

Why Pope Francis Wrote *Fratelli Tutti*?

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Abstract: In response to the invitation made to me, this article has a simple and straightforward purpose: to introduce Catholics and other Christians to Pope Francis' *Fratelli Tutti*. That is its focus, that is all it seeks to do. Pope Francis' central aim in his encyclical is to enter into "dialogue with all people of goodwill". He seeks to reach out to people around the world, whatever their faith or worldview, ethnicity, or nationality, so as to celebrate and foster the fundamental brotherhood and sisterhood of all the world's peoples. He calls everyone to the rebirth of what he sees as an aspiration to universal fraternity: "let us dream as a single human family, he says, as children of the same earth which is our common home". The article traces the ways in which his encyclical invites us all to advance along the paths of hope towards that universal fraternity.

Keywords: dialogue, building bridges, evangelisation, fraternal love, service, consistency, hope

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[摘要] 為回應編者對我所作的邀請，筆者撰寫此文之目的至為簡單明確：把教宗方濟各《眾位弟兄》通諭，介紹給天主教徒及基督新教信徒。本文之焦點，乃力求達到此目的。教宗方濟各通諭的中心目標，旨在與所有心懷善念的人進行對話。教宗力圖與世上所有人接觸，不論他們持有任何信仰和世界觀，屬於甚麼種族和國籍，教宗也希望與他們攜手，表揚及促進與世上所有人建立根本的弟兄姊妹情誼。他希望重新喚起每個人對普世弟兄情誼的渴望。教宗說：「我們既然屬於同一人類大家庭…一起居住在這共同家園，那麼讓我們每一個人…一起追夢吧！」本文根據該教宗通諭，探討通諭如何邀請我們所有人，在希望的道路上朝向普世博愛一起前進。

關鍵詞：對話、建造橋樑、傳福音、兄弟情誼、服務、一致性、希望

Background

On 3 October 2020, the vigil of the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis published his encyclical letter, *Fratelli Tutti* (FT), on the theme of fraternity and social friendship. He stated: “Although I have written this encyclical from the Christian convictions that inspire and sustain me, I have sought to make this reflection an invitation to dialogue among all people of good will” (FT 6).

We should note here that in this letter, as with his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’* (LS), titled *Care for Our Common Home*, the Pope reaches out to people all around the world whatever their religious faith or worldview, ethnicity, or nationality. This, in itself, is an acknowledgement of the fundamental brotherhood and sisterhood of all the world’s peoples.

While the Pope says that issues of human fraternity and social friendship “have always been a concern of mine” (FT 5), it is evident that two things in particular led him to produce *Fratelli Tutti* in October 2020. The first reason that he began writing it was to take up and develop the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* – an extraordinary document when seen against the background of the tensions and even enmity between Christians and Muslims over the centuries – signed by the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb and Pope Francis in Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019.

He then points to the second reason that drew him to produce *Fratelli Tutti* in its final form: “As I was writing this letter, the Covid-19 pandemic unexpectedly erupted, exposing our false securities”. This revealed the inability of countries to work together, a fragmentation that points to the fact that if anyone thinks the only lesson to be learned from this is simply the need to improve what we were already doing “is denying reality” (*FT* 7).

In the light of these two factors Francis states that he wrote *Fratelli Tutti* to acknowledge the dignity of each human person and that, together, as a human family, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity, “Let us dream as a single human family, as fellow travellers, sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all” (*FT* 8).

Sixteen months after those words to “all brothers and sisters” were published, the horrendous war in Ukraine broke out. It is a conflict that has shaken the world with its senseless carnage, death, and destruction. In chapter one of *Fratelli Tutti* the Pope had spoken of dark clouds over a closed world, signs of a certain regression whereby “ancient conflicts thought long buried are breaking out anew, while instances of a myopic, extremist, resentful and aggressive nationalism are on the rise” (*FT* 11). He was reading the signs of the times; his words have proved to be prophetic.

New Paths of Hope

In spite of these dark clouds hanging threateningly over humanity, *Fratelli Tutti* points us towards new paths of hope because “God continues to sow abundant seeds of goodness in our human family”. Francis emphasises that “the recent pandemic enabled us to recognise and appreciate once more all those around us who, in the midst of fear, responded by putting their lives on the line”.

He points to ordinary people, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, shopkeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caretakers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, priests and religious: “they understood that no one is saved alone” (*FT* 56).

The same can be said in more recent months of the thousands and thousands of people in countries in Europe and around the world who have reached out in myriad ways to help the millions of men, women and children caught up in the Ukrainian conflict, a war that was not of their choosing. The challenging words of *Fratelli Tutti* ring out clearly: “I invite everyone to renewed hope, says the Pope, for hope speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart ... Hope is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, the petty securities and compensations which limit our horizon, and it can open us to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile. Let us continue, then, to advance along the paths of hope”.

A Loosely Linked Compilation of Themes

With those remarks about why the Pope wrote *Fratelli Tutti*, we can look more closely at the document itself. It rapidly becomes clear to readers that it is a very rich and valuable document. Most people, however, find it easier to read it in “chunks” – one chapter or section at a time – rather than reading right through at one sitting. The reason for this is that while the letter’s overall topic – “fraternity and social friendship” – links the whole, the document itself presents a compilation of themes that are loosely connected rather than tightly linked. Quotations make up more than a quarter of the 43,000-word document and many of the abundant 288 footnotes relate directly to themes that Pope Francis had himself spoken or written about in the seven and a half years of his pontificate up to that point.

In this sense the encyclical makes accessible to the reader major themes of Francis’ papacy. By carefully selecting and developing these themes at the level of an encyclical, Francis is making – as he did in *Laudato Si’* on *Care for Our Common Home* – a substantial contribution to the social teaching of the church, as many other Popes before him have done since Leo XIII published *Rerum Novarum* in 1891.

The Consistency of the Man Who Wrote *Fratelli Tutti*

It can help us capture what *Fratelli Tutti* is highlighting if we reflect on the life of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the man

who wrote this encyclical. His life bears witness to the fact that what he says in *Fratelli Tutti* is quite simply the truth: whether as Rector of the Colegio Maximo in Buenos Aires and, later, as Provincial of the Jesuits in Argentina, or as Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis has been consistent through the years in seeking to develop human fraternity and social friendship.

Among the many influences upon him is that of Father Pedro Arrupe, the General of the Jesuits who appointed him, at the unusually young age of 36, to be Provincial of the Jesuits in Argentina. On 31 July 1973, the very day that Bergoglio's appointment as Provincial was announced, Arrupe was in Valencia, Spain, addressing a large audience of people from around Europe who were engaged in Jesuit education. Arrupe, who is regarded by many of those who knew him as a saint, summed up the purpose of Jesuit education as, "seeking to form men and women for others". That phrase succinctly sums up the theme of universal fraternity that is the leitmotiv of *Fratelli Tutti* and that has been a consistent thread in the life of Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Bergoglio became known across Latin America for his dedication to the poor in the *Vilas Misérias*, the slums surrounding the ever-growing city of Buenos Aires. He was also known for his repeated calls for social dialogue and social collaboration in what was a deeply divided country at that time. These themes are developed powerfully in Chapter Six of *Fratelli Tutti*, with

its heartfelt appeal “to recover kindness”. Francis speaks there of kindness “as a fruit of the Holy Spirit” (Gal 5:22), describing it as an attitude that is “gentle, pleasant and supportive, not rude or coarse”.

By this stage in his pontificate we have become accustomed to the sight of Pope Francis washing the feet of women and men from young offender institutions, which included washing the feet of a young Muslim woman a few weeks after his election – “a first for a Pope”. Washing feet in this way is something he had done consistently in Buenos Aires. It symbolises the way he sees and understands his ministry, and it is this approach that lies behind his approach when he speaks of human fraternity in *Fratelli Tutti*.

The Significance of a Name

And then there is the significance of the name Francis. Why did Jorge Bergoglio, on his election as Pope, choose the name Francis? Pope Francis himself provided the answer to that question when he met with representatives of the media on Saturday, 16 March 2013, just five days after his election.

“Some people,” he said, “wanted to know WHY the Bishop of Rome wished to be called Francis. Some thought of Francis Xavier, Francis de Sales, and also Francis of Assisi. I will tell you the story,” said the Pope. “During the election, I was seated next to the Cardinal Claudio Hummes, the former Archbishop of Sao Paulo in Brazil: a good friend, a good friend! When things were looking dangerous, he

encouraged me.” Dangerous? Bergoglio was in danger of being elected!

“And when the votes reached two thirds, there was the usual applause, because the Pope had been elected. And he gave me a hug and a kiss, and said: *Don’t forget the poor*” (my italics).

“And those words came to me: the poor, the poor. Then, right away, thinking of the poor I thought of Francis of Assisi. Then I thought of all the wars, as the votes were still being counted, till the end. Francis is also the man of peace. That is how the name came into my heart: Francis of Assisi. *For me, he is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation*” (my italics).

We should note those last three phrases because they signal three things that have remained of great importance as Francis’ papacy has developed. The third phrase, “the man who loves and protects creation”, has of course found ample treatment in the encyclical *Laudato Si’*. The first two phrases, however – “the man of poverty, the man of peace” – were first of all developed in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) – *The Joy of the Gospel*. This document, which was published in Francis’ first year as Pope, is explicitly intended by him as indicating the direction his pontificate would take. In other words, he intended it to be seen and understood as programmatic.

Three Texts that Form a Triptych

Together, the three documents of Pope Francis that I have mentioned up to this point – *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, *Laudato Si'*, 2015, and *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020 – form a triptych. It is *Evangelii Gaudium*, however, that offers the all-embracing vision, the interpretative key, that lies at the heart of Francis' pontificate. That vision, that key, is found in the word *evangelization*.

“Evangelizing”, Pope Paul VI writes in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) *On Proclaiming the Gospel*, 1975, one of Francis' favourite pastoral documents, “is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the church, her deepest identity”. Francis clearly indicates his understanding of the core meaning of evangelization in *Evangelii Gaudium*: it means witnessing to the heart of the Gospel, because “in this basic core what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead” (EG 36). It is not we who first loved God, Francis has said many times, but God who first loved us. “Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others, and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others” (EG 39).

The Pope sees and presents the person of Francis of Assisi, whose name he chose to characterise the direction and “flavor” of his pontificate, as evidence of this understanding of evangelization. The first two articles of *Fratelli Tutti* present an image of St. Francis of Assisi that sets the tone

of the entire encyclical. Pope Francis does this by selecting, from among the counsels St. Francis offered, the one where the saint calls for a love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance, and declares blessed all those who love their brother “as much when he is far away from him as when he is with him” (*FT* 1). This, declares the Pope, shows how St. Francis expressed the essence of a fraternal openness that allows us “to acknowledge, appreciate and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, regardless of where he or she was born or lives”.

The Heart of *Fratelli Tutti*: A Stranger on the Road

While the first two articles of *Fratelli Tutti* set the tone by presenting Francis of Assisi as an outstanding example of universal fraternity, it is chapter two that stands at the heart of the encyclical letter. It invites us to contemplate “a parable told by Jesus Christ two thousand years ago”, namely, the parable of the Good Samaritan, presented by the Pope under the title of “a Stranger on the Road”. As the Pope says, since the letter is addressed to all people of good will, regardless of their religious convictions, the parable is one “that any of us can relate to and find challenging”.

In a way that echoes the style and method of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, the Pope – himself a Jesuit – invites us to contemplate the scene presented by Jesus. We see a man wounded by robbers and abandoned at the side of the road,

and we are likewise invited to reflect on the way that three passers-by respond to the needs of this wounded man. Two of these people, ironically a priest and a levite (a person engaged in religious service) pass by “on the other side of the road”, even though they see the wounded man. The third, a stranger and merchant who, as a Samaritan, was despised as someone impure, detestable, dangerous by most Judaeans of that time, is the only one who gives up his time and money to care for the injured man.

Which of these persons, Jesus asks of us in his parable, do we identify with? Which of these characters do we resemble? That direct and incisive question is a challenge to each of us, whatever our beliefs or worldview. The distinctions between Judaeans and Samaritans, priest and merchant, fade into insignificance, declares the Pope: “now there are only two kinds of people: those who care for someone who is hurting and those who pass by ... here, all of our distinctions, labels and masks fall away: it is a moment of truth”. With this parable, says Francis, “Jesus trusts in the best in the human spirit ... he encourages us to persevere in love, to restore dignity to the suffering and to build a society worthy of the name” (*FT* 71).

In this chapter Pope Francis is, implicitly, acknowledging that the Spirit of God acts within the hearts of every man and woman and that the call to love and accepting all as our brothers and sisters – universal fraternity – is something that can be recognised and, by God’s grace,

adhered to. At the same time, Francis contends that for Christians the words of Jesus have an even deeper meaning: “They compel us to recognise Christ himself in each of our abandoned or excluded brothers and sisters (cf. Mt 25:40-45)”. Believers come to know that God loves every man and woman with infinite love and thereby confers infinite dignity upon all humanity: “If we go to the ultimate source of that love which is the very life of the triune God, we encounter in the community of the three divine Persons the origin and perfect model of all life in society” (*FT* 85).

The opening articles of the following chapter (*FT* 87-96) are not often singled out or commented upon in reflections on the encyclical. However, these articles are important because they elucidate aspects of that love which is the very life of the one and three-personed God, referred to in the *Fratelli Tutti* article quoted in the previous paragraph.

That article referred to the community or communion of persons within the one and only God which, in Christian belief, consists in the mystery whereby the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father in the unity of the Spirit: a communion of life whereby each divine person goes out in self-gift towards the other. Human life is called to be modelled on that self-gift. As the Pope writes (*FT* 87): “human beings are so made that they cannot live, develop and find fulfilment except in the sincere gift of self to others” – the closing phrase of that quote being taken from article 24 of the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Church

in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes – Joy and Hope*.

Pope Francis draws on the writings of two great writers to underscore this point: firstly, the 13th century theologian St. Thomas Aquinas who wrote that in the depths of every human heart, love creates bonds and expands existence, “for it draws people out of themselves and towards the other”; secondly, the 20th century theologian Karl Rahner who stated that a human person always has to take up the challenge of moving beyond himself or herself (FT 88).

In this sense, observes the Pope, the spiritual stature of a person’s life is measured by love: “our love for others, for who they *are*, moves us to seek the best for their lives. Only by cultivating this way of relating to one another will we make possible a social friendship that excludes no one and a fraternity that is open to all” (FT 94). In that sense, genuine love is ever more open, impelling us towards universal communion (FT 95).

Francis of Assisi: Saint of Fraternal Love

This theme of universal communion, universal fraternity, is taken up in many ways throughout the encyclical, just as it has been a leitmotiv running throughout Francis’ pontificate. Chapter four, titled *A Heart Open to the Whole World*, enlarges on the theme, stressing the importance of “the factor of gratuitousness”, the ability to do some things simply because they are good in themselves, without concern for personal gain or recompense.

This brings us back to Francis of Assisi, because it was this kind of self-transcending love that stood out in his life. He simply spread the love of God, understanding that “God is love and those who abide in love abide in God (1 Jn 4:16)” (*FT* 4). The saint of fraternal love, simplicity, and joy, who inspired the Pope to write the encyclical *Laudato Si’*, prompted him once more, he announces in *Fratelli Tutti*, to devote this encyclical to fraternity and social friendship:

“Francis felt himself a brother to the sun, the sea and the wind, yet he knew he was even closer to those of his own flesh. Wherever he went, he sowed seeds of peace and walked alongside the poor, the abandoned, the infirm and the outcast, the least of his brothers and sisters” (*FT* 2).

Those words call to mind the concept of “integral ecology” that is developed at length in *Laudato Si’*. In that earlier encyclical the Pope spells out very clearly the relationship between care for the environment – *Care for Our Common Home* as he titled that text – and care for human society: “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature” (*LS* 139).

Other sections of that letter echo this in ways that clearly express the continuity of thought and concern between *Laudato Si’* and *Fratelli Tutti*. For example: “A

sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion, and concern for our fellow human beings ... Everything is connected, and concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society” (*LS* 91).

Relations and relatedness, communion and pilgrimage are words that express Pope Francis’ vision of life and creation, its meaning and purpose. Taking up words from St. Francis of Assisi’s *Canticle of the Sun*, a kind of hymn of the universe, he declares: “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth” (*LS* 92).

Social Dialogue as a Contribution to Peace

The above paragraphs help us appreciate more fully the vision of evangelization that lies behind *Fratelli Tutti*. To evangelize, Francis pointed out early in his pontificate, is to make the kingdom of God present in our world: “I want to share my concerns about the social dimension of evangelization, precisely because if this dimension is not properly brought out, there is a constant risk of distorting the authentic and integral meaning of the mission of evangelisation” (*EG* 176).

He explicitly concentrated in *Evangelii Gaudium* on two great issues, “that strike me as fundamental at this time in history”. Those two issues are first, the inclusion of the poor in society (*EG* 185-206) and second, peace and social dialogue (*EG* 217-237). And when we read those sections of the document again, it is evident that they develop two features he had attributed to St. Francis of Assisi just days after his election, namely “the man of poverty, the man of peace”.

Those features are further developed in *Fratelli Tutti* and there is a dimension, often repeated in the text, that I would single out: *social dialogue as a contribution to peace*. Francis has repeatedly emphasised that evangelisation involves the path of *dialogue* (*EG* 238-258). It is also central to Pope Francis’ understanding of the “social friendship” referred to in the title of his encyclical. He develops this theme of dialogue from a series of different angles in chapters five and six of *Fratelli Tutti*.

Francis emphasises a crucially important dimension of social dialogue: respect for the other, which necessitates openness to the other. “Authentic social dialogue involves the ability to respect the other’s point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns” (*FT* 203).

As he said in his apostolic exhortation, *Querida Amazonia* (*QA*), following the 2019 Synod on *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*: “In

a true spirit of dialogue, we grow in our ability to grasp the significance of what others say and do, even if we cannot accept it as our own conviction. In this way, it becomes possible to be frank and open about our beliefs, while continuing to discuss, to seek points of contact, and above all, to work and struggle together” (QA 108).

This section of *Fratelli Tutti* seems to me to be of vital importance at a time when dangerous tensions between countries, together with “culture wars” and “religious antagonisms” within countries, often resemble a dialogue of the deaf rather than a shared desire and search for the truth. Public discussion, observes Francis, if it truly makes room for everyone and does not manipulate or conceal information, “is a constant stimulus to a better grasp of the truth, or at least its more effective expression” (FT 203). As the Pope remarked in the 2018 film by the German filmmaker Wim Wenders, *Pope Francis A Man of His Word*, “let us not forget that differences are creative; they create tension and in the resolution of tension lies humanity’s progress”.

Sadly, that understanding of relationships is often far from day-to-day reality in which lack of dialogue – or even a mendaciousness and insincerity in what is merely a pretence at dialogue – means that people are concerned not for the common good, but for the benefits of power or, at best, for ways to impose their own ideas. The heroes of the future, argues Francis, will be with those who can break with this unhealthy mindset and determine respectfully to promote

truthfulness, aside from personal interest. “God willing, such heroes are quietly emerging, even now, in the midst of our society” (*FT* 202).

Sincerely Seeking a Basis for Consensus

A section that offers what is perhaps the most specifically philosophical or ethical reflection of the encyclical is found under the title, *Basis for a Consensus* (*FT* 206-214). In this reflection Francis seeks, in the light of the pluralism that characterises most contemporary societies around the world, to reject relativism – which “always brings the risk that some or other alleged truth will be imposed by the powerful or the clever” (*FT* 209) – and to engage with others in the search for the solid foundations sustaining our decisions and our laws.

The Pope contends that there is ultimately no reason to oppose the interests of society, consensus, and the reality of objective truth. The dignity of others is to be respected in all circumstance, “not because this is something invented or imagined, but because human beings possess an intrinsic worth superior to that of material objects and contingent situations ... and this inalienable dignity is a truth that corresponds to human nature apart from all cultural change” (*FT* 213).

As already mentioned earlier, Francis touches on this theme in chapter three of *Fratelli Tutti*, under the heading of a universal love that promotes persons: “social friendship

and universal fraternity call for an acknowledgement of the worth of every human person ... this is a basic principle of social life” (*FT* 106).

Reaching out in a spirit of social friendship to all brothers and sisters, Francis suggests that “to agnostics, this foundation could prove sufficient to confer a solid and stable universal validity on basic and non-negotiable ethical principles that could serve to prevent further catastrophes. As believers, we are convinced that human nature, as a source of ethical principles, was created by God, and that ultimately it is he who gives those principles their solid foundation” (*FT* 214). This, in the Pope’s view, does not lead to the imposition of any one moral system since fundamental and universally valid moral principles can be embodied in different practical rules. In the light of this, he says, “room for dialogue will always exist”.

What the Pope calls for here would, perhaps, find an echo in the hearts and minds of the vast majority of the 8 billion human beings at present alive on our planet. Just over 75 years ago, in 1945, the great majority of the nations of the world signed the *United Nations (UN) Charter*, a document that builds on the three founding pillars of peace and security, human rights, and development. That historic event was followed up in 1948 by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*, a document which offers a comprehensive statement of inalienable human rights, declaring them to be universal and to be enjoyed by all people, no matter who

they are or where they live.

This declaration, which was followed up by a series of international conventions and agreements reflecting the development of what is generally known as “international human rights law”, is in itself an expression of fundamental values that – at least in principle – are shared by members of the international community. Of the 56 members of the UN in 1948, none voted against the text, but South Africa, Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Union abstained.

In the 70 or so years since the *UN Charter* and the *UDHR* were signed, the make-up of the international community has changed almost beyond recognition. There are now no less than 193 member states of the UN, with two entities enjoying non-member observer status, namely the Holy See and the state of Palestine. What is more, while the UN and its constituent bodies continue to attempt to play a significant and constructive role around the globe, those same 75 years have been marked by many forms of tension and conflict. The three founding pillars, that is, the entrenching of peace and security, human rights, and development in our world remain out of reach. There have been many and positive achievements among peoples and nations, but colossal failures as well. In many ways the international “community” continues to be anarchic.

The search for a “basis for a consensus”, that the Pope calls for in *Fratelli Tutti*, remains an immense challenge. At this moment in history we live in a world still seeking to

emerge from the impact of a global pandemic. It is a world where the horrific war in Ukraine has shaken us out of our complacency and reminded us vividly of the potential danger posed by the existence and proliferation of immensely powerful nuclear weapons. It is a moment when all life on earth, human and otherwise, is threatened by what is perhaps the most serious threat of all: the environmental catastrophe that could result from climate change and global warming – rapidly expanding processes that are already under way around the entire globe.

Those challenges, with the only-too-real dangers they represent, tend to wash over us, partly because of their huge scale, a global scale we sometimes feel to be beyond our own capacity to influence in any way. We tend to focus back on the nearer-to-home news bulletins on our televisions and mobile phones and on the day-to-day challenges of our daily lives. And yet, we all *can* do something, above all if we seek for ways of doing it alongside others. It is important that, together, we reflect upon the threat from pandemics, nuclear proliferation, and climate change, and seek to act, because they are of *existential importance* for everyone in our world today and for the generations who come after us.

Amidst these challenges, Pope Francis continues to invite us to go forward, along the paths of hope and to reach out in a spirit of friendship and dialogue to all our brothers and sisters. There is, to borrow a phrase, “iron in his words”, because when he speaks of dialogue he is not talking about

something abstract and other-worldly, but something in which we are called to be engaged and committed. It is certainly something in which he personally has been and is deeply committed.

Pope Francis: “If the Church is alive, it must always surprise us”

Pope Francis made the above remark about “surprise” at a general audience in his first year as successor of the apostle Peter. For many it signals why they find Francis a welcome breath of fresh air, a sign of hope in a church where renewal – and even conversion of heart and life – are always called for, “*ecclesia semper reformanda – the church always in need of reform*”.

There are, however, also those among laity and clergy who find his approach unsettling, disturbing, and who are rather wary of “surprises”. Change, after all, is sometimes – or even often – disturbing for most of us and not always welcome. And this is a Pope who said he dreamed of a “missionary option”, adding that what he meant by this was “a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation” (EG 27).

Francis’ remark about “surprises” reminds me of the response of Bilbo Baggins to the wizard Gandalf in Tolkien’s

The Hobbit. Gandalf remarks, somewhat pointedly, that he is looking for someone to share in an adventure he is arranging and it is very difficult to find anyone. “I should think so”, replies Bilbo. “We are plain quiet folk and I have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner!”

Francis is open to surprises and adventure. The path of dialogue that he has pursued both as bishop in Buenos Aires and as bishop of Rome is something he appears to regard as an adventure, a path where the response of the “other” often brings surprises, opening up new pathways.

“Religions at the Service of Fraternity in Our World”

In his early years as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Bergoglio gathered together with members of other Christian churches and other religious faiths to plant an olive tree, a symbol of peace and fraternity, in the centre of Argentina’s capital, the famous Plaza de Mayo. He then steadily maintained and developed contact and dialogue with other churches and faiths throughout his time as archbishop. This included pastors from Christian evangelical churches – a relatively unusual relationship given the friction between Catholics and evangelicals in some parts of Latin America.

He continues to carry the personal friendships formed there into his years in Rome. In May 2013, two months after his election as Pope, a number of the Buenos Aires evangelical pastors with whom he used to pray regularly

joined him in Rome at his residence in Santa Marta. They greeted one another warmly and prayed together. A year later, in May 2014, when he made a pastoral visit to Amman, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem – areas of tension between religious believers – Francis became the first Pope to include two representatives of other faiths in his entourage, the Jewish Rabbi Abraham Skorka and the Muslim leader Omar Abboud, good friends from his Buenos Aires days.

Since that time he has had many contacts with Bartholomew, the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, with Archbishop Welby of Canterbury, and other leaders of Christian churches and communities, and likewise with the representatives of other world faiths. 4 October 2021, witnessed a striking example of collaboration: Pope Francis and some 40 faith leaders joined in an appeal for urgent action at the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) due to take place in Glasgow in the first weeks of November that year. The faith leaders who signed this appeal were considered to represent an estimated 84 per cent of the world’s people that identify with a faith. “Future generations will never forgive us, they declared, if we miss the opportunity to protect our common home. We have inherited a garden; we must not leave a desert to our children”.

Francis observes that one of the titles of the Bishop of Rome is *pontifex, a builder of bridges*. In his first month as Pope he made an address to the members of the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See, which succinctly sums up

the theme he developed in *Fratelli Tutti* almost eight years later: “dialogue between us will help build bridges between all people, so that every person can see in another not an enemy, not a rival, but a brother and sister to welcome and embrace ... We cannot build bridges between people while forgetting God, but the opposite is also true: we cannot have true relations with God while ignoring others”.

It is, of course, easy enough to talk or write about bridge building but trying to do it in practice can be extraordinarily demanding. Pope Francis’ first visit as Pope to Africa in 2015 offers a striking example. He was due to go to Kenya and Uganda in East Africa, but there was another challenge. He had also been invited to go to the Central African Republic, which at that time was experiencing violence and bloodshed that threatened to tear the country apart – with great tensions between Christian and Muslim groups. Many people advised the Pope not to go, but the Catholics and other Christians in that country, and even Muslim leaders there, begged him to go. The French Defence Minister warned the Vatican that it would be very dangerous for the Pope to go and that the French troops who were there as UN peacekeepers could not guarantee his safety.

Nevertheless, Francis went and was warmly welcomed. One of the most poignant images of his visit, which in the event passed off peacefully, is of him in the principal mosque of Bangui, the capital. Standing by the side of the leading Imam in silent prayer, Francis faced with him in the direction

of Mecca. In a speech in Bangui, the Pope declared, “God is peace – ‘*salam*’ – Christians and Muslims are brothers and sisters, created by the same God. Together we must say no to hatred, to revenge and violence, particularly that violence which is perpetrated in the name of religion or of God himself. Make your country a welcoming home for all its children, regardless of their ethnic origin, political affiliation, or religious confession”.

In the spirit of dialogue Francis has reached out to both of Islam’s two principal communities, the Shia and the Sunni. In 2021 he made a visit to Iraq amid tight security and additional concerns caused by rising Covid infection rates at that time. He described his visit as “a duty towards a land that has been martyred for so many years”. Francis had to forego his open-sided popemobile and accept the demand that he travel in an armoured car, making longer journeys by plane or helicopter. The last thing the Iraqi authorities wanted was an attack on the Pope in their country.

One of the most significant aspects of this visit was a meeting with the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a deeply revered figure among Shiite Muslims worldwide and who is regarded as having had a moderating influence in the turbulence that has afflicted Iraq. The visit, which took place in al-Sistani’s modest home in the holy city of Najaf, took months to prepare. In a statement published by his office the Grand Ayatollah affirmed, “his concern that Christian citizens should live like all Iraqis in peace and security, and

with their full constitutional rights”, while the Vatican said that Francis thanked Sistani for having “raised his voice in defence of the weakest and most persecuted” at violent moments in the recent history in Iraq.

Two years before that meeting with the Shiite Ayatollah in Iraq, Pope Francis had met with the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayeb in Abu Dhabi. Sheikh Al-Tayeb is head of Sunni Islam’s most prestigious seat of learning, al-Azhar in Cairo. That meeting on 4 February 2019, was the first time a Pope had gone, as Pope, to any part of the Arabian peninsula. Together, in an historic first, they signed the document mentioned at the beginning of this article, the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*. It was this that first prompted Francis to begin writing the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*.

The document makes a powerful and forthright statement: “God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters”. This was no mere diplomatic gesture, points out the Pope, but a reflection born of dialogue and common commitment (FT 5).

“In my fraternal meeting with the Grand Imam”, states Francis in the final pages of *Fratelli Tutti*, “we resolutely declared that religions must never incite war, hateful attitudes, hostility, and extremism, nor must they incite violence or the shedding of blood. These tragic realities are the consequence of a deviation from religious teachings.

They result from a political manipulation of religions and from interpretations made by religious groups who, in the course of history, have taken advantage of the power of religious sentiment in the hearts of men and women ... God, the Almighty, has no need to be defended by anyone and does not want his name to be used to terrorise people” (*FT* 285).

We get a fuller understanding of the historic significance of this meeting and the declaration of the Pope and the Grand Imam, if we cast our minds back half a century. 28 October 2022 comes to mind, the 57th anniversary of the promulgation by Paul VI at the Second Vatican Council of *Nostra Aetate*, the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions*.

Already, at that time, many around the world were astonished that a document that was not even thought of when the Council began, could come out with such a positive opening to other world religions just four years later. It was a profound change in attitude on the part of the Catholic Church and all part of the opening “to the other” that characterised the Second Vatican Council. Pope Francis’ encyclical on human fraternity shows how far we have come, in spite of continuing suspicions, tensions and even conflicts carried forward in the name of religion.

Charles de Foucauld: the Universal Brother

At the outset of *Fratelli Tutti* the Pope presents

Francis of Assisi – whose appeal has transcended time and continents, different nationalities and religious traditions – as an exemplar of the universal fraternity that is the central theme of his encyclical. St. Francis stands at the centre of *Fratelli Tutti* as a person relevant to our day and with whom we can identify in spite of the 800 years that separate his time from ours.

As he closes the encyclical, Pope Francis draws our attention to another person, Charles de Foucauld, whom he sees as an exemplar of that same universal fraternity. Foucauld, who died in 1916, was canonized in St. Peter's Square on 15 May 2022. He was a man who “directed his ideal of total surrender to God towards an identification with the poor, abandoned in the depths of the African desert” (*FT* 287). It was in that setting that he expressed his desire to feel himself a brother to every human being, and asked a friend to “pray to God that I truly be the brother of all”.

Charles de Foucauld only came to realise that dream after many restless and turbulent years of uncertainty in his personal life. In turn a soldier, explorer, geographer, and Trappist monk, after many years of searching he finally found his path – that of a solitary missionary in Algeria. He was a missionary yes, but a missionary with a difference. He did not preach to the Arabs and Tuaregs among whom he lived but sought to be as Jesus of Nazareth to them, living amongst them in poverty and simplicity. “I want all the people who live here, he wrote, Christians, Muslims, Jews,

to get used to thinking of me as their brother, a universal brother, the brother of all. They have started to call my house the fraternity and it makes me very happy”.

Mission in this sense means seeking to be and see as Jesus does, believing and acting in union with the heart and mind of Jesus. Through the simple image of the heart surmounted by a cross that St. Charles wore on his clothing – an image replicated in the simple chapel of his lodgings – he acknowledged that dedication to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was at the centre of his life, his outreach, his spirituality. And this meant recognising that those around us are, in truth, the brothers and sisters of Jesus of Nazareth, and likewise our brothers and sisters, children of the one Father.

Charles di Foucauld’s mission was, in essence, one of witness, a way of being and acting towards the other, whoever “that other” might be. The words of Pope Paul VI in his 1975 encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* come to mind, where he observed that men and women today listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses (EN 41).

A few months before his death, Foucauld wrote to a friend: “I think there is no saying of the Gospel that made a deeper impression on me and more transformed my life than this one: ‘Whatsoever you did to one of the least of these you did it to me’. If we remember that these are the words of Uncreated Truth and come from the same lips that said, ‘This is my Body, this is my Blood’, how compellingly we

are moved to seek out Jesus and love him in the ‘least’, the sinners, the poor”.

As Pope Francis writes in the final words of *Fratelli Tutti*, Charles de Foucauld “wanted to be, in the end, ‘the universal brother’. Yet only by identifying with the least did he become at last the brother to all. May God inspire that dream in each one of us” (*FT* 287).