Opinion
Spirituality



Detail of mural of St. Francis of Assisi and the wolf of Gubbio painted on the St. Francis Inn, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, seen Oct. 1, 2010. (Flickr/Jim McIntosh)



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"Francis inspired these pages," said Pope Francis about St. Francis of Assisi in the opening section of his new encyclical letter, "*Fratelli Tutti*, on Fraternity and Social Friendship." Recalling that St. Francis inspired the pope to write his last encyclical letter in 2015, "*Laudato Sí*, on Care for Our Common Home," Francis situates this current teaching document again within the framework of Franciscan spirituality and theology. He also traveled to Assisi this weekend to commemorate the Feast of St. Francis and officially sign this new encyclical.

As in his earlier encyclicals and exhortations, Francis draws from a wide range of sources throughout *Fratelli Tutti*. At times the Franciscan tradition, and St. Francis in particular, are featured explicitly. Such is the case with the encyclical's title. It is an Italian translation of the opening phrase of St. Francis's *Admonition VI*, which the medieval saint preached to his brother friars in Latin.

Although the encyclical does not offer many direct references to the person or writings of St. Francis beyond the opening and closing paragraphs, the inspiration of the saint from Assisi and the tradition that bears his name is present throughout the text. There are several key themes that carry a distinctive Franciscan valence worth identifying and unpacking. The following is a sampling of just a few of the many ways the Franciscan tradition has, as the pope acknowledged, shaped the focus of this social teaching.

The concept of *fraternitas*

The English translation of the Latin term *fraternitas* as "fraternity" has garnered criticism, even before the encyclical was published. Understandably, the common-sense interpretation of the term views the concept as exclusively masculine, referring to the "bond among brothers" or "brotherhood." Indeed, this is an accurate understanding, particularly when one considers that the term is most often used in the contemporary context of the United States in reference to male college students belonging to exclusive social organizations that often emphasize a party lifestyle.

However, the term takes on a slightly different and notably significant meaning when viewed through the lens of the Franciscan theological tradition. It carries at least two senses in this context. The first is not that unlike the reference to college social organizations, albeit without the implications of bacchanalia. Dating back to

St. Francis himself, whenever the Franciscan friars refer to their local communities of men religious, the term used has been "fraternity." It is also a term that is used by the Secular Franciscan Order in reference to the local communities or associations of women and men who have professed to live according to the Franciscan Rule in their respective secular contexts. In this way, fraternity takes on a rather practical meaning, serving as the term for a particular group of Franciscans.

The second sense of *fraternitas* also goes back to St. Francis and it is more theological than it is practical. Fraternity in this sense is more expansive and has to do with the kind of relationship one has with another. The reason that St. Francis preferred the title "brother" was simple: He truly meant that he saw himself as inherently related to all women, men, and even nonhuman creatures as part of God's one family of creation. To talk about fraternity as a disposition or value is to talk about how you view and relate to other people, including strangers and those who may be very different from you. It is about recognizing intrinsic familial ties with all people and creatures.

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Pope Francis picks up on this Franciscan logic of *fraternitas* in the third chapter of *Fratelli Tutti*. He critiques societal relationships determined by affinity, preferences, status or any other feature, and argues for a more fundamental concept of human relationship: fraternity. "Fraternity is born not only of a climate of respect for individual liberties, or even of a certain administratively guaranteed equality. Fraternity necessarily calls for something greater, which in turn enhances freedom and equality" (Paragraph 103).

Earlier in Chapter 2 of the encyclical, the pope uses the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) to show how the Christian notion of relationship with others transcends the limits and qualifications we are quick to use in isolating ourselves from solidarity with others. By contrast, if we recognize that we are all sisters and brothers to one another, then we have an inherent bond with each other that demands something of us — our love, respect and care.

Francis highlights the demands that a spirit of fraternity places on us in relationship to one another in human society. Too often, the pope says, "we are constantly tempted to ignore others, especially the weak." He notes that, "for all the progress

we have made, we are still 'illiterate' when it comes to accompanying, caring for, and supporting the most frail and vulnerable members of our developed societies. We have become accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, ignoring situations until they affect us directly" (Paragraph 64).

St. Francis instructed his followers that living the Christian life according to his distinctive vision basically boiled down to "walking in the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ," a phrase that appears throughout his writings. Living like Jesus means prioritizing relationship above all else; it means caring for those in need, regardless of their identity or what affiliations they might have.

Pope Francis lifts this up as not only something reserved for Franciscan friars and sisters, but also for all human beings, who are fundamentally interdependent and connected to one another. How we think of ourselves in relationship to others ought to be governed by this principle of our a priori interrelatedness as sisters and brothers. And the way we form our worldviews, make decisions, engage in the public square, and interact with one another at all levels should be grounded in our inextricable *fraternitas* with all.



Painting of St. Francis of Assisi by Federico Barocci, circa 1600-1604 (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Crossing borders, building bridges

Early in the document, the pope recalls St. Francis' famous encounter with Sultan Malek al-Kamil at Damietta, Egypt, in 1219. Drawing a connection to that historic episode of mutual respect, peacemaking and fraternity — a shared sense of a fraternal bond between the two men from different cultures and religions — Pope Francis identified a comparable sense of encounter he had with Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, whom he met in Abu Dhabi in 2019. At that meeting, the two religious leaders signed a document on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together," which included the shared assertion that, "God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties, and dignity, and has called them to live together as

brothers and sisters."

The nod to the importance of interreligious dialogue and friendship across differences in the global effort to promote human solidarity is no small gesture. Francis, taking seriously the prioritization of fraternal and sororal relationship with all people modeled by St. Francis, describes this social teaching as directed not only to his Christian sisters and brothers, but also addressed to all women and men of good will.

This expansive audience reflects the inclusive vision articulated at the outset of *Laudato Sí* and encyclicals of his predecessors, dating back to John XXIII's 1963 document *Pacem in Terris*, which was geared not only to Catholics and other Christians but also all people of good will.

St. Francis is known to have crossed many borders and built many bridges in his time. He intentionally transgressed the social, civil and ecclesial borders of his community to embrace and then live with lepers who had been ostracized from the ordinary life of Assisi. He crossed the border of the Fifth Crusade's battle to engage in a peaceful encounter and exchange of ideas with the Sultan, despite the vilification of Muslims by the majority of Christian Europe at the time, including and especially by Pope Innocent III. He even moved across the border of species when he sincerely referred to nonhuman creatures as his "sisters" and "brothers," recognizing that lines of demarcation between the human and nonhuman are in some ways artificial constructs, given our interdependence on one another and universal reliance on our common source, which is God.

Pope Francis celebrates the Eucharist at the tomb of St. Francis in the crypt of the Basilica of

Pope Francis celebrates the Eucharist at the tomb of St. Francis in the crypt of the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, Italy, Oct. 3. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Today Francis calls on all his brothers and sisters, regardless of their religious tradition or nation of origin, to "see things in a new light and to develop new responses" to the challenges before us (Paragraph 128). Among these challenges is the increasing tendency that individuals and nations have to erect borders and walls, literal and figurative ones, which separate, isolate and exclude the most vulnerable in our world. Francis' consistent critiques throughout the encyclical of consumerism, capitalism, nationalism, xenophobia and other ascendant ideologies

of our time also gesture to the importance of bridge building between peoples.

The pope points to love as the necessary ground for our building a "culture of encounter," which "means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone" (Paragraph 216). He speaks throughout *Fratelli Tutti* of the evils of apathy and indifference, a recurring theme in his preaching and magisterial teaching. These attitudes not only prevent us from the capacity for compassion — the ability to suffer with others in solidarity — but they also promote an individualism that creates separation and prohibits authentic relationship. What results is not only social division, but also tremendous suffering, which is felt most acutely by the poor and vulnerable.

The imposition of physical and ideological borders does great harm to human dignity, particularly for migrants and immigrants, which is why Francis strongly emphasizes the need for "fraternal gratuitousness" or the building of bridges to a better life for those who suffer the most without asking the costs (Paragraph 140). This is only possible, the pope notes, if we measure ourselves not merely as one country competing against others but "as part of the larger human family." He adds: "Only a social and political culture that readily and 'gratuitously' welcomes others will have a future" (Paragraph 141). It is only in the spirit of St. Francis' *fraternitas* that such reforms can take place.

Peacemaking and reconciliation

Toward the end of *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis writes: "In many parts of the world, there is a need for paths of peace to heal open wounds. There is also a need for peacemakers, men and women prepared to work boldly and creatively to initiate processes of healing and renewed encounter" (Paragraph 225). Here he again embodies the wisdom of St. Francis as a promoter of peacemaking and reconciliation.

Remembered as a faithful reformer of the church and society, St. Francis' commitment to peacemaking and reconciliation as the means for reforming dysfunctional relations between people was grounded in his understanding of universal *fraternitas* — that we are all brothers and sisters to one another and ought to act like it. In his famous "Canticle of the Creatures," St. Francis barely mentions human beings. When he does toward the end of the text, after invoking many other aspects of creation, he says that we humans are most authentically in keeping with

God's intention for us when we "give pardon," "bear infirmity and tribulation" and "endure in peace."

Similarly, Francis stresses the need for another kind of being in the world, one that is more human, one that returns to this foundational vocation wherein God calls all people to be peacemakers and reconcilers. Returning to the Franciscan principle of *fraternitas*, the pope invokes the family as a metaphor for reimagining social structures and political engagement. He notes that families regularly have disputes, but the way that healthy families resolve them can be a model for thinking about the bigger picture of human dynamics in society.

> They may quarrel, but there is something that does not change: the family bond. Family disputes are always resolved afterwards. The joys and sorrows of each of its members are felt by all. That is what it means to be a family! If only we could view our political opponents or neighbors in the same way that we view our children or spouse, mother or father! How good would this be! (Paragraph 230)

Authentic peacemaking requires truth telling and a shared commitment to the good of the other. It also requires recognizing how decisions have consequences — sometimes dramatically negative ones — for "the more vulnerable members of society" (Paragraph 234). He adds: "Those who work for tranquil social coexistence should never forget that inequality and lack of integral human development make peace impossible" (Paragraph 235).

Again, this hearkens back to the model and vision of St. Francis, who in promoting *fraternitas* as the lens through which to view all relationships, always prioritized the poor and marginalized.

Francis, like his medieval namesake, does not condone "easy" forgiveness or reconciliation, which often comes at the expense of silencing or dismissing the discomfiting experiences and histories of those who have been victimized. Instead, he insists on the importance of memory in a manner evoking the theological concept "dangerous memory" of Fr. Johann Baptist Metz, and the rejection of decisions or actions arising from "fear and resentment" (Paragraph 266).

In the final chapter of the encyclical, the pope appeals to all religious believers, regardless of their tradition, to be agents of reconciliation, recognizing the

fundamental commitment we all have to promote the common good.

Speaking from the Christian perspective, Francis ties together the importance of the example of Jesus Christ and *fraternitas* as the foundation for our universal human vocation to be peacemakers and reconcilers. "For us the wellspring of human dignity and fraternity is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. From it, there arises, for Christian thought and for the action of the Church, the primacy given to relationship, to the encounter with the sacred mystery of the other, to universal communion with the entire human family, as a vocation of all" (Paragraph 277).

These three themes — *fraternitas*, crossing borders and building bridges and peacemaking and reconciliation — only begin to signal the manifold ways the inspirational specter of St. Francis haunts this latest encyclical letter. As the church begins to unpack the wisdom and challenge present in this teaching during the coming weeks, months and years, the fullness of the Franciscan influence will become even more apparent.

My sense is that St. Francis would be very pleased with the message and content of *Fratelli Tutti*, but that he would be truly overjoyed if the people of the world actually took this teaching to heart and put it into practice.

The Basilica of St. Francis is seen as Pope Francis celebrates Mass at the tomb of St. Francis i

The Basilica of St. Francis is seen as Pope Francis celebrates Mass at the tomb of St. Francis in the crypt of the basilica in Assisi, Italy, Oct. 3. The pope was to sign his new encyclical, " 'Fratelli Tutti,' on Fraternity and Social Friendship" near the tomb of St. Francis. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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