

“Fratelli tutti”

A Personal Reflection on Pope Francis’ Encyclical

By Fr. David

Having now read the Pope’s latest encyclical I could, like others have already done, produce a summary of the document. But as I say, others more knowledgeable than me have already done this and I am not sure that mine would be better than theirs, indeed, I fear it would be a lesser document. So please find attached a summary published on the Vatican’s own news website ‘Vatican News’. They produced two summaries, a longer one and a shorter one; attached is the shorter one.

What, however, I did feel was worthwhile was doing a fairly brief, “These were the sentences that made me stop and think” summary. So this is not a balanced reflection on the understanding of the Pope, rather it is an unbalanced summary of the bits that touched my ignorance or my bias! Enjoy.

Fr. David.

Firstly, let’s deal with the name: “Fratelli Tutti”.

While “Fratelli tutti” literally means “All brothers”, the Pope follows this title by saying, “With these words, Saint Francis of Assisi addressed his brothers and sisters...”

Bishop Mark, my bishop in England, translates this title as, “Brothers and Sisters, all.” I personally like “All in fraternity”.

What is this all about?

Pope Francis quotes Saint Francis to give the start point for the encyclical; he selects a quote from St. Francis where he talks of a love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance, and declares blessed all those who love their brother or sister “as much when he is far away from him as when he is with him”.

I loved this paragraph – 4:

Francis did not wage a war of words aimed at imposing doctrines; he simply spread the love of God. He understood that “God is love and those who abide in love abide in God” (1 Jn 4:16). In this way, he became a father to all and inspired the vision of a fraternal society. Indeed, “only the man who approaches others, not to draw them into his own life, but to help them become ever more fully themselves, can truly be called a father”.

Let this be writ large in the home of every priest!

He goes on to say – 6:

I offer this social Encyclical as a modest contribution to continued reflection, in the hope that in the face of present-day attempts to eliminate or ignore others, we may prove capable of responding with a new vision of fraternity and social friendship that will not remain at the level of words.

He will go on to say that this trend to “eliminate or ignore others” is not just about abortion and euthanasia, but is how there is a trend in some areas of modern society to build walls to keep out what we don’t like and diminish our world to what is within our small comfort zone. While ‘building walls’ might seem to have a specific political reference to a popular slogan by President Trump, really this is not the impression given in the whole text. If a specific ‘wall’ between the US and Mexico is brought to mind, it is not an indictment on one person or one policy, but an underlining of a principle of “human fraternity and social friendship” (§5).

Covid (7)

As I was writing this letter, the Covid-19 pandemic unexpectedly erupted, exposing our false securities. Aside from the different ways that various countries responded to the crisis, their inability to work together became quite evident. For all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all. Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality.

Chapter One – Dark Clouds Over a Closed World

One of my ‘pet-peeves’ is when a preacher or evangelist starts by telling us how terrible today’s world is with wars and dreadful things happening. I want to then ask, ‘So you think the last century was better, with two world wars, the whole scale genocide of the Jewish people in the second world war and the genocide of the Tutsi people in Rwanda?’ And more recently we have been hearing of how many people were killed by the Spanish Flu in 1918-1920, estimates run between 17 million and 100 million! We really do live in a very blessed time, and while instant and ‘rolling’ news has meant that we can be made graphically aware of anything happening anywhere in the world, this must not blind us to the big picture of our incredible blessings at this time. Having said this, I think that the Pope at this point is not talking about our world in absolute terms but rather in which direction we are moving. Clearly there are trends in our world that are moving in a negative direction. Indeed, late in the encyclical this will become clear. The point here is that “Goodness, together with love, justice and solidarity, are not achieved once and for all; they have to be realised each day.” (11)

Another great paragraph – 15

Political life no longer has to do with healthy debates about long-term plans to improve people s lives and to advance the common good, but only with slick marketing techniques primarily aimed at discrediting others. In this craven exchange of charges and counter-charges, debate degenerates into a permanent state of disagreement and confrontation.

I think we can all see this!

Again, on the theme of how do we judge our world – 21

The claim that the modern world has reduced poverty is made by measuring poverty with criteria from the past that do not correspond to present-day realities. In other times, for example, lack of access to electric energy was not considered a

sign of poverty, nor was it a source of hardship. Poverty must always be understood and gauged in the context of the actual opportunities available in each concrete historical period.

Chapter Two – A very scriptural chapter

This chapter starts with the parable of the Good Samaritan and keeps returning to it, so the quotes below should be read in that light. But first, talking about unity among people, the Pope quotes Saint Irenaeus taking the image of a melody – 58

“One who seeks the truth should not concentrate on the differences between one note and another, thinking as if each was created separately and apart from the others; instead, he should realise that one and the same person composed the entire melody”.

And why has euthanasia become so popular in some parts of the world? With the parable in mind, the Pope would say because we are “illiterate”! – 64

Let us admit 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.

Again, one of my hobby-horse issues: piety in church and in religious observances as an end in itself without any understanding that what we do in church should be just the starting point for taking God’s love out into the world – 74

One detail about the passers-by [in the parable of the Good Samaritan] does stand out: they were religious, devoted to the worship of God: a priest and a Levite. This detail should not be overlooked. It shows that belief in God and the worship of God are not enough to ensure that we are actually living in a way pleasing to God. 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. The guarantee of an authentic openness to God, on the other hand, is a way of practising the faith that helps open our hearts to our brothers and sisters. Saint John Chrysostom expressed this pointedly when he challenged his Christian hearers: “Do you wish to honour the body of the Saviour? Do not despise it when it is naked. Do not honour it in church with silk vestments while outside it is naked and numb with cold”. Paradoxically, those who claim to be unbelievers can sometimes put God’s will into practice better than believers.

Chapter Three

In the funeral rite we talk about “the bonds of friendship and affection that knit us together during this life do not unravel with death”. This is beautifully echoed in 87

...life is stronger than death when it is built on true relationships and bonds of fidelity. On the contrary, there is no life when we claim to be self-sufficient and live as islands: in these attitudes, death prevails.

Chapter Four – An enlightening and affirming chapter

The Pope sticks a balance between preserving traditional culture and moving forward together in growth – 134

Indeed, when we open our hearts to those who are different, this enables them, while continuing to be themselves, to develop in new ways. The different cultures that have flourished over the centuries need to be preserved, lest our world be impoverished. At the same time, those cultures should be encouraged to be open to new experiences through their encounter with other realities, for the risk of succumbing to cultural sclerosis [excessive resistance to change] is always present. That is why we need to communicate with each other, to discover the gifts of each person, to promote that which unites us, and to regard our differences as an opportunity to grow in mutual respect.

And again, quoting his Apostolic Exhortation ‘Evangelii Gaudium’ in 142

“We need to pay attention to the global so as to avoid narrowness and banality. Yet we also need to look to the local, which keeps our feet on the ground. Together, the two prevent us from falling into one of two extremes. In the first, people get caught up in an abstract, globalised universe... In the other, they turn into a museum of local folklore, a world apart, doomed to doing the same things over and over, incapable of being challenged by novelty or appreciating the beauty which God bestows beyond their borders.”

To counter this tension between a love for our own land and culture, and our openness to others, one needs a really strong rootedness and understanding of one’s own culture in order to be open to others – 143 and 145

Just as there can be no dialogue with “others” without a sense of our own identity, so there can be no openness between peoples except on the basis of love for one’s own land, one’s own people, one’s own cultural roots. I cannot truly encounter another unless I stand on firm foundations, for it is on the basis of these that I can accept the gift the other brings and in turn offer an authentic gift of my own. I can welcome others who are different, and value the unique contribution they have to make, only if I am firmly rooted in my own people and culture.

There can be a false openness to the universal, born of the shallowness of those lacking insight into the genius of their native land or harbouring unresolved resentment towards their own people.

I always say to my parishioners that they should relish the opportunity to visit churches of other denominations, then they might be able to pick up some good ideas that could enrich our own parish, and if not, then they will be confirmed in their own tradition.

Or in relation to countries – 137

A country that moves forward while remaining solidly grounded in its original cultural substratum is a treasure for the whole of humanity.

In this chapter the Pope is talking about migration and how we treat the poorest in our world. And really the bottom line is given to us in 140

We received life freely; we paid nothing for it. Consequently, all of us are able to give without expecting anything in return, to do good to others without demanding that they treat us well in return. As Jesus told his disciples: “Without cost you have received, without cost you are to give” (Mt 10:8).

Chapter Five – a somewhat dryer chapter

This chapter was about civil leaders and leadership, but it did come back to some basic principles – 166

Everything, then, depends on our ability to see the need for a change of heart, attitudes and lifestyles. Otherwise, political propaganda, the media and the shapers of public opinion will continue to promote an individualistic and uncritical culture subservient to unregulated economic interests and societal institutions at the service of those who already enjoy too much power...

The bigger risk does not come from specific objects, material realities or institutions, but from the way that they are used. It has to do with human weakness, the proclivity to selfishness that is part of what the Christian tradition refers to as “concupiscence”: the human inclination to be concerned only with myself, my group, my own petty interests.

And as a Church, ‘change of heart’ is at the centre of what we preach.

If you want a good ‘one liner’, then 174 quotes Pope John Paul II and tells us that we should avoid the

“temptation to appeal to the law of force rather than to the force of law”.

Or 188 tells us that we should be

...taking intelligent advantage of the immense resources offered by technological development.

And while this section is talking about global politics, these realities can be seen in our own parish communities; each parish is both a collective whole but also a group of valued individuals – 182

Each of us is fully a person when we are part of a people; at the same time, there are no peoples without respect for the individuality of each person. “People” and “person” are correlative terms.

And in relation to the waste of food, the Pope makes a powerful statement – 189

...world politics needs to make the effective elimination of hunger one of its foremost and imperative goals. Indeed, when financial speculation manipulates the price of food, treating it as just another commodity, millions of people suffer and die from hunger. At the same time, tons of food are thrown away. This constitutes a genuine scandal. Hunger is criminal; food is an inalienable right.

And finally, in this chapter there is a list of questions that politicians should ask themselves, but in reality, it is a list by which all of us should let ourselves be challenged – 197

For as time goes on, reflecting on the past, the questions will not be:

“How many people endorsed me?”,

“How many voted for me?”,

“How many had a positive image of me?”

The real, and potentially painful, questions will be,

“How much love did I put into my work?”

“How did I do for the progress of our people?”

“What mark did I leave on the life of society?”

“What real bonds did I create?”

“What positive forces did I unleash?”

“How much social peace did I sow?”

“What good did I achieve in the position that was entrusted to me?”

Here there is an agenda for all of us in our daily living.

Chapter Six – About dialogue

Dialogue is about listening and openness, not just about talking at one another – ¶200

Dialogue is often confused with something quite different: the feverish exchange of opinions on social networks, frequently based on media information that is not always reliable. These exchanges are merely parallel monologues.

A long quotation here as I think it gets to the heart of the issue – 203

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. Based on their identity and experience, others have a contribution to make, and it is desirable that they should articulate their positions for the sake of a more fruitful public debate. When individuals or groups are consistent in their thinking, defend their values and convictions, and develop their arguments, this surely benefits society. Yet, this can only occur to the extent that there is genuine dialogue and openness to others. Indeed, 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. Public discussion, 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. It keeps different sectors from becoming complacent and self-centred in their outlook and their limited concerns. Let us not forget that differences are creative; they create tension and in the resolution of tension lies humanity's progress.

And this chapter ends with a wonderful paragraph on kindness – 224

Kindness frees us from the cruelty that at times infects human relationships, from the anxiety that prevents us from thinking of others, from the frantic flurry of activity that forgets that others also have a right to be happy. Often nowadays we find neither the time nor the energy to stop and be kind to others, to say “excuse me”, “pardon me”, “thank you”. Yet every now and then, miraculously, a kind person appears and is willing to set everything else aside in order to show interest,

to give the gift of a smile, to speak a word of encouragement, to listen amid general indifference. If we make a daily effort to do exactly this, we can create a healthy social atmosphere in which misunderstandings can be overcome and conflict forestalled. Kindness ought to be cultivated; it is no superficial bourgeois virtue. Precisely because it entails esteem and respect for others, once kindness becomes a culture within society it transforms lifestyles, relationships and the ways ideas are discussed and compared. Kindness facilitates the quest for consensus; it opens new paths where hostility and conflict would burn all bridges.

Chapter Seven – Which talks about renewal

Again, the Pope is talking about international relations, but this is equally applicable to any parish or any group of people. It is interesting that he says that even if people were “in error or acted badly”, they might still have “a legitimate point of view”! – 228

The path to peace does not mean making society blandly uniform, but getting people to work together, side-by-side, in pursuing goals that benefit everyone... The path to social unity always entails acknowledging the possibility that others have, at least in part, a legitimate point of view, something worthwhile to contribute, even if they were in error or acted badly. We should never confine others to what they may have said or done, but value them for the promise that they embody.

And this is said again in a different way in 230

In a family, parents, grandparents and children all feel at home; no one is excluded. If someone has a problem, even a serious one, even if he brought it upon himself, the rest of the family comes to his assistance; they support him. His problems are theirs... In families, everyone contributes to the common purpose; everyone works for the common good, not denying each person's individuality but encouraging and supporting it. 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 neighbours in the same way that we view our children or our spouse, mother or father! How good would this be!

Then our own, sometimes small, efforts are the seed for peace – 231

...the processes of change that lead to lasting peace are crafted above all by peoples; each individual can act as an effective leaven by the way he or she lives each day.

Chapter Eight – Conclusion

The Pope finishes his document with a couple of prayers – 287

A Prayer to the Creator

*Lord, Father of our human family,
you created all human beings equal in dignity:
pour forth into our hearts a fraternal spirit
and inspire in us a dream of renewed encounter,
dialogue, justice and peace.*

*Move us to create healthier societies
and a more dignified world,
a world without hunger, poverty, violence and war.*

*May our hearts be open
to all the peoples and nations of the earth.*

*May we recognise the goodness and beauty
that you have sown in each of us,
and thus forge bonds of unity, common projects,
and shared dreams.*

Amen.

An Ecumenical Christian Prayer

*O God, Trinity of love,
from the profound communion of your divine life,
pour out upon us a torrent of fraternal love.*

*Grant us the love reflected in the actions of Jesus,
in his family of Nazareth,
and in the early Christian community.*

*Grant that we Christians may live the Gospel,
discovering Christ in each human being,
recognising him crucified
in the sufferings of the abandoned
and forgotten of our world,
and risen in each brother or sister
who makes a new start.*

*Come, Holy Spirit, show us your beauty,
reflected in all the peoples of the earth,
so that we may discover anew
that all are important and all are necessary,
different faces of the one humanity
that God so loves.*

Amen.