

Pope Francis' Fratelli tutti and building a culture of respect

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By Sr. Mary Garascia, Ph.D.

Two Islamic religious authorities appear in Pope Francis' new encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. The first is the Grand Imam (or Sheikh) of al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb. An Egyptian, he is considered by some Muslims the highest authority in Sunni Islamic thought. In February 2019, he and Pope Francis jointly issued "*The Abu Dhabi Declaration*" or "*The Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*." The other Islamic religious authority in the encyclical is Egyptian Sultan Malik as-Kamil who met with Francis of Assisi, during the 5th Crusade (1217–1221), becoming a historical model for interreligious dialogue still inspiring our Pope of today.

At the end of this encyclical, the Pope quotes the final intercession from the Abu Dhabi Declaration: "In the name of God and of everything stated thus far, [we] declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard" for establishing a culture of respect that might bring the world and its peoples together (emphasis mine) (#285). He concludes the encyclical with two lovely prayers that parishes might well adopt!

I suggest reading this latter part of the encyclical first because it so clearly states the main purpose of the encyclical, and the inspiring ending might help us persist through other sections that may be harder to read.

In calling us all to help create that culture of mutual respect, Pope Francis does not begin with justice, or social justice, as I expected. Instead he uses the virtue of love in its many dimensions as the unifying element or theological glue of this encyclical. He presents the Good Samaritan as manifesting a *love capable of transcending borders* which is "...the basis of what in every city and country can be called *social friendship*". *Genuine social friendship within a society makes true universal openness possible...*" (#99)

We all know that love of neighbor means recognizing the dignity and rights of individuals and caring for the vulnerable, and so with compassion we act to meet their needs through charitable acts. But charity is not enough. Drawing on the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, qq. 8-17), Pope Francis says that not only elicited acts of charity are needed for "social friendship" but "commanded acts" of love--acts of charity that spur people to create more sound institutions, more just regulations, more supportive structures, acts that can change the social conditions that caused the neighbor's suffering. (#186) "Commanded acts" for Aquinas flow from our reasoning faculty. Our reason "attends" or notices what is happening around us; it reads the signs of the times and assesses what is happening—it judges the good or evil of what is happening. Then our reason and will together command us to act.

What would you say if you were asked to describe the situation of our world and our culture today? In the first chapter, Pope Francis

describes what he sees at great length. Some of his comments are similar to those in his first encyclical, *Laudato Si* (2015), such as his criticism of the market economy and the kind of globalism that strengthens the powerful but weakens others (#9). He expands his earlier critique of technology by talking about digital relationships which do not really build community: digital communities form between persons who think alike, shielding them from debate, spreading false information, fomenting prejudice and hate, Pope Francis says, (#42-50). Does that sound like the election cycle we just went through?

It is not just an individual, like the victim in the Good Samaritan parable, who is lying by the road, in need of charity. The Pope sees humanity itself lying there, broken and wounded--our culture, our world's political and economic systems, our planet's ecology. For Pope Francis, all of us must act--we are commanded to act—because like him, we see a troubled world. We must engage in politics out of love—love for our world's culture and the way it works, love for our planet.

Chapter Five of this encyclical, entitled *A BETTER KIND OF POLITICS*, includes a section called "*the politics we need*." "*What is needed*" says Pope Francis, "*is a politics which is far-sighted and capable of a new, integral and interdisciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis*." (#177) "*For whereas individuals can help others in need, when they join together in initiating social processes of fraternity and justice for all, they enter the field of charity at its most vast, namely political charity... I appeal for a renewed appreciation of politics as a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good*." (#180)

This encyclical is long and with various digressions about controversial issues like just war (#258) and immigration (129& #130). But its fruit, its needed magisterial teaching, lies in the clear connection it draws between love and politics.

Political charity, social friendship: these are ways of talking about love that we need to "take in" and ponder. Pope Francis reached out to the people of Islam because it will take all the world's religious leaders to help issue the call to political charity on a global scale. Meanwhile, parishes can help their members begin the "process of dialogue" that the Pope mentions as the method for reaching the goal he presents to us all: to help create a culture of respect in our nation and our world.

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