

## Fratelli tutti

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*On the eve of the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, 4 October 2020, Pope Francis published his third encyclical letter. It seems to summarize the social dimension of his pontificate and it is telling that once again he uses a phrase from his patron saint as Pope to define the encyclical. Just as Saint Francis explicitly invited his fellow brothers and sisters to experience and promote mutual love and to love all without distinction or preference, so Pope Francis invites us to develop and promote fraternity and social friendship in our concrete world today.*

*The encyclical is largely composed of quotations from the addresses he has given in many places during the last seven years of his pontificate, in which the guidelines he wanted to give to the world as leader of the Church are now formally established and put into a clear framework. He also makes use of texts sent to him through bishops' conferences. It sounds like his testament, in which he takes stock of his pontificate. He also regularly refers to his previous encyclical *Laudato Si'* and to social encyclicals of his illustrious predecessors.*

*There were many reactions from the Catholic community right away, mostly positive, but the publication of the encyclical did not go unnoticed on a global scale either. After all, the themes that the Pope addresses affect everyone and the entire world order. It can therefore certainly not remain an inner-church document but rather invite communities, both local, national, and international, to reflect and hopefully to take action. A serious reading of this text cannot and will not leave anyone unmoved. It is like an extensive examination of conscience as to how we build our lives in community: do we do it as individuals, enveloping ourselves in devastating indifference or competition with one another, or do we do it as brothers and sisters in love for one another?*

*Everyone will read this encyclical from their specific background, from their own life story, and from the position they have in society. I wish to do so as the person in charge within an international congregation that fulfils a clear mission in the world, more specifically in the world of education and health care, on the basis of its own charism. As a method I choose a short summary of each chapter followed by a more personal reflection. May it be a space and an invitation in which everyone can make their own reflection for themselves and for the group to which they belong.*

#### 1. Dark clouds over a closed world

The first chapter will be described by many as rather gloomy and pessimistic. It gives a razor-sharp analysis of the current world view and the partial destruction of the dream of being able to grow towards a greater unification on a global level. First of all, it points to the rising trend of a certain nationalism, in which countries and peoples adopt a superior attitude towards others. It seems to be an illusion that what the global

economy is trying to impose on us is a unique cultural model. It is a model that does lead the world towards greater virtual unity, but at the same time it further divides individuals and nations. Instead of the greater closeness that should result from it, the distance between each other is growing. It is a growing globalization that does not, however, prompt us to grow in fraternity with each other. Some seem to forget their history and others deny their tradition, which leads to new forms of cultural colonialism. People who deny their history and their traditions lose their souls, their spiritual identity, their acquired morality and, finally, their ideological, economic, and political independence. In the end, what do the terms democracy, freedom, justice, and unity still mean? These have become hollow terms that are now used to dominate others. The concern for our common home, which the world is after all, is by no means a concern for the economic powers that are only interested in making a quick profit. Who are the first victims here? The poor, people with disabilities who are not considered useful to this global economy, unborn children who are not yet included, and the elderly who have become a burden. With the falling birth rate, there is a strong growth in the older population, which is suffering from ever-increasing loneliness and neglect, which emerged so poignantly during the recent and current pandemic. Greater inequalities are emerging between population groups with the development of new forms of poverty.

It seems that human rights are not the same for all people in the world. One cannot turn a blind eye to the gross discrimination that keeps rearing its ugly head time and again. If the dignity of human beings were respected and the rights of all were recognized, fresh and creative initiatives would emerge that would further the common good. Now we often see the opposite happening, and it is painful to see that what was solemnly proclaimed 70 years ago is far from being a reality and is certainly not respected everywhere. Severe forms of injustice dominate the world view fuelled by aberrant anthropological visions aimed at so-called control of the world's population and an economic model aimed solely at the acquisition of profit, which does not shy away from exploiting, excluding, or even killing people.

Are women's rights guaranteed everywhere? What stain on our civilization are the new forms of slavery, perpetuated by criminal networks?

How many wars are not waged and how many persecutions do not take place based on racial or religious grounds? It is like a third world war fought piecemeal. What always perishes first is the spirit of fraternity, which should be the cement and the calling of our human family. Nowadays, a so-called stability and peace are often propagated based on a mentality of fear and mutual distrust. This can never bring true peace. In a world where walls are being erected to shield oneself from others because one supposedly fears the other, one cannot speak of peace. Instead, it promotes a mentality of fear, insecurity, loneliness, and creates a terrain for mafia groups.

Looking at the world, we cannot deny the great advances in science, technology, medicine, industry, and the standard of living of people in developed countries. But is it proportionate to the same progress morally and spiritually? There is something profoundly wrong here. How can it be that where such progress reigns there is an icy

silence, a total indifference to a totally different reality worldwide where, because of grave injustices and political crises, millions of children are dying of hunger? Is this the result of globalization, in which we should be striving for shared growth towards greater justice worldwide?

The COVID-19 pandemic proved that we are all in the same boat where no one can save themselves on their own. It turned out to be a confrontation of how necessary it is for us to achieve greater cooperation on a global scale. Apparently, very little has been learned from the past financial crisis and people have very quickly fallen back into a mentality of every man for himself. What will be the next step at a global level once this pandemic has been beaten? Will it soon be forgotten, with everyone falling back on themselves? And, in the ongoing fight against COVID-19 and its prevention, will the so-called 'useless' groups once again be relegated to second place? These are confronting questions that we must dare to ask ourselves. The only way forward is to grow towards a community where mutual belonging and solidarity become real priorities.

Another social pain we are facing today is that of the issue of refugees. Never before have so many people been on the run in search of greater security for themselves and their families. Of course, when it comes to world politics, everything should be done to ensure that people can stay in their own countries and do not have to flee. That should be and remain the primary option. But reality is different. That is why we cannot close our eyes to this global tragedy that we are facing today. Especially the way in which these people are deprived of their human dignity and are treated in an inhumane manner. Do refugees suddenly have less value, less importance, and have fewer rights simply because they are refugees? We are aware that we are facing a difficult problem here, in which fear is often the basis for various forms of exclusion. However, let us also continue to see the positive side of the greater intercultural and even interreligious exchange that this migration can entail.

Today, we are living in the heyday of communication. But is this great progress always used in a positive way? New forms of criminal activity are emerging through these media, as well as personal addictions and the illusion that a virtual world can replace the real world. In the wake of this, we are witnessing a growing individualism which, among other things, manifests itself in an aforementioned xenophobia and a disdain for the vulnerable. Platforms are being created via the internet where all forms of extremism can be expressed and organized. The fact is that virtual communication can never replace personal encounters. True wisdom grows through living encounters with reality and not by surfing the internet for hours on end every day to gather seemingly endless information. One might wonder if one is not losing the capacity of listening to each other in the process.

Another phenomenon we should mention is the way in which certain countries behave superior to others and dominate them, thereby blocking local development and

imposing on them strange ideologies that are in stark contrast to their own traditions and morals.

*Yes, quite a lot to take in, but still an urgent invitation not to bury our heads in the sand and pretend that it does not concern us. The strength of Pope Francis is precisely that he does not stop calling on us to break our complacency and to feel jointly responsible for the common good. The first step is to become more and more aware of reality and to do so in an objective and correct way, without allowing ourselves to be dragged along by opinion formers who have intentions other than to proclaim the truth. The greatest malady that emerges here is a growing individualism, which is developing into a political and economic model and which undermines the realization that we are all each other's brothers and sisters and that we are responsible for each other and for the common good. A first step and thought must always be: what do I and my specific community in which I live have to do with this? The danger is that we hide behind the excuse that we are not world politicians or big industrialists who can set trends because of the power and money they have. "Be the change you wish to see in the world" is a well-known saying that also applies here. For many phenomena that we see evolving on a global level and that are being considered here, we also see on a small scale in our own hearts and in the small communities to which we belong. So, let us be self-critical and ask ourselves how our social fraternity and love are doing. And with that we move on to the next chapter that wants to go deeper into precisely that.*

## 2. A stranger on the road

In a typical Ignatian style, Pope Francis analyses the parable of the Good Samaritan as a contemplative orientation in order to develop a path of true social love and solidarity. Referencing the question that God asked Cain after he killed his brother Abel: "Where is your brother?" (Gen 4:9) with the appalling answer: "Am I my brother's keeper?" refers to the heart of the problem: one can withdraw from caring for the other, for one's neighbour in a tragic way. Based on this realization, Jewish tradition has elevated love for one's neighbour as a commandment. However, it was still too limited to one's own kinsmen. It is this limitation that Jesus radically breaks with the parable of the Good Samaritan and makes the commandment of love a universal commandment that excludes no one. The memory of having been foreigners themselves helped the Jews to develop a specific concern for foreigners.

The parable describes a sharp contrast between those who do things by the book and continue on their way undisturbed and the Samaritan who is moved by the stranger on the wayside. The question Jesus asks next with whom one wants to identify is therefore a confrontational one. Referring to today, we must conclude that we have made great progress in so many areas, but often remain illiterate when it comes to the concrete care of our neighbours in need. Many people's first concern often remains not to want to be disturbed by the problems of others. However, the only path that remains open to us is precisely the one taken by the Samaritan: opening up to our vulnerable neighbours and preventing ourselves from evolving into a society in which the weak

are excluded. In fact, indifference to the suffering of one's neighbour goes against our human nature, because we were created as each other's neighbours and are called upon to become each other's neighbours more and more. Every day we are confronted with the same story and the question is which choice we make: the priest's and the Levite's, who, indifferent to the suffering of the other, continue on their way, or the Samaritan's, who allows himself to be moved by the suffering of the other. These are the two groups of people we see today. The story of the Good Samaritan therefore remains a very topical one.

Actually, the story starts with robbers attacking the man. This, too, remains a regrettable reality to see how much aggression there is today and in which people become victims. How do we deal with this, what do we do to prevent it, and what do we do to help the victims of this aggression?

It is very striking that Jesus uses the very example of a priest and a Levite, two religious people who are assumed to observe the commandments to the letter. He points out the danger of engaging only with worship within the Church and neglecting the concrete concern for our neighbours at the same time. Believing in God and worshipping him in church does not necessarily mean living according to his will. The words of Saint John Chrysostom are striking, indicating that we would rather honour a nicely dressed image of Jesus than a naked Jesus on the cross.

Those who close their eyes, like the priest and the Levite, to the suffering of those who fell into the hands of robbers become accomplices to the crime that was committed! They continue the crime so to speak. Something to think seriously about.

Sometimes we hear that the safety and care of our neighbours in need is the responsibility of the government, of society as such. This is true, but that should not stop us from taking action ourselves when we come across a suffering person. Shirking our responsibility is always wrong. On the contrary, it is important to involve others, as the Samaritan did, and encourage them to help us care for each other. Because together we can always do more than on our own.

What is also striking is that not a word of thanks is uttered in the parable. The Samaritan leaves without waiting for a reply from the person he helped. The dedication in the service itself gives him the greatest satisfaction, that is enough for him, because he was only doing his duty.

The story of the Good Samaritan overturns all the restrictions that had crept into the commandment of love. All cultural and historical boundaries are lifted from it. Everyone should feel called to become the other person's neighbour, without limitations. Of course, it was powerful that Jesus took a Samaritan as an example, someone who was considered impure by the Jews and should therefore be avoided. So, bridges are being built on both sides!

A final consideration is that this parable should always be read in conjunction with the judgment criteria in which Jesus declares that everything that is done for the poorest and weakest is done for him. Jesus himself is present in every brother and sister who is abandoned or excluded.

The Church, too, has taken a while to condemn all forms of slavery and certain forms of violence, but with the current development of theology in this field, we no longer have any excuse. It is therefore our duty to condemn in the strongest possible terms any form of self-enclosed nationalism and xenophobia.

*The parable of the Good Samaritan is a true icon for our Congregation as well, in which our charism of charity is vividly present. It is not without reason that this scene was chosen for the stained-glass window placed in the National Basilica of Koekelberg in Brussels on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Congregation. It is also featured on the memorial stone that was placed in the chapel of the brothers in Eindhoven, on a stained-glass window in our convent rest home in Zelzate, and on the tabernacle of our international novitiate in Nairobi. But at the same time, we are constantly called upon to repel and transcend all limits of our love for our neighbour. And this is about the concrete love we must give to our neighbours in need on our path, the way in which we as a community are open to the poor in our neighbourhood, the way in which we continue to give real priority to caring for the least in our apostolate and let our choices be determined by it.*

### 3. Envisaging and engendering an open world

After a picture of the situation and the parable as an inspiration as to how things can be done, the following five chapters are devoted to concrete paths to a world where more social love prevails and areas where this needs to be practised in a very special way. In passing, a number of clear positions are formulated, as well.

This third chapter makes a plea to grow towards an open world, where there is room for all. Human beings are created to live together with others, even more so, to enter into a relationship with every neighbour that is marked by love. Everyone is therefore called to move beyond themselves, to break the cocoon of their own existence, and to make room in their lives for being together with others. This relationship with others makes us grow as human beings, and enables us to expand our circle of relationships and grow a spirit of hospitality within us. How uniquely this was lived in monastic communities, as early as the early Middle Ages, where welcoming guests was an important task and was lived as a concrete fulfilment of the commandment of love for one's neighbour.

Love is at the heart of our existence and must also be the heart of every believer. Love can never take second place and cannot be replaced by a persistent struggle to defend certain ideological interpretations of faith. If defending is necessary, it must be done with and in love. The greatest danger in our lives is not to love! That is why every form of hospitality and friendship will be deeply marked by love. It is love that drives us to seek, find, and cultivate the best in every neighbour's life.

Love breaks down all barriers, both geographical and existential. It should be our ability to constantly broaden our horizons and create more and more space in our lives for the presence of the other. Any form of exclusion of another person because of race,

colour, or faith must be foreign to us. In this inclusion that we are developing, we want to pay special attention to people with disabilities and the elderly, who today often lead marginal lives in society and are considered more of a burden.

Today, our attention is particularly drawn to the way in which we open or close our borders to refugees. Referring to the parable, refugees are seen by some as the man lying there on the wayside, disturbing our walk. One does not want to be disturbed and so one looks for ways and means to shield and protect oneself and one's own community. The term 'neighbour' is completely eroded and people only want to head out with those who can easily be accepted as a partner. That is why freedom, equality, and fraternity must always go hand in hand. Fraternity is the true humus for the desired freedom and equality. Without fraternity, we are driven towards ever-increasing individualism, which is a real viral infection for the further development of our community and must therefore be radically opposed.

Our basic principle must be that all human beings have the right to live in dignity and to develop themselves fully, and this right cannot and must not be ignored by any country. If this is not respected, we will become a society with diverse groups: those who have the opportunity to realize their full potential in life and those who do not, sinking into an ever-increasing marginality, which, as we can see in certain major cities, is becoming a source of growing aggression. When it is only the economic return that counts, many fall by the wayside, which, unfortunately, we are increasingly witnessing today, and all that remains of fraternity is a vague romantic slogan. The only orientation for our actions towards each other and also for the harmonious development of a society is the common good we want to promote. The common good refers to *benevolentia*, willing the good of others. In order to achieve this, we must go down the path of solidarity, treating solidarity as a moral virtue and a social attitude. It must be rooted in family upbringing and further education in schools. Young people need to be guided in the development of conscientious action in the moral, spiritual, and social spheres, which should be tested in practice and further developed through concrete forms of service, especially towards the fragile neighbour. Solidarity grows when people increasingly think in terms of the well-being of the community and no longer see their own prosperity, which is preached by the realm of money, as the only way to complete well-being. Here, the principle applies that private property can never be made absolute at the expense of the universal destination of goods. This principle can never remain a theory but must become visible and tangible in our attitude and commitment towards the poor. It is the only way to achieve a more equitable distribution of the resources at our disposal, to which we can never claim the absolute exclusive right.

This is also where the call sounds that entrepreneurship must never be aimed at the accumulation of property without taking account of human rights and the common good. They can be expected to pay attention to decent employment. Every government should set as its objective to give all citizens sufficient land, a roof over their heads,

and work. Internationally, we cannot remain insensitive to the development of those countries that are experiencing great difficulties, and we must seek to reduce the debt burden that grips certain countries and nips any form of further development in the bud and to pay it off in a way that is feasible.

*Once again, we need to ask ourselves how we can develop and shape these basic principles for the development of an open world in our own environment. It would be a mistake to hide behind political decisions and thereby shirk our responsibility to promote this open world. The words fraternity and solidarity call for concrete action. The fact that we call ourselves 'brothers' can be a powerful signal to promote fraternity in our environment and to put it into action, especially to those who miss out on any experience of fraternity in their lives. In many regions, we face the problem of refugees. As a congregation, we cannot turn a blind eye to this issue and, once again, it is a matter of developing small acts of love through concrete actions. The way in which we deal with our own resources, the resources of the community, of the region, and of the entire Congregation, should be inspired by a well-considered solidarity by which we also make a concrete contribution to a more equal development in the different parts of the Congregation. Let us not fall into the trap of considering the resources of the Congregation as 'private resources', only concerned with our own well-being and therefore allowing ourselves to be trapped in statistics with which banks like to claim us and advise us to set aside sufficient reserves for our own future. While not ruling out a justified concern for our own survival, solidarity explicitly asks us to share with others, and this on the basis of our shared responsibility for the growth of the general welfare of the entire Congregation.*

#### 4. A heart open to the whole world

This chapter looks at a very topical problem and discusses how we can deal with it in an evangelically responsible fashion.

The problem of migration, which is dealt with in detail here, is, of course, a complex issue for which there are no ready-made solutions. Ideally, we should avoid unnecessary migration by creating the possibility of living safely and with dignity in countries of origin as much as possible. But at the same time, everyone has the right to look for a place for themselves and their families where they can develop fully as a person. Four verbs should always be paramount when it comes to migrants: welcome, protect, promote, and integrate. This can be put into practice, for instance, by facilitating the obtaining of visas, by developing humanitarian corridors for refugees who are genuinely in an emergency situation, by providing suitable accommodation and the necessary social support, with the right to integration into the education system and the safeguarding of religious freedom. When migrants receive their citizenship, it must be on the basis of full equality with the other citizens of the country. In order to achieve all this, cooperation is needed between the various bodies involved in the reception of refugees and migrants in the country.



The arrival of people from different cultures should not immediately be viewed as a threat, but rather as a mutual enrichment. Let us not forget how many countries were actually shaped by intercontinental migration, just think of the whole of the American continent. It is therefore really necessary today to make positive efforts to achieve a smoother rapprochement between East and West, taking into account and respecting cultural, historical, and religious differences. That is why we are once again calling for a new legal, political, and economic world order that can look after and deal with precisely these new problems on a global scale. What is important here is that there should be room even for the poorest to make their voices heard and take part in the decision-making process. Too often, decisions are still made about them without any form of participation on their part. The aspect of gratuitousness needs to remain a fundamental attitude: when people come knocking at our door, and this also applies to the wider community, we should not ask straight away what benefit they bring us. The criterion must always be that we continue to see each other as part of the great human family and not be fixated on the differences that exist. The poles of 'globalization' and 'localization' will always be present and cannot simply be suppressed or denied, but we must ensure that they are brought to a viable balance. Globalization does not necessarily hinder the respect and growth of the local; it can also enrich it. I go to the other person with my own origins, which I do not necessarily have to deny, but at the same time I am open to the other person's origins. Growing towards a greater universality does not mean that we have to standardize everything and deny our own history and roots. No, we should not build a Tower of Babel, for that is only an expression of pride and false ambitions. It is a question of acting locally, but always with openness to a broader perspective. Closing ourselves off to this is the breeding ground for an unhealthy nationalism and populism that, unfortunately, is becoming more and more prevalent. Every culture must be open to universal values. The love of one's own country does not contradict the heartfelt openness and integration of a more global humanity. Let us see the whole human community as one big family, and there are many internal differences in every family, but they are not irreconcilable.

*The subject of migration leaves no one unmoved in this day and age, and once again it is a matter of seeing what we ourselves, as individuals and as a small community, can do to develop that greater openness and positive attitude towards migrants. We deal with migrants in both health care and education, and this will require our special attention in order to help them integrate fully so that they feel truly at home in our care and education and are not regarded as second-class citizens. Within the Congregation itself, internationalization is growing very strongly, and here, too, we are invited to appreciate this in a positive way and to really benefit from it. Is it not an enrichment of our charism that this can now take shape and grow in so many different cultures? Life in international communities is a challenge, but above all a gift and a mutual enrichment, provided that mutual respect prevails and no superiority of one or the other reigns. In the past, many brother missionaries have experienced life in a completely different culture as a real personal enrichment by discovering new values that were lost in other*

*parts of the world. At the same time, they were allowed to share their own culture with others and enrich them with it. Are we now also sufficiently and willingly open to the other direction when brothers from the South or the East live in northern regions and help shape the charism? The feeling of superiority remains a dangerous problem that needs to be challenged at every turn.*

##### 5. A better kind of politics

*The next chapter deals with another growing problem that we are facing all over the world: social tendencies where populism and growing liberalism are emerging and which are having a profound effect on politics. There is no need to say that this issue is highly sensitive on an international level and also provoked immediate reaction when the encyclical came out. Nevertheless, nothing new is being put forward, only a clear summary of the vision which Pope Francis has been expressing to the political world from the very beginning of his pontificate, with a profound concern for the preservation and further growth of the care for the common good in which no one is left out. He is sometimes accused of being too socio-political, but it is actually a consistent extension and an update of the Gospel message in today's world. The Gospel does not call us to be apolitical; on the contrary, it calls us to be politically sensitive. Putting up an image of a boat with hundreds of refugees of different nationalities and religious backgrounds on Saint Peter's Square in Rome is a symbolic act that seeks to highlight not only the problem of migration, but also the growing trends of populism and liberalism, and the disastrous consequences it entails.*

The basic premise stated here is clear: the disdain of the weaker members of society can be hidden in various forms of populism which use these weaker members demagogically to defend their views and also in forms of liberalism which only protect the economic interests of the powerful.

First of all, populism. It is as if today we are divided into two camps: those who call themselves populists and those who oppose it. As soon as one formulates one's own opinion, it is immediately decided in which camp one should be put. When a particular culture develops into a self-righteous ideology and serves the power that one wants to develop over others, it very quickly evolves into a treacherous form of populism. Very typical of leaders who start to behave in a populist way is the fact that they want to achieve everything immediately and consider all means appropriate to do so.

With the rise in liberalism, we have to note that more and more weaker people are at risk of falling by the wayside. The community is becoming more and more individualistic, and society is consequently perceived as a sum of individuals. So-called neo-liberalism focuses solely on economic systems aimed at acquiring more and more. In the meantime, however, it turns a blind eye to the large groups that are increasingly being sidelined as a result. Attention to quality employment is giving way to the pursuit of greater profits and the further technicization of jobs. This affects the

necessary political concern that must be there for the promotion of personal well-being together with the promotion of the common good. It was thought that the financial crisis of 2007-2008 would lead to a new economic system that would pay greater attention to ethical principles of proper governance, but in the meantime it has become apparent, and very clearly so during the COVID-19 pandemic, how individualism still prevails over concern for the global good of society.

The twenty-first century is the scene of a further weakening of the United Nations' influence, because time and time again, the economic and financial dimensions are overriding the political dimension, which should focus precisely on global well-being. The need for further reflection on reform within the United Nations is reiterated, so that this important international and umbrella organization can carry out its mission properly. While respecting the autonomy of nations, there must be a body to ensure that human rights and the dignity of every human being are respected and promoted within all countries in order to build greater fraternity throughout the world. Primordially, it must continue to call for joint action against the scourge of food shortages in so many places. Perhaps it is a good sign that it is precisely the United Nations World Food Programme that has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It seems to confirm what the encyclical says about the fact that there can be no world peace when so many harrowing forms of poverty continue to plague so many people. Often, the United Nations Organization also seems paralysed when it comes to reaching peace agreements, because the law of power seems to prevail over the power of law.

When we look around on an international scale, we can see that in many places politics have become an internal power struggle in which the general interest is compromised. It is understandable that, in such a situation, an aversion arises to everything that has to do with politics. However, aversion is not the right answer. On the contrary, we must work towards a renewed form of politics in which concern for the common good becomes a genuine priority once again. For this to happen, however, a new mentality is needed among those who conduct politics, namely a mentality of social love. Only then can politics be seen as a true vocation serving the community. Love should not only be there on an interpersonal level, but also within a wider community, thus exerting a beneficial influence on the whole social, economic, and political process. This social love makes us love the common good and makes us creative to continue to look after the good of every citizen effectively. There is no room for individualism or for the desire for power here. It is through this social love that people can grow towards a true civilization in which love is the main theme. This social love unleashes forces to confront world problems and respond to them by renewing the existing social, political, economic, and legal structures from within. This social love will always need the light of truth: truth about human beings as people, about society as a community where everyone can be heard, is respected, and where special attention is paid to the weak. The latter must always remain a major concern in any form of

politics. A society must therefore continue to give room to forms of solidarity that grow from the bottom up and promote them on the basis of the sound principle of subsidiarity. Politics must also have the courage to combat all forms of abuse that enslave people and all forms of terrorism, arms trafficking, drug trafficking, and international crime that have only one aim: to disrupt the social system.

Social love will also pay attention to the fact that no one is excluded and will therefore fight against forms of fundamentalism that disregard all forms of tolerance.

Looking at the person who makes a political commitment, it should be noted that they must excel in solidarity and true love for their neighbours. The word 'tenderness' is even mentioned, which, of course, is in stark contrast to the harshness with which politics can sometimes be done. A politician must indeed be concerned for the common good, but must not turn a blind eye to the injustice they observe in their close environment. Attention to this will have a positive impact on the wider political work. Good politics must therefore always be based on love, hope, and confidence that the good is still alive in the hearts of many and that it can be brought to the surface through targeted action as a powerful counterweight to the negative that also exists.

*None of us can remain insensitive to what is happening at an international level. With modern means of communication and the media, we are confronted with it on a daily basis. Learning about it is one thing, forming a clear idea is the next step. Perhaps, however, we should not stop there, but we should also have the courage to take a clear stand where we are, especially when the weak are being exploited, when human dignity is being disregarded. We are not being called upon to take an active political stance or to adopt strong political positions. However, we are called upon to be politically sensitive and also sufficiently critical of what is happening around us. We all have different responsibilities within society and that is why we need to see how we can give shape to this political sensitivity at our level. It is also important which choices we make in our reading, and with which opinion-formers we go along. It is certainly desirable to pay closer attention to tendencies towards populism and neo-liberalism. The term 'social love' sounds new in this context, especially in a world where there seems to be room only for power, for money, and love is dismissed as something for the weak. In the apostolate in which we are especially committed to the weakest in society, we can continue to urge politicians not only to engage with those who are of electoral importance, but also, and above all, to continue to pay attention to those who are at the bottom of the social ladder.*

## 6. Dialogue and friendship in society

Seeking rapprochement, expressing oneself, listening to each other, daring to look each other in the eye, getting to know each other and trying to understand each other, finding common ground: these are tried and tested ways to arrive at a true dialogue. Some, however, flee reality and entrench themselves in their own little world from which they attack the others. There is a profound difference between dialogue and what we know today as an exchange of opinions on social media. Such debates are

very often manipulated and have only one purpose: to have the truth on their side. That has nothing to do with anything other than power and personal gain.

Authentic dialogue presupposes that one is open to the views of the other person on the basis of the conviction that there is some truth in every view. In order to achieve this, one does not have to agree entirely with what the other person is saying, but one looks for common ground.

The question is whether the media today serve this kind of dialogue. There is a lot of exchange over the internet, but that is no guarantee that there is also dialogue. Dialogue is always about sincerely seeking the truth, serving the weakest, and building the common good.

Some people believe that there are neither absolute nor objective truths. They cloak themselves in relativism. The fact that every human life is sacred and inviolable bears no compromise. This relativism is very harmful to society and to mankind as such. We must realize that there are actions that are intrinsically wrong, regardless of the circumstances and the intention in which they are committed. It seems that the distinction between good and evil is becoming blurred in this world and is being replaced by an ethics based on what seems advantageous to us and what is disadvantageous to us.

We also need to be aware that much of what is proclaimed through the media is anything but true. There is a great deal of manipulation involved, and there is a danger that we will allow ourselves to get carried away by what the media are proclaiming as dominant ideas and no longer be open to what is true and real.

In a pluralistic society, dialogue is essential, but it must always be based on a clear personal stance coupled with openness to the views of others. We will see, however, that there are values that are not negotiable; that, too, must remain clear in any dialogue, but it must not be an obstacle to continuing the dialogue. Such a dialogue will even put certain truths in a clearer light, without necessarily expecting or demanding consensus on them.

Let us work towards a culture of encounter. It is the path that leads to true and profound peace that cannot be built just like that. It is a slow process in which one listens patiently to each other and accepts that the other has the right to be himself and can also be different. At the basis of such a culture of encounter is, of course, mutual respect, which must be developed towards each other. If this is lacking, the main focus will be on the differences that will always exist. Focusing solely on differences is tapping into a source that leads to a great deal of violence with which we have recently been so heavily confronted.

That is why the culture of encounter must lead to what can be called a social and cultural pact, in which people understand and accept that they never have a monopoly on the whole truth but, at the same time, have the right to express their convictions. These need not be opposites. The criterion will always be respect for and promotion of the personal and common good. We can learn a lot from Saint Paul, who was very

clear about his conviction and did not hide it, but at the same time stood up for proper relationships, based on benevolence, gentleness, and respect. The Pope wonders whether we can still say these three words to each other: “excuse me”, “pardon me”, and “thank you”. It could not sound more practical.

*A short chapter on an essential theme in which the importance of having a good dialogue is the connecting thread. There is no need for much comment, because what is said sounds so recognizable, even within our Congregation. It will always be necessary to strike a balance between having one’s own views, being able to put them into perspective when we listen attentively to the arguments and reasoning of the others, and at the same time realizing and accepting that there are general truths that are not negotiable. The latter is perhaps the most difficult and the most challenged today, since certain dialogues are blocked because it is no longer accepted that there are still universal values that do not allow for compromise. The trick is then to keep the dialogue open and arrive at a renewed form of being together, where respect for each other takes precedence over continuing to fixate on differences. Unity in diversity, without compromising what is truly fundamental and absolute: the absolute inviolability of all life.*

*As children of our time, we will not be insensitive to a certain degree of relativism, in which we too easily close our eyes to what is objectively wrong, and blur the distinction between good and evil, in our own lives and in the society to which we belong. Here, too, we must have the courage to swim against the tide at times and not allow ourselves to be carried away by a destructive relativism.*

## 7. Paths of renewed encounter

Building on what was said in the previous chapter, the encyclical now seeks to address a number of very concrete realities that are defining our coexistence today and that call for a clear position.

The starting point must always be the truth, accompanied by justice and mercy. The truth does not have to lead to revenge, but rather to reconciliation and forgiveness.

The arduous road to world peace is not a road where all differences have to be overcome, but a road of shared work for the promotion of the common good. It is detrimental when one wants to dominate the other and where only power has the first and final word. Equally detrimental is the way in which wealth is being accumulated today by a small minority. This is a far cry from a shared concern for the common good, and these are the stumbling blocks for it. That is why major reforms never happen from behind a desk, nor do they happen by legal means alone, but rather when, through joint dialogue, a serious effort is made to find lasting solutions. It is important, in this respect, to consciously set aside any form of revenge. Peace does not only mean the absence of war, but also the desire to really grow towards greater tolerance towards each other, in which respect for each other’s dignity as human

beings must always come first. For example, only a culture of closeness with the so-called ostracized groups in society will allow mutual understanding to grow.

It is regrettable that some people do not want to talk about reconciliation, because they believe that conflict, violence, and separation are inherent in any form of coexistence. Others see reconciliation as a sign of weakness and a way to flee from conflict. Forgiveness and reconciliation are themes that are very much characteristic of Christianity, but they are also present in other religions. But Christ does not speak of cheap forgiveness, peace, and social agreements. That is why his statement is particularly powerful: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt 10:34). This is precisely about the fundamental values discussed in the previous chapter, which do not tolerate any compromise and for which martyrs gave their lives, even to this day. Nor is it a question of simply forgiving corruption or criminal acts that do serious damage to human dignity. We are called upon to love everyone, but this does not mean that we can accept everything that others do. Forgiveness does not mean covering up what others do to the weak. It takes courage to face up to this injustice, precisely out of love for one's neighbour and ultimately out of love for God himself. But this must be done out of a sincere desire for goodness to prevail and not for revenge. We have to be able to keep looking in our hearts to see what feelings are there and how we do not allow ourselves to be dominated by negative feelings. True reconciliation takes place at the heart of the conflict and is only possible through sustained dialogue and transparent and patient consultation. Otherwise it will remain something artificial and certainly not sustainable.

An important basic principle for building social friendship and peace is that unity must always remain more important than conflict. We must do everything we can to prevent polarization.

Forgiveness does not mean what we should just forget. We cannot simply forget persecutions and serious crimes against humanity, but at the same time we must not allow ourselves to be paralysed by them. We never evolve without a clear reminder of the past, but we must always leave room for forgiveness. The vicious circle of violence can only be broken by forgiveness. Revenge will give neither the perpetrator nor the victim true satisfaction.

On the basis of these general principles, we can only state that any form of war is a gross denial of human rights and remains a dramatic act of aggression against the environment. If we want to promote truly integrated human development, everything possible must be done to avoid wars. Hence the importance of intensive dialogue and consultation, including at world level. Although it is said that we have the right to defend ourselves in the event of an attack, the question must always be asked whether there was sufficient consultation and whether we were not too quick to take up arms. Preventive warfare is therefore fully condemned, especially in the light of the disastrous consequences it can have by using today's devastating arsenal of weapons. That is why we keep repeating: "Never again war!" Every war leaves the world worse

than it was before. War is always a defeat for the political authorities and, ultimately, for all humanity, a surrender to the forces of evil.

Another topic is the death penalty. It is made clear that the death penalty is always inadmissible and every country is invited to develop other means of punishing a perpetrator of a serious crime, while at the same time protecting society from possible recidivism. One might even ask whether life imprisonment is really an alternative or whether it seems more like a veiled death penalty. At the same time, we must continue to respect the human dignity of the perpetrator and condemn all forms of torture.

*World peace is indeed a great concern, and we are constantly faced with conflicts around the world that are getting out of hand. As Pope Francis pointed out, it is a world war fought piecemeal. We are also thinking of the countries where we are present as a congregation and where we constantly face ethnic and religious disputes that sometimes have dramatic repercussions. For us brothers, it is important that we succeed in transcending all ethnic differences and show the environment by means of a harmonious community life that coexistence with different ethnic backgrounds is indeed possible. And in the places where we live as a minority within other religions, the task remains to find concrete ways of dialogue. This will be discussed in the next chapter. Through our apostolate, in which we open ourselves without discrimination to people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, we can contribute to a growing dialogue. Sometimes we stand side by side like two pyramids. The tops are far away from each other and it is difficult to enter into dialogue with each other ideologically, but at grassroots level, dialogue can easily grow through very practical actions, and so the pyramids can gradually move closer together so that the tops can come closer together, as well.*

*Everything that has been said with regard to world conflicts also applies to our coexistence as a community, as a region, and as a congregation.*

## 8. Religions at the service of fraternity in our world

This brings us to the final chapter, which has a topic that Pope Francis holds very dear and in relation to which he has already taken many initiatives. His basic premise is that the various religions should be able to contribute to greater fraternity at world level. The quote from the Indian bishops is quite powerful: "The goal of dialogue is to establish friendship, peace and harmony, and to share spiritual and moral values and experiences in a spirit of truth and love."

The starting point is that together we should open up to God as the Father of all. We should join together before God as the transcendent truth, which transcends the various religious interpretations. In this way, when we look for God with a sincere heart, we will meet fellow travellers who are also in search of God, without being a priori entrenched in ideological principles. When the world is in crisis today, it is because a kind of anaesthesia for the transcendent has emerged and has made many a master. It has been replaced by purely secular and material interests that have



completely supplanted transcendent values. The Church therefore has a public role to play in creating ways of promoting and encouraging human dignity and universal fraternity. Here, the Church shows itself as a mother.

From this standpoint, the Church also wants to esteem the ways in which God works in other religions, in line with what was taught at the Second Vatican Council. At the same time, we must make the music of the Gospel sound in our homes, in our workplaces, in politics, and in the economic world. For it is precisely this constant attention to the dignity of every human being and the building of true fraternity that echoes in the Gospel message.

This is, of course, where the call for tolerance and openness sounds in places where we, as the Catholic Church, are in a minority, and at the same time the Catholic Church wants to show this openness to those who are of a different denomination or who profess a different religion and even to those who do not believe at all. Let us continue to open ourselves to God who does not look with eyes, but with heart, and who is therefore a God of surprises. Ideally, this way we can achieve a harmonious society between different cultures and religions.

That is why any form of religious intolerance is unacceptable, and certainly the terrorism that results from it. Religion can never be the cause of terrorism, but it is mutual poverty, oppression, and injustice that form the basis of it and that abuse religion to commit terrorist acts. That is why religious leaders must do everything in their power to engage in and maintain dialogue with one another, thereby contributing effectively to world peace and suppressing all forms of extremism.

In conclusion, Pope Francis reminds us of those who have truly contributed to building this universal fraternity, both within the Catholic Church and beyond: Saint Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi. And very specifically, Blessed Charles de Foucauld is presented as a model who has travelled a true path of transformation to become a true brother to all men and women. He truly became the 'universal brother'.

*Let us welcome this third encyclical with a thankful heart and honestly look for ways in which we ourselves, as individuals and as a community, can respond even better to the various impelling invitations it carries. Together with the previous social encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis wants to call upon all of us to live up to our mission as Christians, not just indoors, but really as citizens of the world and thus to be salt and leaven in the dough. No one can remain indifferent to the serious ecological problems we are facing, but they must always be placed within a broader framework in the context of the promotion of human dignity: of the whole man and of every man, as Pope Paul VI said. Inspired by God's Spirit, let us form a living central panel of the triptych in which the two encyclicals are like the side panels, showing us the way, the way of the Gospel, which we must continue to follow radically, but together with many, with all people of good will. Be the change you wish to see in your own environment and in the world.*

With an invitation to all to read the whole encyclical, to reread it, to reflect on it together, and to engage in dialogue about it.

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