

# A Redemptive Anthropology of Christian Friendship:

## *Fratelli Tutti*, “On Fraternity and Social Friendship”

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On October 3rd, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi and the anniversary of his death, Pope Francis signed his third encyclical on the tomb of the medieval saint. *Fratelli Tutti* (“Brothers All”), takes its title from the “Admonitions” of St. Francis to his young community. It is the second of Pope Francis’s three encyclicals to claim his papal patron as its religious inspiration. The first of these “Franciscan” encyclicals, *Laudato Si’*, is animated by the saint’s famous love for creation; this second one is inspired by his model of a “fraternal openness” which is exemplified in a “love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance.”<sup>1</sup> Together, these encyclicals propose Francis of Assisi as a spiritual model for modern men and women. G. K. Chesterton, with St. Francis in mind, observed that, “The Saint is a medicine because he is an antidote. ... He will generally be found restoring the world to sanity by exaggerating whatever the world neglects.”<sup>2</sup> It is no accident that in an age such as ours, at once extravagant and decadent while also divisive and resentful, the pope should direct our gaze to a man who embodies poverty, joyful self-denial, and a love that is radical and uncomfortable.

The antidote proposed by Pope Francis is “fraternity and social friendship.” While building on *Laudato Si’* and noting that the fraternity born of faith extends to nature, *Fratelli Tutti* emphasizes the more specific fraternal obligations regarding economics, war and peace, globalization, cultural attitudes and philosophical horizons, and criminal reform placed on us by our fellow human beings: “It is my desire that ... by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity.”<sup>3</sup> Over the course of the encyclical’s eight chapters and 287 sections we see the way in which social friendship touches every part of our shared lives: politics, justice, interreligious dialogue and more.

While the encyclical is far-reaching in the many aspects of social life it speaks on, its unifying theme is the proposal of “universal fraternity and social friendship”<sup>4</sup> in response to “present-day attempts to eliminate or ignore others.”<sup>5</sup> In response to “reductive anthropological visions”<sup>6</sup> the encyclical argues that social friendship is a recurring human vocation, taken up anew in each generation and never guaranteed without

effort, intelligence, and a love that is willing to sacrifice for the common good.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is the scriptural heart of the encyclical. In his reading of it, Pope Francis discerns a set of human types that provide the opportunity for an examination of conscience. The unnamed thieves who set upon the Judean man are presented as the prior, structural, and often unknown causes of the violence and neglect we see around us today.<sup>7</sup> The priest and the Levite are by-standers and passers-by who challenge the Christian to recognize that, “a believer may be untrue to everything that his faith demands of him, and yet think he is close to God and better than others.”<sup>8</sup> These men illustrate the inveterate human reality “that we are constantly tempted to ignore others.”<sup>9</sup> The Samaritan is the person able to understand that the wounded stranger is also a neighbor.<sup>10</sup> He teaches us that, “love does not care if a brother or sister in need comes from one place or another.”<sup>11</sup>

The parable is a narrative image of Christian friendship and what it demands. The friend is the person “who approaches others...to help them become ever more fully themselves.”<sup>12</sup> For the Christian, such fraternal friendship is rooted, ultimately, in divine filiation: because we are all children of God, we are all brothers and sisters. The encyclical proposes a “redemptive anthropology” as an antidote to the “reductive anthropologies” characteristic of our modern age. The basic category of this redemptive anthropology is not the “individual” but the “person.” An “individual” is identified by distinction from others, whereas a “person” is an identity-in-relation: “The human person, with his or her inalienable rights, is by nature

open to relationship.”<sup>13</sup> Without such an anthropological vision, Pope Francis warns, we can only be “associates” never “neighbors.” Such associations are based on extrinsic criteria and goals and, therefore, are never an adequate basis for securing the deep equality that can only be, “the result of the conscious and careful cultivation of fraternity.”<sup>14</sup> This anthropology of Christian friendship argues for an openness to others that breaks down the “walls”<sup>15</sup> that “radical individualism”<sup>16</sup> places between us and the stranger.<sup>17</sup>

The encyclical’s latter chapters propose principles for a new and better politics grounded in the common good.<sup>18</sup> Just as we are not individuals, but persons, so too we are not merely a society—an aggregate of individuals — but rather a *people* — a group of persons motivated by a “collective aspiration” and participating in “a shared identity arising from social and cultural bonds.”<sup>19</sup> Social friendship is the prior and enabling condition for “political charity.” Thus, enabled by renewed bonds of friendship, a politics of the common good facilitates what we might call “structural charity,” which alleviates suffering by redeeming the social conditions and institutions that cause it. Such charity<sup>20</sup> is the “soul” and “heart” of politics: its deepest, most stable, animating motivation. This implies that not only sin, but also love can be structural: “Charity finds expression not only in close and intimate relationships but also in macro-relationships: social, economic, and political.”<sup>21</sup>

The pope concludes the encyclical by drawing some direct implications of a commitment to social friendship. Against this vision of a human life rooted in dignity and integrated into authentic community we are prepared

to take the full and tragic measure of war. We are counseled by the pope to “touch the wounded flesh of the victims.”<sup>22</sup> Fraternal charity not only challenges the war-making of nations, but also the State’s claim to legitimate violence in the form of the death penalty. If Christian friendship commits us to desire the healing and redemption of each person including our enemies, then the death penalty cannot but be seen as a failure of Christian love: “Today we state clearly that ‘the death penalty is inadmissible,’ and the Church is firmly committed to calling for its abolition worldwide.”<sup>23</sup> Our treatment of the justly imprisoned is a measure of our love: “The firm rejection of the death penalty shows to what extent it is possible to recognize the inalienable dignity of every human being.”<sup>24</sup>

“It is the paradox of history,” Chesterton wrote, “that each generation is converted by the saint who contradicts it most.”<sup>25</sup> *Fratelli Tutti* suggests that the Franciscan witness of universal fraternity is the strong remedy we need today; fraternal openness to our human brothers and sisters, particularly those who come to us as the stranger, the immigrant and the death row inmate. ✚

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**ENDNOTES**

1. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, October 3, 2020, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html), §1
2. G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, G.K. Chesterton

- Collected Works, II, (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986), 424
3. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §7
4. Both terms are used frequently throughout. See, for example, §142 and §176
5. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §6
6. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §22
7. “Dark shadows of neglect and violence in the serve of petty interests of power, gain, and division” (Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §72)
8. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §74
9. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §64
10. “The Samaritan became a neighbor to the wounded Judean by approaching and making himself present.” (Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §81)
11. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §62
12. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §4
13. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §111
14. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §104
15. Pope Francis uses the word “walls” 14 times in the encyclical as a metaphor for our temptation to selfish isolation from others.
16. While Pope Francis, like his papal predecessors, is concerned with moral relativism (§§185, 206, 209), he also sees “radical individualism” (§105) as its prior and enabling condition.
17. He singles out for specific critique, “racism” (§§20, 41, 97, 266), “narrow nationalism” (§§11, 86, 141), “petty provincialism” and abstract “globalism” (§142), “limitless consumption” and “empty individualism” (§11).
18. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §154
19. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §158
20. The scope of Christian love is universal: “Charity... calls for an effective process of historical change that embraces everything: institutions, law, technology, experience, professional expertise, scientific analysis, administrative procedures and so forth” (*Fratelli Tutti*, §164)
21. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §181
22. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §261
23. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §263
24. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §269
25. G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 424