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## Current challenges for ecclesial communities in light of “Fratelli tutti”

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As the title itself of the Encyclical states, “Fratelli tutti” is a document on fraternity and social friendship, a pairing that I would dare to say is unprecedented in the history of the Universal Magisterium. From his privileged observation point, the Holy Father reads the reality of the contemporary world and considers certain trends in the world “that hinder the development of universal fraternity” (FT, 9). They pose common challenges for ecclesial communities.

The Holy Father refers to tragically shattered dreams of unity, the culpable lack of a common project for all human beings, the clear absence of a common direction in processes of globalization and development, the systematic breach of human rights at borders, and new forms of oppression of the poor and the vulnerable. Despite this, Pope Francis also sees seeds of goodness and paths of hope in today’s reality that may give new lustre to grand ideals (cf. FT, 10-55).

Considering the mission that the Holy Father has entrusted to the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, I have chosen to analyse the above-listed challenges from a particular angle: the ministry of human mobility. The arrival and presence of many migrants and refugees and the different reactions of host communities enable us to grasp the dangers of the throwaway culture that the Holy Father contrasts sharply, by way of antidote, with the culture of encounter.

Throwaway culture, to which the Holy Father previously referred in his Encyclical Letter “Laudato si’” (cf. LS, 16, 22 and 43), finds in “Fratelli tutti” a different definition that highlights its negative effects on human relations:

Some parts of our human family, it appears, can be readily sacrificed for the sake of others considered worthy of a carefree existence. Ultimately, “persons are no longer seen as a paramount value to be cared for and respected, especially when they are poor and disabled, ‘not yet useful’ – like the unborn – or ‘no longer needed’ – like the elderly. We have grown indifferent to all kinds of wastefulness, starting with the waste of food, which is deplorable in the extreme” (FT, 18).

Throwaway culture clearly applies in the context of migration, where obvious differences make it easier to distinguish “us” from “them”, leading to their exclusion:

Migrants are not seen as entitled like others to participate in the life of society, and it is forgotten that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person... No one will ever openly deny that they are human beings, yet in practice, by our decisions and the way we treat them, we can show that we consider them less worthy, less important, less human. For Christians, this way of thinking and acting is unacceptable, since it sets certain political preferences above deep convictions of our faith: the inalienable dignity of each human person regardless of origin, race or religion, and the supreme law of fraternal love (FT, 39).

Throwaway culture, with its illusion of omnipotence and its creation of a global élite, inexorably leads us to entrench ourselves in our own interests, leads us to isolation and to the death of fraternity. To save humankind and its ideals, so that it can carry out God’s creative project, Pope Francis urges everyone to promote a culture of encounter:

“Life, for all its confrontations, is the art of encounter”. I have frequently called for the growth of a culture of encounter capable of transcending our differences and divisions. This means working to create a many-faceted polyhedron whose different sides form a variegated unity, in which “the whole is greater than the part” (FT, 215).

An encounter with the other puts into place an essential dimension of human existence; the quality of human relations shapes the growth and realization of happiness for every person. “To attain fulfilment in life we need others” (FT, 150). Human beings – adds the Holy Father – cannot “fully know themselves apart from an encounter with other persons” (FT, 87).

All encounters with others are potentially enriching, and this potential is directly proportional to the otherness of the person encountered. The more different or “other” they are, the more that person helps those who meet her to grow in knowledge and humanity.

Pope Francis’s invitation should be viewed from this perspective: as an invitation to favour encounters with those on the peripheries of life, “for they have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centres of power where weighty decisions are made” (FT, 215). The existential peripheries, explained the Holy Father in July 2019, “are densely populated with persons who have been thrown away, marginalized, oppressed, discriminated against, abused, exploited, abandoned, poor and suffering” (*Homily*, 8 July 2019).

On the existential peripheries, we find many migrants, refugees, displaced persons, and victims of human trafficking, who “have become emblems of exclusion. In addition to the hardships that their condition entails, they are often looked down upon and considered the source of all society’s ills” (*Message for the 105<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees*). Renouncing encounter with them means giving up “the gift present in an encounter with those outside one’s own circle” (FT, 90); it means losing “an opportunity for enrichment and the integral human development of all” (FT, 133).

The encounter to which the Holy Father refers is not a chance or improvised encounter, but a deliberate way of life that becomes a passion, a constant commitment to “seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone” (FT, 216). This encounter helps all parties involved to grow in humanity, as Pope Francis clearly explained in a 2016 speech: “Opening ourselves to others does not lead to impoverishment but rather enrichment, because it enables us to be more human: to recognize ourselves as participants in a greater collectivity and to understand our life as a gift for others; to see as the goal, not our own interests, but rather the good of humanity” (*Address at the “Heydar Aliyev” Mosque, Baku, Azerbaijan, 2 October 2016*).

In this context, it is interesting to observe that the Holy Father chose the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10, 25-37) to illustrate the dynamics of the encounter that is an enrichment in humanity. This very special encounter is often used to explain the meaning of “neighbour” in the evangelical sense: love of this neighbour is the basis on which we will be judged worthy or unworthy of eternal life. However, Pope Francis identifies a different meaning in this parable: “the parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbours, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good” (FT, 67).

The encounter described in the Parable can be summarised with four verbs that are closely interrelated: to acknowledge, to be compassionate, to be close, to take care.

The first verb is to “acknowledge” a brother or sister in need. But in order to acknowledge them, it is first important to “acknowledge” their presence. Those who retreat inwards, ignore others, or are indifferent, cannot see the neighbour beaten and abandoned along the road (cf. FT, 73). Acknowledging that our brother or sister is our neighbour requires a further effort, especially if they do not “belong to our social group” (FT, 81). Besides this immanent dimension of fraternity, there is also a transcendent one, relying upon what Jesus Christ clearly revealed: “I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Mt 25, 40). Therefore, the Christian is called “to recognize Christ himself in each of our abandoned or excluded brothers and sisters” (FT, 85). From this perspective, the

culture of encounter is transformed into a “theology” of encounter and, equally, a “theophany” of encounter.

The second step is “to be compassionate”. In this case, too, we can consider the immanent dimension that entails the Samaritan’s capacity to understand the suffering of the poor traveller, to be moved and feel empathy. “We cannot be indifferent to suffering; we cannot allow anyone to go through life as an outcast. Instead, we should feel indignant, challenged to emerge from our comfortable isolation and to be changed by our contact with human suffering” (FT, 68). At the same time, the transcendent dimension proposes divine compassion as a model. As Pope Francis explained in 2015, “God’s compassion is to place himself in the difficulty, to put himself in the situation of the other, with his Fatherly heart”, and “this is why he sent his Son” (*Morning meditation*, 30 October 2015).

The third step is “to be close”. The Holy Father stresses that the Samaritan “became a neighbour to the wounded Judean. By approaching and making himself present, he crossed all cultural and historical barriers” (FT, 81). In his message for the 106<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope Francis explained that such barriers generate fears and prejudices that “keep us distant from others and often prevent us from ‘becoming neighbours’ to them and serving them with love.” Being neighbours means involving ourselves personally, giving others the most precious thing that we have: time! Certainly, the Samaritan “had his own plans for that day, his own needs, commitments and desires. Yet he was able to put all that aside when confronted with someone in need. Without even knowing the injured man, he saw him as deserving of his time and attention” (FT, 63). To be close means to be ready to “get our hands dirty”. And “Jesus gave us the greatest example of this when he washed the feet of his disciples: he took off his cloak, knelt down and dirtied his hands” (*Message for the 106<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees*).

The fourth step is “to take care”. Following in the footsteps of the Samaritan, the Holy Father urges us to “bandage the wounds” of every “existential foreigner” (97) and all the “hidden exiles” (98), pouring “oil and wine” on them. Oil, wine and bandages symbolize the tools that we are called to use to soothe and heal, which range from attentive listening to saying the right word; from medical to psychological assistance; from restoring trust to restoring personal dignity. Taking care means partaking in the other person’s suffering. This long-term commitment transforms us into “traveling companions”, friends, walking along the same road towards a common destination. And when we realize that we cannot do everything alone, then we must do what the Samaritan did as he took the wounded man to an inn. “The Samaritan discovered an innkeeper who would care for the man; we too are called to unite as a family that is stronger than the sum of small individual members.” For “the whole is greater than the part, but it is also greater than the sum of its parts” (FT, 78).

Encounter is a challenge that helps us grow in humanity and concerns us all, as no one can opt out. "All of us have a responsibility for the wounded, those of our own people and all the peoples of the earth. Let us care for the needs of every man and woman, young and old, with the same fraternal spirit of care and closeness that marked the Good Samaritan" (FT, 79). In his visit to Lampedusa in 2013, Pope Francis recalled this common responsibility: "'Where is your brother?' His blood cries out to me, says the Lord. This is not a question directed to others; it is a question directed to me, to you, to each of us." (*Homily*, 8 July 2013). The question is clear and demands an answer from each of us, because as the Holy Father says, "here and now, anyone who is neither a robber nor a passer-by is either injured himself or bearing an injured person on his shoulders" (FT, 70).

However, we must acknowledge that committing to this encounter, spreading a culture of encounter, is not easy. In "*Fratelli tutti*", Pope Francis highlights two preparatory actions that imply two different movements: overcoming fears and transcending borders.

A natural instinct of self-defence often leads us to feel doubtful and fearful towards others, especially foreigners and migrants. But we are called to move beyond "those primal reactions" because "there is a problem when doubts and fears condition our way of thinking and acting to the point of making us intolerant, closed and perhaps even - without realizing it - racist. In this way, fear deprives us of the desire and the ability to encounter the other" (FT, 41). Ecclesial communities should always be reminded that it is Jesus Christ who seeks to be encountered in the brother and sister knocking on our doors. As the Holy Father reasserted in February 2019, "it is really Him, even if our eyes struggle to recognise Him: with torn clothes, his distorted face, his wounded body, unable to speak our language" (*Homily*, 15 February 2019).

In the Encyclical Letter "*Fratelli tutti*", Pope Francis insists repeatedly on the need to transcend borders to prepare for the encounter with the other. First, the Holy Father refers to the geographical and political borders that end up defining the imbalance between those who enjoy the most resources and those who are left with nothing in the modern world. "If every human being possesses an inalienable dignity, if all people are my brothers and sisters, and if the world truly belongs to everyone, then it matters little whether my neighbour was born in my country or elsewhere" (FT, 125). However, Pope Francis also refers to the social, cultural, economic, and religious borders that are erected to distinguish "us" from the "them". As a result, "new walls are erected for self-preservation, the outside world ceases to exist and leaves only 'my' world, to the point that others, no longer considered human beings possessed of an inalienable dignity, become only 'them'" (FT, 27).

Even if the challenge posed by an encounter that helps us grow in humanity is addressed to all of humanity, ecclesial communities must feel called out by name, so to speak. Quoting Saint John Chrysostom, the Holy Father urges all Christians thus: "Do you wish to honour the body of the Saviour? Do not despise it when it is naked. Do not honour it in church with silk vestments while outside it is naked and numb with cold'. Paradoxically, those who claim to be unbelievers can sometimes put God's will into practice better than believers" (FT, 74). Ecclesial communities, called to be living witnesses of the coming of the Kingdom of God, are entrusted with the task of conjugating verbs of encounter in the first person, both singular and plural. This necessarily starts with listening. "We must not lose our ability to listen" (FT, 48). Listening to the territory and the inhabitants of the existential peripheries is a *conditio sine qua non* to identify spaces of exclusion and to lay the foundations for encounter.

Ecclesial communities are called to listen today to the "cry" of the People of God, who are often "silent", as they suffocate in tears of suffering, and "silenced", because they are disturbing and unsettling. However, the Lord has given us the Holy Spirit to discern His plan without letting the illusions of this world distract us. Let me conclude with the Holy Father's prayer: "Lord, [...] pour forth into our hearts a fraternal spirit and inspire in us a dream of renewed encounter, dialogue, justice and peace. Move us to create healthier societies and a more dignified world, a world without hunger, poverty, violence and war" (FT, *Prayer to the Creator*).