity places on us in relationship to one another in human society. The pope says that “we are constantly tempted to ignore others, especially the weak.” He notes that “for all the progress we have made, we are still ‘illiterate’ when it comes to accompanying, caring for, and supporting the most frail and vulnerable members of our developed societies. We have become accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, ignoring situations until they affect us directly” (no. 64).

Saint Francis instructed his followers that what it meant to live the Christian life according to his distinctive vision basically boils down to “walking in the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ,” a phrase that appears throughout his writings. Living like Jesus means prioritizing relationship above all else; it means caring for those in need, regardless of their identity or what affiliations they might have. Pope Francis lifts this up as not only something reserved for Franciscan friars and sisters, but also for all human beings, who are fundamentally interdependent and connected to one another. How we think of ourselves in relationship to others ought to be governed by this

principle of our a priori interrelatedness as sisters and brothers. And the way we form our worldviews, make decisions, engage in the public square, and interact with one another at all levels should be grounded in our inextricable *fraternitas* with all.

The Franciscan notion of poverty and relationship to property

I remember once giving a talk to a group of students from a religious order in the northeastern United States. The director of formation had invited me to give a presentation on the theme of Franciscan spirituality. I prepared my remarks, keeping in mind how limited my time was, and arrived to give my hour-long talk. I covered the fundamentals of the Franciscan worldview, explained briefly Saint Francis's own experience of ongoing conversion, and highlighted the ways the Franciscan tradition has sought over the centuries to renew our commitment to following Christ by living the gospel as genuinely as possible. When I was finished speaking and opened the floor for questions and discussion, the priest who had invited me to speak made the first comment. He expressed gratitude for what I had shared but also puzzlement. He had come to the presentation expecting "to hear a lot more about poverty, since isn't that what you Franciscans love so much?"

My response was swift, because I had encountered this sort of assumption about the Franciscan tradition before (if it's not poverty, then it's almost always about the saint's love of animals). I explained that I had talked about the Franciscan notion of poverty the whole time, emphasizing repeatedly the absolute primacy of relationship in Saint Francis's worldview informed by the gospel. What this priest was expecting was to hear something more banal, something more in keeping with some kind of praise for abject material poverty as an end in itself. It was then that I took the opportunity to introduce the basic fact that Franciscans do not actually profess a vow of poverty, but rather a vow to live *sine proprio*, a Latin phrase that means "without anything of one's own."

Saint Francis, like Jesus of Nazareth long before him, did not see material poverty—that lack of the basic things necessary for human flourishing, like food, water, shelter, love, healthcare, clothing, and so on—as something to be praised or desired. Abject poverty is an evil, whereby people are forced into terribly dehumanizing circumstances. Christians and all people of good will should fight to eliminate it and liberate people from such conditions. But Saint Francis came to recognize that possessiveness—of both material goods and nonmaterial attitudes, prejudices, and hubris—inevitably get in the way of authentic human relationships. The amassing of property and the appropriating of power, and especially the effort to maintain or increase those two things, creates distance between people. Walls are erected, lines drawn, and persons isolated against the real or perceived threat other people present to those who wish to maintain their control over their possessions.

For Saint Francis, *sine proprio* was never understood as an end itself, but rather as a means to a more important and foundational end: *relationship*.⁷ The Franciscan tradition teaches that evangelical poverty is about living more like Christ, which ought to inform how one views oneself, others, and the world. Pope Francis picks up on this theme in *Fratelli Tutti* from the outset, noting how contemporary society encourages a particular way of living, one that promotes individual accumulation of wealth, property, and power for its own sake. As he notes in chapter one of the encyclical, this has rendered our modern societies more unequal, more fearful, and more isolated (nos.

⁷ For more on the history of this Franciscan theme, see Michael F. Cusato, “The Renunciation of Power as a Foundational Theme in Early Franciscan History,” in *The Early Franciscan Movement (1205–1239): History, Sources, and Hermeneutics* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo, 2009), 29–48; Michael F. Cusato, “The Early Franciscans and the Use of Money,” in *Poverty and Prosperity: Franciscans and the Use of Money*, ed. Daria Mitchell (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2009), 13–38; and Jacques Dalarun, *Francis of Assisi and Power*, trans. Anne Bartol (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2007).

22–29). His turn in chapter two toward the Lukan parable of the good Samaritan offers an illustration of this alternative—Christian, Franciscan—worldview in practice. Whereas others walking past the man injured by robbers would not allow themselves to move beyond the figurative walls of their own comfort, the Samaritan did not allow anything, including differences in ideology or religious perspective, to get in the way of attending to the needs of the other. In this way *fraternitas* is modeled by the decision to voluntarily surrender property (the money given and promised to the innkeeper), as well as comfort, convenience, and time in order to be a true brother to another human being in need.

Throughout the rest of the encyclical Pope Francis returns to this theme of *fraternitas* in action as marked by an attitude of *sine proprio*. He critiques those individuals and nations that jealously protect access to their borders, which is a form of turning away from migrants and refugees in order to maintain the status quo. Citing his earlier encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the pope states in chapter three that “the Christian tradition has never recognized the right to property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property.” Pope Francis adds, referencing John Paul II’s 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, “The principle of the common use of created goods is the ‘first principle of the whole ethical and social order’; it is a natural and inherent right that takes priority over others” (no. 120). This is deeply Franciscan in spirit because it makes plain that the common good supersedes any claim to individual property, especially when so few have so much while so many lack the most basic goods. The later chapters return again and again tacitly to this Franciscan view of property and the common good, outlining a clear vision for how the principle of solidarity demands another way of relating to others. For example, in chapter six the pope speaks at great length about the need to develop a “culture of encounter” that is uninhibited by prejudices, fear, and cultural chauvinism.

A culture of encounter: Crossing borders, building bridges

Early in the document the pope recalls Saint Francis's famous encounter with Sultan Malik-el-Kamil at Damietta, Egypt, in 1219.⁸ Drawing a connection to that historic episode of mutual respect, peacemaking, and fraternity—a shared sense of a fraternal bond between the two men from different cultures and religions—Pope Francis identified a comparable sense of encounter he had with Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, whom he met in Abu Dhabi in 2019. At that meeting the two religious leaders signed a document, “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together,” which included the shared assertion that “God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties, and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters.”⁹

The nod to the importance of interreligious dialogue and friendship across differences in the global effort to promote human solidarity is no small gesture. Pope Francis, taking seriously the prioritization of fraternal and sororal relationship with all people modeled by Saint Francis, describes this social teaching as directed not only to his Christian sisters and brothers, but also addressed to all people of good will. This expansive audience reflects the inclusive vision articulated at the outset of *Laudato Si'* and encyclicals of his predecessors, dating back to John XXIII's 1963 document *Pacem in Terris*, which was geared not only to Catholics and other Christians but also all people of good will.

Saint Francis is known to have crossed many borders and built many bridges in his time. He intentionally transgressed the

⁸ For more on this encounter, see George Dardess and Marvin L. Krier Mich, *In The Spirit of Saint Francis and The Sultan: Catholics and Muslims Working Together for the Common Good* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011); and Paul Moses, *The Saint and the Sultan: The Crusades, Islam, and Francis of Assisi's Mission of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

⁹ Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together,” February 4, 2019.

social, civil, and ecclesial borders of his community to embrace and then live with lepers who had been ostracized from the ordinary life of Assisi. He crossed the border of the Fifth Crusade's battle to engage in a peaceful encounter and exchange of ideas with the sultan, despite the vilification of Muslims by the majority of Christian Europe at the time, including and especially by Pope Innocent III. He even moved across the border of species when he sincerely referred to nonhuman creatures as his sisters and brothers, recognizing that lines of demarcation between the human and nonhuman are in some ways artificial constructs, given our interdependence on one another and universal reliance on our common source, which is God.

Today Pope Francis calls on all his brothers and sisters, regardless of their religious tradition or nation of origin, to "see things in a new light and to develop new responses" to the challenges before us (no. 128). Among these challenges is the increasing tendency that individuals and nations have to erect borders and walls, literal and figurative ones, which separate, isolate, and exclude the most vulnerable in our world. Pope Francis's consistent critiques throughout the encyclical of consumerism, capitalism, nationalism, xenophobia, and other ascendant ideologies of our time also gesture to the importance of bridge building between peoples.

The pope points to love as the necessary ground for our building a "culture of encounter," which "means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone" (no. 216). He speaks throughout *Fratelli Tutti* of the evils of apathy and indifference, a recurring theme in his preaching and magisterial teaching. These attitudes not only prevent us from the capacity for compassion—the ability to suffer with others in solidarity—but they also promote an individualism that creates separation and prohibits authentic relationship. What results is not only social division, but also tremendous suffering, which is felt most acutely by the poor and vulnerable.

The imposition of physical and ideological borders does great harm to human dignity, particularly for migrants and immigrants, which is why Pope Francis strongly emphasizes the need for “fraternal gratuitousness” or the building of bridges to a better life for those who suffer the most without asking the costs (no. 140). This is only possible, the pope notes, if we measure ourselves not merely as one country competing against others, but “as part of the larger human family.” He adds: “Only a social and political culture that readily and ‘gratuitously’ welcomes others will have a future” (no. 141). It is only in the spirit of Saint Francis’s *fraternitas* that such reforms can take place.

Peacemaking and reconciliation

Toward the end of *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis writes: “In many parts of the world, there is a need for paths of peace to heal open wounds. There is also a need for peacemakers, men and women prepared to work boldly and creatively to initiate processes of healing and renewed encounter” (no. 225). Here he again embodies the wisdom of Saint Francis as a promoter of peacemaking and reconciliation.

Remembered as a faithful reformer of the church and society, Saint Francis’s commitment to peacemaking and reconciliation as the means for reforming dysfunctional relations between people was grounded in his understanding of universal *fraternitas*—that we are all brothers and sisters to one another and ought to act like it. In his famous “Canticle of the Creatures,” Saint Francis barely mentions human beings. When he does, toward the end of the text, after invoking many other aspects of creation, he says that we humans are most authentically in keeping with God’s intention for us when we “give pardon,” “bear infirmity and tribulation,” and “endure in peace.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Francis of Assisi, “Canticle of the Creatures,” in *FAED* 1:113–14.

Similarly, Pope Francis stresses the need for another kind of being in the world, one that is more human, one that returns to this foundational vocation wherein God calls all people to be peacemakers and reconcilers. Returning to the Franciscan principle of *fraternitas*, the pope invokes the family as a metaphor for reimagining social structures and political engagement. He notes that families regularly have disputes, but the way that healthy families resolve them can be a model for thinking about the bigger picture of human dynamics in society.

They may quarrel, but there is something that does not change: the family bond. Family disputes are always resolved afterwards. The joys and sorrows of each of its members are felt by all. That is what it means to be a family! If only we could view our political opponents or neighbors in the same way that we view our children or spouse, mother or father! How good would this be! (no. 230)

Authentic peacemaking requires truth telling and a shared commitment to the good of the other.¹¹ It also requires recognizing how decisions have consequences—sometimes dramatically negative ones—for “the more vulnerable members of society” (no. 234). He adds: “Those who work for tranquil social coexistence should never forget that inequality and lack of integral human development make peace impossible” (no. 235). Again, this harkens back to the model and vision of Saint Francis, who, in promoting *fraternitas* as the lens through which to view all relationships, always prioritized the poor and marginalized.

¹¹ For more on peacemaking and reconciliation, see Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992); Robert J. Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998); Eli S. McCarthy, ed., *A Just Peace Ethic Primer: Building Sustainable Peace and Breaking Cycles of Violence* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020).

Pope Francis, like his medieval namesake, does not condone “easy” forgiveness or reconciliation, which often comes at the expense of silencing or dismissing the discomfiting experiences and histories of those who have been victimized. Instead, he insists on the importance of memory in a manner evoking the theological concept “dangerous memory” of the late German theologian Johann Baptist Metz, and the rejection of decisions or actions arising from “fear and resentment” (no. 266).¹² In the final chapter of the encyclical the pope appeals to all religious believers, regardless of their tradition, to be agents of reconciliation, recognizing the fundamental commitment we all have to promote the common good.

Speaking from the Christian perspective, Pope Francis ties together the importance of the example of Jesus Christ and *fraternitas* as the foundation for our universal human vocation to be peacemakers and reconcilers. “For us the wellspring of human dignity and fraternity is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. From it, there arises, for Christian thought and for the action of the Church, the primacy given to relationship, to the encounter with the sacred mystery of the other, to universal communion with the entire human family, as a vocation of all” (no. 277).

These four themes offer but a taste of the robust Franciscan inspiration discernable throughout *Fratelli Tutti* and in the life and ministry of Pope Francis. While a whole volume could be written on the distinctive Franciscan character of this and the pope’s other writings, I want to move now to offer a brief reading guide to the encyclical, highlighting along the way significant points worth looking for as you explore the text.

A Brief Reading Guide to *Fratelli Tutti*

While Saint Francis and the Franciscan tradition offer the inspirational impetus for *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis uses this

¹² See Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2011).

occasion to draw the world's attention to numerous challenges, crises, and threats that exist before us today. The overarching focus of the encyclical is to invite readers to remember that another way of being in the world and structuring our societies is possible, and the framework for that alternative worldview is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In a manner similar to, but not as structurally obvious as, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis engages in a “see, judge, act” model of translating the church's social teachings into praxis.¹³ Within the Catholic Church this model was first articulated in 1961 by Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, which outlined how the baptized can take the principles we hold as essential to our faith and put them into practice. Near the end of the text, in a section keenly titled “Practical Suggestions,” he writes:

There are three stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice. First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgment on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what in the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles. These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the three terms: look, judge, act. (no. 236)

Because of the number of chapters (a short introduction plus eight chapters) and the organization of the document (unlike *Laudato Si'*, this encyclical does not map evenly onto the threefold structure), the “see, judge, act” framework is not as intuitive in the outline of *Fratelli Tutti*, but it is operative in the text all the same.

Pope Francis opens the document with a short introduction that outlines the major theme of the text: *fraternitas* as inspired by the legacy of Saint Francis of Assisi. He then moves to

¹³ For an overview of this approach, see Erin M. Brigham, *See, Judge, Act: Catholic Social Teaching and Service Learning*, rev. ed. (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2019), 23–31.

chapter one, in which the “seeing” work unfolds. Here we get an accurate, if at times sad, depiction of the current state of world affairs. In his social analysis the pope notes that there is increased inequality, division and polarization, dehumanizing of certain populations, and a rise in the instrumentalizing of human beings who are “sacrificed” and “discarded.” The wealth gap means that fewer and fewer people and communities are holding most of the world’s wealth, while the vast majority of the global population barely survives. Furthermore, growing individualism and indifference—themes that repeatedly appear in the pope’s writings and preaching—have led to widespread apathy in the face of unimaginable suffering, especially in the age of the novel coronavirus pandemic. Pope Francis summarizes what he sees with the line: “We are more alone than ever in an increasingly massified world that promotes individual interests and weakens the communitarian dimension of life” (no. 12). Something has to change.

Having outlined some of the key signs of our times, Pope Francis turns to the gospel parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37) as one source for “judging” the circumstances in which we find ourselves as outlined in the previous chapter. The reference to this parable is an echo of one of Pope Francis’s earliest pastoral visits to the small island of Lampedusa, Italy, in July 2013. In his address then, the pope used the parable of the good Samaritan to frame his remarks and draw greater attention to the “globalized indifference” that results in the unnecessary deaths of thousands of migrants and refugees.¹⁴ This is a beautiful reflection in which the pope presents a detailed exegesis and application of this otherwise familiar gospel passage. He draws out the parallels to our time and the challenges that people of good will face when confronted with those whom we can assist or ignore, just like the man left on the side of the road by robbers. In true Pope Francis form, he highlights in this encyclical key themes that resonate through the centuries: the persistence

¹⁴ Pope Francis, “Homily of Holy Father Francis: Visit to Lampedusa,” July 8, 2013.

of indifference; societies that exclude the weak; and political movements that promote selfishness, individualism, and apathy. Jesus's message in the parable continues to challenge us today and provides us with an appropriate lens through which to interpret the signs of our times outlined in chapter one.

The remaining chapters, three through eight, cover a tremendous amount of ground. Many of the topics the pope engages in these chapters will be familiar to those well versed in the holy father's homilies, addresses, and writings. It's notable that many of the references throughout these sections are to previous addresses or texts by Pope Francis, which shows how this particular encyclical fits comfortably within the pope's own theological, social, and pastoral outlook and ministry. What we see in these chapters is a presentation of what the world *could be* if we took the gospel seriously and allowed the model of Christ's life, death, and resurrection to inform how we relate to one another and structure our communities. This includes an emphasis on openness to the other, which requires each of us having an "open heart" (chapter four) and the promotion of an "open world" (chapter three) in which all people are at home and treated as sisters and brothers to one another (*fraternitas*).

Chapters five and six build on these foundational understandings of openness and outline what these might look like in practice. For example, chapter five centers on the creation of what Pope Francis calls "a better kind of politics" (no. 154). This political worldview ought to be shaped by the prioritization of the common good, whereas so much of the contemporary political scene—all over the world—is dominated by individualism, xenophobia, unchecked capitalism, and other deleterious trends that appeal to the basest fears of populations. Instead, the pope calls for "political love," a startling phrase in an age of such partisan division, but one that summarizes well the truth that "charity is at the heart of every healthy and open society" (no. 184). Chapter six builds on this political philosophy, making clear that such a political framework can only take root if we are committed to "dialogue and friendship in society." At the

outset of the chapter Pope Francis summarizes what he means by dialogue: “Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word ‘dialogue’” (no. 198). This is all the more necessary when we look at the rise in conflicts of all sorts in all parts of the world. The aim of such a dialogical model of government and society is to promote kindness and a “culture of encounter,” which sets up well the final two chapters of *Fratelli Tutti*.¹⁵

Chapter seven introduces an important but not as often discussed theme among Christians in the world today: reconciliation. Pope Francis is keen to note that social change cannot simply take place as if history does not exist and the past did not happen. While forgiveness is essential in the Christian life, we are not meant to merely “forgive and forget,” but rather to remember the victims and survivors of violence and injustice. In this section of the encyclical the pope also reiterates the inadmissibility of the death penalty and the need to reject war.

In chapter eight the pope, again living up to his namesake’s legacy, reminds us of both the importance of interreligious dialogue and the more fundamental identity we have as humans who are part of one divine family. Religion, therefore, should serve this sense of universal human *fraternitas*. I am reminded in this closing section of *Fratelli Tutti* of one of the last talks that the Trappist monk and author Thomas Merton gave before his untimely death in 1968. Speaking to a group of Christian monks in Asia, Merton said that prior to dialogue and communication there is a deeper level of connection that we Christians call *communion*. He adds: “It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we

¹⁵ For more on the Catholic notion of encounter, see Marcus Mescher, *The Ethics of Encounter: Christian Neighbor Love as a Practice of Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020).

have to be is what we are.”¹⁶ Truly, this sense of communion about which Merton speaks so eloquently illustrates well the concept of *fraternitas* that Pope Francis wishes to present to the church and world.

Situating *Fratelli Tutti* within the History of Catholic Social Teaching

Despite what some naysayers and enthusiasts alike might wish to believe, *Fratelli Tutti* is not cut out of whole cloth as if it were some entirely novel teaching by some extremely innovative pontiff. Like its predecessor encyclical *Laudato Si'*, this document builds on the previous magisterial documents promulgated over the course of the last century. This tradition of authoritative instruction is known as Catholic social teaching.¹⁷ As with each contribution made over the years by a host of popes including Leo XIII, Pius XI, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, Pope Francis's latest addition to the tradition draws from the important work of his predecessors while adding some clarifications and developments. The pope summarizes the aim and scope of the encyclical in the opening:

The following pages do not claim to offer a complete teaching on fraternal love, but rather to consider its universal scope, its openness to every man and woman. I offer this social Encyclical as a modest contribution to continued reflection, in the hope that in the face of present-day attempts to eliminate and ignore others, we may prove capable of responding with a new vision of fraternity and social friendship that will not remain at the level of words. (no. 6)

¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), 308.

¹⁷ For a succinct and insightful introduction, see Edward P. DeBerri et al., *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret*, 4th ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).

There are a number of key principles that form the focal point and structure of Catholic social teaching. Over the years there have been different efforts to summarize the central elements. In 1998 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) issued a document titled “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions,” which outlined seven major themes of Catholic social teaching.¹⁸ These key principles include: (1) the dignity of the human person; (2) the human person in community; (3) the dignity of work and rights of workers; (4) option for the poor and vulnerable; (5) solidarity; (6) care for creation; and (7) rights and responsibilities. *Fratelli Tutti* touches on all seven key principles, referencing the magisterial documents of the pope’s predecessors while also drawing wisdom from a variety of other sources, especially regional conferences of Catholic bishops throughout the world. This last point is something distinctive about Pope Francis’s contribution in his writings; he is always emphasizing the interrelationship between global concerns and the insights of local churches responding to those concerns around the world.

There are numerous resources already available that provide excellent introductions to and analysis of the century-old Catholic tradition of social teaching.¹⁹ For that reason, I want only to point out a few examples here of *Fratelli Tutti*’s continuity with and dependence on previous documents in the church’s social teaching. Among the most important themes that appear continually throughout the encyclical is that of the universal and inalienable dignity of the human person. In Paul VI’s 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio* we are reminded that “human

¹⁸ See USCCB, “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions,” June 19, 1998.

¹⁹ For example, see David J. O’Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, expanded ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010); Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching: A Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002); and Kenneth R. Himes, ed., *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005).

dignity is the result of human existence. It is not earned by achievements or bestowed by any authorities other than God.”²⁰ This is also a recurring theme in *Fratelli Tutti*, as Pope Francis critiques the current social and global circumstances that often reduce people’s dignity to an evaluation of their material wealth or demonstrable contributions. John Paul II, in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, also emphasizes this point, noting the ways that economic inequality and poverty diminish the inherent dignity and value of human personhood established by God. Pope Francis cites both of these texts and develops these same themes for our contemporary context.

Likewise, the theme of the common good appears regularly throughout *Fratelli Tutti*. Recognized as the essential goal and purpose of human government, promotion and protection of the common good is something that Catholic social teaching recognizes as flowing from our human vocation as persons in community. Pope Francis draws from *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* again, as well as John Paul II’s 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, at various points throughout *Fratelli Tutti* to reiterate the centrality of the common good and the importance of work in protecting and maintaining human dignity.

Perhaps the most recognizable principle of Catholic social teaching is that of solidarity, which appears in *Fratelli Tutti* more than twenty-five times. Here Pope Francis builds on the work of John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI in emphasizing the interrelatedness of the human family and the importance of our acknowledgment of interdependence. For Pope Francis, solidarity is not merely a theme for the human family alone, but is also something that we are called to recognize in terms of “integral ecology,” as he describes it in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’*. There is an intrinsic relationship humanity has to nonhuman creation, which also calls for greater reflection, discernment, and action on behalf of justice.

²⁰ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (1967), as summarized in DeBerri, *Catholic Social Teaching*, 20.

To be clear, Pope Francis is not merely repeating what has come before him, as inspirational and important as those teachings are. The pope is also *building* on to the tradition of Catholic social teaching, and he does so in at least three notable ways. The first is a clarification about the inadmissibility of the death penalty. Pointing to earlier magisterial teaching that sets the stage, notably John Paul II's 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope Francis emphasizes that "Saint John Paul II stated clearly and firmly that the death penalty is inadequate from a moral standpoint and no longer necessary from that of penal justice. There can be no stepping back from this position. Today we state clearly that 'the death penalty is inadmissible' and the Church is firmly committed to calling for its abolition worldwide" (no. 263). The pope also cites the 2018 revision of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in which the inadmissibility of the death penalty is articulated directly.²¹

The second is a contribution to a millennia-old discussion in the church that dates back to at least Saint Augustine of Hippo (d. 430 CE); that is, what criteria—if any—we can use to evaluate whether war is justified. This topic is less clearly decided in *Fratelli Tutti* than the closed case of the death penalty. When it comes to what is known as the just-war theory, Pope Francis takes a hard look at the realities of our world in these modern times, noting the dire truth that "conditions that favour the outbreak of wars are once again increasing" and, therefore, "if we want true integral human development for all, we must work tirelessly to avoid war between nations and peoples" (no. 257). In response, the pope explains in paragraph 258 that there have been too many false excuses issued by nations and peoples to justify their violent actions and the launchings of wars. Citing the *Catechism's* acknowledgment of the church's longstanding just-war criteria, Pope Francis expresses serious

²¹ See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops regarding the Revision of No. 2267 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the Death Penalty," August 1, 2018.

doubt about whether such conditions could ever be met in an age marked by weapons entirely inconceivable to the great Christian thinkers—like Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274)—who have contributed to the development of just-war theory over the centuries. Pope Francis explains:

At issue is whether the development of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and the enormous and growing possibilities offered by new technologies, have granted war an uncontrollable destructive power over great numbers of innocent civilians. The truth is that “never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely.” We can no longer think of war as a solution, because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits. In view of this, it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a “just war.” Never again war! (no. 258)

While coming just shy of definitively precluding any possibility of a “just” war, the pope signals to theological ethicists, pastoral ministers, and world leaders alike that this remains a pressing and important question.

Finally, while not new for Pope Francis, as demonstrated in his other writings and addresses, the citation of non-Christian sources remains a significant and inspirational inclusion in *Fratelli Tutti*. In particular, the pope opens and closes the encyclical with reference to the encounter he had with Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb in 2019, which resulted in a joint statement on human solidarity and fraternity. Near the very end of *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis cites a long passage from this joint statement (no. 285) and makes reference to it eight other times in the encyclical. He also cites Rabbi Hillel (nos. 59–60), thereby acknowledging insights from leaders of the other Abrahamic religions of Judaism and Islam. The continued emphasis on dialogue, especially within an interreligious context, is a hallmark of Pope Francis’s ministry and outreach, which offers

the church an opportunity to build on the foundational work of the Second Vatican Council, especially its 1965 *Decree on Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*. When it comes to promoting *fraternitas* throughout the whole human family, it cannot be left to Christians alone, but to those of all faith traditions—and no faith tradition at all—to join together in solidarity to work for peace, justice, and the integrity of creation.

The Absence of Women in the Text

Before leaving you to explore the document itself, it is important to note one major issue with *Fratelli Tutti* that has rightly garnered much attention, namely, the absence of women. While Pope Francis does regularly invoke the inclusive phrases “men and women” and “brothers and sisters” throughout the encyclical, it is striking that *no women are cited* in the text. This is jarring and, frankly, disappointing. Prior to the encyclical’s release, as discussed above, there was a lot of consternation about the odd titular choice in naming this encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, an Italian translation of the original Latin phrase (*omnes fratres*) used by Saint Francis when addressing an *entirely male audience* in the 1220s. This is not a critique of Saint Francis, for it would have been very odd in the thirteenth century to use a gender-inclusive address in a setting that included only male Franciscan friars. But there is no clear justification for maintaining the gender exclusivity in a modern language (Italian) in the contemporary context (the year 2020). To many, this was not at all surprising, yet to me it remains a gratuitous oversight that is not really justifiable.

More startling, though, is the absence of women as theological sources or models of Christian discipleship in the text itself. As theologian Meghan Clark notes,

At the very end, despite the pope saying he’s been inspired by “brothers and sisters,” it is only three men Francis lists: Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu, and Mahatma Gandhi. This is particularly striking because

much of the local community-building work called for by this encyclical is practiced and embodied by women, especially within the contexts of migration and post-conflict reconciliation.²²

Indeed, some of the most visible, inspirational, and powerful models of peacemaking, reconciliation, and solidarity have been women. I think of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize recipients Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee of Liberia and Tawakkol Karman of Yemen for their extraordinary contributions to peacemaking efforts.²³ Or, Malala Yousafzai of Pakistan, who shared the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize for her contributions in the “struggle against the suppression of children and young people and for the right of all children to education.”²⁴ Yousafzai was shot in the face by the Taliban for her activism on behalf of the rights of girls and women to receive an education. Or, perhaps Pope Francis could have again cited Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, whom he mentioned as a model for Christian discipleship in his 2015 address to the United States Congress.²⁵ The list could easily continue.

This last part of my introduction is not intended to sour one’s reading of the important encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, nor do I wish to minimize in any way the profound significance of its content. However, it must be stated that the stark absence of women’s voices and female examples cannot be overlooked. *Fratelli Tutti* is indeed a landmark contribution to Catholic social teaching, one that will certainly inspire and challenge men *and* women in living the Christian life more authentically for generations. But the journey toward full inclusivity remains as great a challenge for the church as it does for other communities and nations

²² Meghan Clark, “‘Fratelli Tutti’ Shares Practical Wisdom, But Lacks Insights of Women,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 5, 2020.

²³ See “The Nobel Peace Prize for 2011,” <https://www.nobelprize.org>.

²⁴ See “The Nobel Peace Prize for 2014,” <https://www.nobelprize.org>.

²⁵ See Pope Francis, “Address of the Holy Father: Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress,” September 24, 2015.

around the world. Perhaps it is fitting to close this section with reference to an important passage in the encyclical, which appears without irony, yet remains a challenge to Pope Francis himself and the broader church community: “The organization of societies worldwide is still far from reflecting clearly that women possess the same dignity and identical rights as men. We say one thing with words, but our decisions and reality tell another story” (no. 23).

Conclusion

Pope Francis and his ability to embody many of the core principles of his medieval namesake, Saint Francis of Assisi, continually impress me as a Franciscan friar and theologian. *Fratelli Tutti*, while certainly an imperfect document, nevertheless reflects some of the most important elements of the Franciscan vision of social, ecclesial, and world relationships, all of which ought to begin with the centrality of relationship and the prioritization of the needs of those most vulnerable in our communities. The way this is made manifest in each new time and place is through embracing the distinctively Franciscan principle of *fraternitas*, recognizing that we are always already connected to one another as sisters and brothers, children of the same God who calls us to be reflections of divine mercy, justice, and peace. In a historic moment when both local and global contexts are defined by tremendous division and sectarian polarization, *Fratelli Tutti* offers the church and world a sign of hope and an invitation for readers to become instruments of God’s peace.