
All Brothers. Mons. Víctor Fernández: “There can be no freedom and no equality without all-inclusive human fraternity”

In fraternity dwells “the mystery of authentic human existence”, Pope Francis writes in the new Encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (All Brothers), presented yesterday, October 4th, Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. “This is clearly noticeable in the encyclical”, points out Msgr. **Víctor Manuel Fernández**, Argentinean, Archbishop of La Plata, theologian, former dean of the Catholic University of Argentina. SIR asked the Pope's personal theologian, also an expert on Francis and his thoughts, for an interpretation and critique of the new encyclical, where, in the words of Bishop Fernández, “everything is openness”, and which exemplifies Francis as a “role model of dialogue.” **How can Francis’ new encyclical be best described?** I would call it the great social testament of Pope Francis. It reflects and deepens his understanding of major social themes which he expanded first as Archbishop and then as Pope. *Laudato Si'* is a powerful prophetic text on the care of our common home, but it should be said that Francis made little mention of this theme on previous occasions. *Fratelli Tutti* is an all new prophetic appeal in response to the pandemic, which brings together his finest thoughts, mature reflections developed and consolidated over time. **Every page of this document conveys openness, the dream of a “love that transcends barriers” and borders. What is the relevance of this proposal when confronted with our “closed world”, as the Pope himself denounces?** Everything in this encyclical is marked by openness. In fact, it is in itself a great act of openness and dialogue with the world. Francis is addressing everyone. For this reason, on various occasions he says “for Christians this means...”. Clearly he is speaking to be understood by all. The title is itself an indication of this extraordinary openness. It bears special relevance, however, for it is addressed to a world that was becoming increasingly closed. The worst thing that can happen in a time of pandemic such as the present one is to respond with a closed world. **On close inspection, an encyclical always has universal significance, but in *Fratelli tutti* it is particularly evident, as you acknowledge, that the Pope is addressing humankind regardless of their religious beliefs or ideologies. At the same time, it highlights the role of religions at the service of human fraternity. Is this perspective revolutionary?** This had already occurred with *Laudato Si'*. It was read by many agnostics, including its theological passages, which in fact did not disturb them and conveyed a message directed to them too.

However, while Francis speaks to everyone, he does not do so concealing his Christian faith.

From this perspective he proposes the parable of the Good Samaritan, and occasionally clarifies: “for us this is made possible only by God's grace.” Moreover, in the last chapter, he offers a heartfelt and poetic tribute to our Christian perspective. Yet, there is nothing in the text that stands in the way of everyone reading it, for Francis is a master of dialogue with the world. **Could the parable of the Good Samaritan, illustrated by Pope Francis in the second chapter, actually represent a Gospel icon for this time of pandemic?** Without a doubt. Francis is very fond of this parable. In fact, most of this chapter refers to a homily he delivered at a Te Deum celebrated in Buenos Aires. The metaphor of the same boat, used not long ago, now acquires greater concreteness in the figure of the Good Samaritan, for there can be no authentic universal fraternity if we fail to include the last, the wounded, the ones abandoned on the side of the road. **The pandemic highlighted the fragility and precariousness of freedom and equality in the absence of human fraternity. In your opinion, what is the deepest meaning of human fraternity in the Pope's understanding?** For him, freedom and equality are idle dreams in the absence of an all-inclusive human fraternity, whose universal nature is not only geographical but also existential. Francis tells us that “this is part of the mystery of authentic human existence.” And it stands out in the encyclical: fraternity helps us direct

our lives along an authentic path, leading us towards true humaneness.

Freedom does not bring happiness if we fail to embrace our fellow other.

In the current situation, how important is an authentic balance between the global and local dimensions, between openness and staying grounded? What is missing to reach this balance? Francis developed this theme in *Evangelii Gaudium*, reflected in one of his celebrated principles: "The whole is grater than the part." In that context, Francis explained the innate tension between globalization and localization (EG 234-235). Now, in *Fratelli tutti*, he adds a new and deeper elaboration of this theme, since it is necessary to clarify that universal openness differs from abstract universalism, which despises one's homeland and people. At the same time, it highlights the fact that love for one's homeland should embrace, and allow itself to be enriched by, other peoples. In his post-synodal exhortation *Querida Amazonia* Francis pointed to the need to be always open to new forms of cultural relations, including new "mestizaje." This is clearly one of the central points of All Brothers, in fact, Francis addresses this issue in two different chapters. **The chapter on politics provides a clear and sound explanation of the Pope's perspective, notably his preference for popular, non-populist politics. Is that so?** It certainly does. If they do not understand it now, they never will. Much has been said about Francis' political outlook, but now we have no doubts as to what that outlook amounts to. While some people complain because Francis speaks about politics, here he has the courage to dedicate an entire chapter to politics. *In the explanation of the true meaning of the term "popular", devoid of the flaws of populism, the integral and balanced thought of Francis stands out.* I am confident that many people will be positively impressed by these paragraphs, although it is expected that others will feel offended and react badly to the Pope's proposal. **Human fraternity might experience tears and contention. How important is the dimension of reconciliation in today's world?** Actually, Francis has always favoured the notion of "social friendship", for the word "reconciliation" is often manipulated and understood as a way to deny reality, to renounce justice, to overlook the gravity of past events. The phrase "social friendship", in the subtitle, illuminates the meaning of his invitation to re-encounter, reconciliation and forgiveness. Also on this subject, Francis has a very well-balanced approach, as he advocates unclouded memory and clear, direct and honest discussion, with no concealments or deceptiveness, precisely because that which cannot be denied, forgotten and concealed, can be forgiven. **How will the world emerge from this pandemic? Are you optimistic? And which fundamental tools does *Fratelli tutti* offer in this respect?** It's hard to imagine: some will come out of it in a state of despair only to resume consumption. Having been locked up for a long time and without the possibility of buying, travelling, spending, some will only want to make up for lost time. Others have allowed themselves to be challenged by reality, reflecting on the meaning of their lives, crying at the sight of other people's suffering. Those are the ones who will emerge stronger. Politics responded differently in different countries. Overall, it seems to me that Europe has responded better than the United States or Brazil, for example. What will follow after all this, we shall see. I am not very optimistic because I am aware of human fragility. But I am hopeful, and the Pope's invitation to resume the path of love, expressed in so many beautiful, varied and complete ways, might serve as a powerful encouragement. (*) *journalist, "La vita del popolo"*

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