Fratelli Tutti, On Fraternity and Social Friendship
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Fratelli Tutti: Dialogue, Mission and Cultural Disarmament
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In many ways Pope Francis’ recent encyclical – *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship* [FT] – continues in the spirit of his former encyclical – *Laudato Si’ On Care of Our Common Home* [LS] – calling for a “bold cultural revolution” (#114) in response to the profound challenges of climate change and environmental degradation. Both encyclicals are addressed to all people of good will calling them to urgent dialogue in the interests of the future of our planet and human life. Both encyclicals are also exercises in synodality insofar as Francis makes productive use of statements from Catholic Bishops’ Conferences throughout the world.

The focus of FT is on a new paradigm for relationship and solidarity among human beings for the creation of a peaceful and just world. Quite radical implications for society, economics and politics are clearly enunciated. Here I present a brief overview of FT while giving prominence to its understanding of mission as dialogue – and dialogue as mission. Finally, with reference to a work by interreligious scholar Raimon Panikkar, I will discuss FT as a call to “dialogical dialogue” and “cultural disarmament”.

Francis does not just talk about dialogue but makes it integral to his method. Whereas LS emerged in dialogue with Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew, FT is partly a response to Francis’ meeting with Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb in Abu Dhabi resulting in their joint declaration: “God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters” (#5).Francis’ ecumenical and interreligious sensibilities are also evident in his referencing Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu and Mahatma Gandhi as inspirers of his reflections on ‘universal fraternity’.

Given the challenges facing our “Closed World” (ch.1), Francis presents to us the biblical story of the Good Samaritan which Jesus tells in answer to the question: "Who is my neighbour?" (ch.2). Critiquing the ‘virus of individualism’, Francis uses the parable to teach us that love must go beyond tribe, family and nation to include the stranger, migrant and refugee (chs.3-4). This will also result in a more equitable sharing of the earth’s resources and improved politics to promote social friendship and human dignity – while protecting the vulnerable and safeguarding local and indigenous cultures (chs.5-6).

The final two chapters (7-8) focus more specifically on the urgency of intercultural and interreligious dialogue if we are to become peacemakers in an increasingly fractured world. In this a world of pain, conflict and bitter memories, we need to seek reconciliation and forgiveness. This does not mean forgetting the past – such as the Shoah, atomic bombs in Japan, ethnic killings, the slave trade
-- but being determined through renewed human encounter never to repeat such atrocities. Noting that Jesus never advocated violence or intolerance, we too should be ‘artisans of peace’, building ‘social friendship’ and a ‘culture of encounter’.

For Francis, while every human being is called to this mission of peace and justice through friendship and dialogue, religions have a special responsibility because of their belief in a ‘transcendent truth’. In theistic terms, interreligious dialogue is committed to “God’s way of seeing things” (#281) thereby offsetting modern tendencies towards totalitarianism, individualism and materialism which are enemies of true peace and fraternity. Recognizing religions have not always played such a noble path, Francis calls on every religion to deepen its true identity by returning to its sources and abhorring the distortions which justified violence.

Particular attention is given to the Church’s mission which includes being a ‘spiritual energy’ in the public sphere. Challenging the distancing and privatizing of religion in the modern West, Francis highlights the Church’s public-political role in advancing the ‘common good’, ‘integral human development’ and ‘universal fraternity’. Lest these phrases be misunderstood as vague, abstract ideals, he reconnects our sense of Christian mission to what he calls “the music of the Gospel” leading us “to encounter the sacred mystery of the other(and) to universal communion with the entire human family” (#277).

All this indicates the necessity of developing an understanding of Church and Christian mission which is identifiably Marian. In words that have a profound Marist missionary resonance, Francis wants a Church “in imitation of Mary the Mother of Jesus ... a Church that serves, that leaves home and goes from its places of worship ... in order to accompany life, to sustain hope, to be the sign of unity ... to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation” (#276). This is precisely the call to ‘beginning a new Church’ with ‘Mary at its heart’ – for which Colin, Champagnat, Chavoin, Perroton, Chanel and the first Marists dedicated their lives. Francis now calls all Christians to develop such a Marian Church.

For interreligious scholar Raimon Panikkar, if we are to find a way to peace in today’s world we need to embark on what he calls Cultural Disarmament. The basis of his thought, in agreement with Francis, is that peace and harmony require genuine human dialogue. Panikkar specifies such dialogue is not just rational, logical, ‘dialectical’ dialogue, but needs to be ‘dialogical’ dialogue involving minds, hearts and spirits – the meeting of persons, what Francis calls ‘social friendship’. Panikkar specifies such dialogue can only proceed on the basis of genuine equality between dialogue partners; Francis

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stresses such equality is based on the shared dignity of every human person created in the divine image.

Our problem is that the modern world is caught up with a dominant culture privileging market forces and the technoscientific gods as more important than ancient and local cultures, human conscience or the religious and classic voices of tradition. In Panikkar’s terms, this requires us to ‘disarm’ that part of humanity whose monetary wealth, military might and control over politics services the powerful few over the increasingly voiceless majority. All this is covered in different terms by Francis who focuses on the plight of the disabled, the poor, migrants, refugees and the many more discarded to the margins without a voice in their own human destinies.

Current changes in the world order do not give immediate cause for optimism regarding the implementation of FT’s principles for peace, fraternity and social friendship. Democracy is under attack; populism and totalitarianism are on the rise; ideological divisions between nations are increasing; the called-for reform of the United Nations is subverted by controlling powers; fundamental corruption in many nation-states is incorrigible and seemingly increasing.

However, the stakes are high. In the words of FT, unless we respond to the challenge of affording every human being the right to dignity, “there will be no future either for fraternity or for the survival of humanity” (#107). Panikkar says we need a “radical metanoia, a complete turning of mind, heart and spirit”. This makes us realise more than ever our dependence on the transcendent reality we call God to overturn human intransigence if we are to alter the course of our world. Our missionary task is to engage with all others in dialogue to promote peace, harmony and fraternity. Especially as Marists, we should do so with the joy of Mary’s Magnificat.

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