



DICASTERY FOR PROMOTING
INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

“Fratelli Tutti”!

“Brothers and Sisters: From the Same Womb”

When I was a young lad growing up and studying classical languages, I learned that, in Greek, the words for a *brother* and a *sister* meant, etymologically “from the same womb (*a-delphos/a-delphē*).” This expression has stayed with me and helped me understand several puzzling situations in life. For, if *brothers* and *sisters* are united by the fact of their origin from the same womb, then they are united in dignity, united in honour, united in rights, while maintaining differences in attitudes and habits; and the rest of humanity is so constituted – *products of wombs, brothers and sisters* all of us! This is the message of the beginning chapters of the Bible (Gen.1-4).

The same beginning chapters of the Bible which describe an ontological communion between *brothers* and *sisters* go on to translate this relationship into a brotherly conduct and the function and activity of *caring* or *the exercise of an oversight over each other for their safety and wellbeing*. This is what God expected of Cain with the question: “*Where is your brother Abel*”? But it is also the brotherly conduct and role which Cain rejected with his response: “*I do not know: am I my brother’s keeper* (*shômer* = שומר Gen.4:9). God, however, extends this brotherly conduct and responsibility of the human person also over the earth (creation). Adam was introduced by God into the garden not only to *till* it. Adam was also to *care* (שמר) for it (Gen.2:15): Adam was, as it were, to behave towards the garden as a *brother/sister* behaves towards another *brother/sister*.

The creation account was written very long, indeed, about two thousand years, before the days of St. Francis of Assisi; but their presentation of brotherly ties between the human person and creation, prepared St. Francis to sing about the elements of creation, as if they are his *kin: brother sun, sister moon*, in his hymn of creation. Thus, *fraternity* is like an ontological glue that holds everything created in a bond of *care* and in a *culture of caring*.

These biblical stories and very many similar stories in other cultures make Pope Francis observe: “*These ancient stories, full of symbolism, bear witness to a conviction which we today share, that everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others*” (LS. 70). Indeed, in the introduction of his Encyclical Letter, *Laudato si*, Pope Francis speaks of the “*conviction that everything in the world is connected*” (LS.16), and then goes on to observe that the reality of the interconnectedness of all things is a revealed truth found in the very first chapters of the book of *Genesis*. Accordingly, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also teaches that “*God wills the interdependence of creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other*’ (§ 340).

To this biological and ontological characterization of our human family and creation, as coming from the same womb, St. Francis of Assisi adds a spiritual basis for the *brotherly ties* that must exist between all that exists.

With his spoliation, Francis did not say “*no and goodbye*” to the world; rather he found himself really saying “*hello*”. He was free -- free to go, free to do, free to be. With no master but Christ, and no possession but his soul, he was free. In his poverty, he found the means to pursue and to live his relationship with all, starting with his religious family, and extending it to Sultans. Thus, it is said that in his religious family, Francis was not a *leader*. He was a *brother*; and his followers were a “*band of brothers*”. It appears, then, that for Francis, the only relationship available for one to live in was that of *brotherhood*; and when this relationship was with everything that existed, as creation of God, then Francis lived in a *universal brotherhood* with all creation. His belief also in the universal ability and duty of all creatures to

praise God made him see creation as sharing with him the same vocation to the praise of God, the Creator. And so, from a vocation to a *universal praise of God, the Creator*,¹ Francis derived a vocation to a *universal brotherhood*.

The affirmation of the *universal brotherhood /sisterhood* of the members of the human family , however, needs to reckon with palpable differences. I am from Africa, and many are from Europe and from the Near and Far East, and you can see our differences. If we are physically so different, can we still talk about being one: related by origin? Yes, we can. The womb which makes us all one can be the womb of our parents (Gen.4); but it is also the womb of mother earth, the planet out of which our bodies are drawn and which feeds us (Gen.2-3). We are one because we share a common womb of world culture, which determines what we study and what we pay attention to and how our lives are guided. We share a common womb of history, with all the world wars and everything that has happened, and has brought us to this point. And, lately, we also recognize that we share the common womb of a climate crisis and a healthcare threat and crisis: the covid-19 pandemic.

We are all, in so many ways, from the same womb. This, then, should lead to a common sense of our human dignity that does not leave anybody behind.²

But in the reality of life, some are left behind along the roadside, left behind in culture, left behind in development, left behind in income, left behind in education. All kinds of experiences separate us and make us unequal and uneven, incurring various types of “*human dignity deficits*.”

So, let us consider the pressing climate crisis and this pandemic, as wake-up calls to repair the fractures of inequality, negligence, indifference and the throw-away culture that the course of history and the challenges of cultural civilizations have created within the human family. The wisdom of the need for such a *repair of fractures* we learn from the Old Testament celebration of the *Jubilee Year*. After fifty (50) years the *Jubilee horn* sounds and the indebted, enslaved, insolvents etc. are set free and given a *new lease of life*, “*so that there is no poor one in your midst*” (Dt.15:5).

¹ Cf. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. and Dennis Nolan, *Saint Francis: A Life of Joy* (NY, Hyperion, 2005)., pg.2.

² At the presentation of the SDGs at the Plenary Assembly of the United Nations (September 2015), the Secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki.Moon, described the SDGs, as “*a human dignity narrative that leaves non one behind*”.

Let us go looking for our brothers and sisters whose humanity and dignity are dimmed and reduced to a flicker by modern day slavery and human trafficking. Let us go looking for our brothers who are discarded and left behind, abandoned or left along the roadside of brothels and domestic slavery.

Let us go looking for the men and women whose absence makes us feel less whole, as a community, and less wholesome, and bring them all together to make real the unity and the wholesomeness of the human family of God's creation.

*For, we know that God works all things together
for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to His
purpose!*

*For those God foreknew, He also predestined
to be conformed to the image of His Son,
so that He would be the firstborn among many brothers.*

(Rom.8:28-29).