

CCEE Section for Interreligious Dialogue

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*Religions at the Service of Fraternity in the World*

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Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,  
Dear Delegates for Interreligious Dialogue,  
Dear Friends,

Although I have to travel far away, due to the current pandemic situation, I am pleased to participate in today's online seminar promoted by CCEE's Section for Interreligious Dialogue, which I would like to thank very much, and which wants to reflect in particular on issues relating to relations between the Catholic Church and Muslims in Europe. The speaker who will speak after me will focus on the issue of Muslims in Europe, so I thought that my contribution could relate more generally to interreligious dialogue.

Addressing the Cardinal Secretary of State, the Holy Father has written to: "A divided Europe, made up of insular and independent realities, will soon prove incapable of facing the challenges of the future. A "European community", united and fraternal community will be able to value diversity and acknowledge the part that each has to play in confronting the problems that lie ahead" (*Letter of The Holy Father Francis on Europe*, 22 October 2020).

Europe has known, and still knows, the ancient virus of divisions and selfishness which it has managed to overcome with the ever effective vaccine of solidarity alongside which Pope Francis invites us today to use that "human fraternity".

When the meeting was scheduled to take place in Sarajevo in April 2020, the content of the Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, to which I will obviously refer because it is a fundamental document for the understanding of fraternity and interreligious relations, was still unknown.

We live today in a context made even more serious by the Covid-19 pandemic. "a crisis from which we come out either for better or worse. We must choose", stated Pope Francis during the general audience on 2 September. One month after that appeal, the Holy Father offered us *Fratelli tutti* – a compass with which to navigate the rough

waters of the pandemic. But the new encyclical is not just a response to this momentous health emergency. As the Pontiff himself explains, the “Issues of human fraternity and social friendship have always been a concern of mine”.

Opened by a brief introduction and divided into eight chapters, the Encyclical brings together – as the Pope himself explains – many of his reflections on fraternity and social friendship, whilst placing them in a broader context.

With the Encyclical, the Pope traces out a way to dissipate the many “shadows of a closed world”. The list of issues addressed by the document is long, from migration to the reform of international institutions, and will require careful reading of each paragraph. In any case, it is not necessary to be an insider to tackle the problems posed by the Pontiff. It is a question of cultivating the virtue of charity at every level, from personal life to political life: as the Pope in fact explains, “It is an act of charity to assist someone suffering, but it is also an act of charity, even if we do not know that person, to work to change the social conditions that caused his or her suffering. If someone helps an elderly person cross a river, that is a fine act of charity. The politician, on the other hand, builds a bridge, and that too is an act of charity” (*Ft* 186).

The leaders of different religious traditions and the communities they lead, walking together on the path of interreligious dialogue, can truly make their contribution to universal brotherhood in the societies in which they live. Pope Francis writes in the, as he calls it, social Encyclical (*Ft* 6): “It is wrong when the only voices to be heard in public debate are those of the powerful and “experts”. Room needs to be made for reflections born of religious traditions that are the repository of centuries of experience and wisdom” (*Ft* 275). In fact, the believer is a witness and bearer of values, which can greatly contribute to building fairer and healthier societies. Righteousness, fidelity, love for the common good, care for others, especially those in need, benevolence and mercy are elements that we can share with various religions. In today's world, tragically marked by forgetfulness of God or abuse of His name, people of different religions are called with a commitment to solidarity, to defend and promote peace and justice, human dignity and the protection of the environment. We must offer our collaboration to the societies of which we believers are citizens and make available to all our common values and deepest convictions concerning the sacred and inviolable character of life and the human person. Interreligious dialogue has an essential function in building civil coexistence, a society that includes and is not built on the culture of waste is a necessary condition for world peace. In a dehumanised world, in which the culture of indifference and greed characterise the relationships between human beings, there is a need for a new and universal solidarity and a new dialogue based on fraternity.

A fraternal society, therefore, will be the one that promotes education for dialogue to defeat the virus of “radical individualism” (*Ft* 105) and to allow everyone to give the best of themselves. There are two 'tools' in particular to achieve this type of society: ‘benevolentia’, which is an attitude that “wills the good” of others (*Ft* 112), and solidarity that takes care of fragility and is expressed in service to people and not to ideologies, fighting poverty and inequality (*Ft* 115).

Reading the Encyclical, one feels called to our individual and collective responsibilities in the face of new trends and requirements on the international scene. There are concrete demands, such as for a UN reform, where even the poorest nations are on an equal footing with the others (*Ft* 173); a remission of the foreign debt of the poorest countries (*Ft* 126); a strengthening of the universal destination of private property (*Ft* 123); the end of the arms trade, especially nuclear arms (*Ft* 262). All this is based on the commitment of the international community, but also on personal and group commitment to a culture of dialogue and peace, which is built in a handcrafted style (*Ft* 217). Fraternity can play a devastating role in international relations within a multi-polar and, I might add, multi-religious world.

Finally, I would like to point out that the Encyclical concludes with the memory of Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi and above all Blessed Charles de Foucauld, a model for everyone of what it means to identify with these to become “the universal brother” (*Ft* 286-287) and with two beautiful prayers: one “to the Creator” and the other “ecumenical Christian”, so that in the hearts of men remains "a spirit of brotherhood".

*Fratelli tutti* and the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*

The Holy Father makes explicit reference in the Encyclical to the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, signed on 4 February 2019 in Abu Dhabi by himself and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb. It is, as I have already said on several occasions, a historical document for believers of various religions, as well as for all people of good will. The human family is the one who is consulted and involved. Although the Document itself was born, as the Holy Father well explained, from a long and careful common reflection in Muslim and Catholic circles, it has nothing that cannot be shared by others. Pope Francis developed in the Encyclical the reasoning on brotherhood contained in the document signed in Abu Dhabi and also highlighted in the Encyclical *Laudato si'*. In fact, all three texts together aim at the same goal: achieving universal fraternity; to overcome and fight

individualism, to go from the “globalisation of indifference” to the “globalisation of fraternity”.

Pope Francis and the Great Imam of Al-Azhar have discovered that they are brothers in promoting justice and peace, guaranteeing human rights and religious freedom. Through a culture of dialogue, common collaboration and mutual knowledge, the Document appeals for an end to wars and condemns the scourges of terrorism and violence, especially the religiously motivated ones. “Faith - reads the preface - leads the believer to see in the other a brother to support and to love”.

There are two fundamental appeals contained in the declaration that I would like to underline: appeals to religious freedom and to dialogue. The Declaration attests that “freedom is a right of every person: everyone enjoys freedom of belief, thought, expression and action”. For this reason, we condemn the fact of forcing people “to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected, as too the imposition of a cultural way of life that others do not accept”. The full exercise of this religious freedom is possible when equal rights of citizenship are recognised for Muslims and Christians in their countries, by renouncing “discriminatory use of the term minorities which engenders feelings of isolation and inferiority. Its misuse paves the way for hostility and discord; it undoes any successes and takes away the religious and civil rights of some citizens who are thus discriminated against”. This is what the first article of the Declaration states. As far as dialogue is concerned, it is stated that through understanding and acceptance of the other, not only does it contribute to reducing many economic, social, political and environmental problems that besiege a large part of mankind, but through dialogue believers can “coming together in the vast space of spiritual, human and shared social values and, from here, transmitting the highest moral virtues that religions aim for. It also means avoiding unproductive discussions”.

The Pope confesses that he felt stimulated for his third encyclical by the Great Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb and the meeting in Abu Dhabi, which ended with the signing of the “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” which states that God “has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and who has called them to live together as brothers and sisters” (4 February 2019). The purpose of the Encyclical is to study in depth the major themes set out in the Document on Fraternity and to respond to the requests made to the Pope by many people and groups from all over the world (cfr *Ft* 4).

The methodology adopted by the Holy Father to draft the Encyclical is also striking: “Although I have written it from the Christian convictions that inspire and sustain me, I have sought to make this reflection an invitation to dialogue among all people of good

will” (*Ft* 6). It is, therefore, a reflection carried out in dialogue, joint commitment and listening. This is also an example of fraternity!

The openness to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue that has characterized this pontificate from the beginning is evident.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, I will try to highlight the points within the Document on Fraternity, cited nine times in the Encyclical, which are re-proposed in *Fratelli tutti*.

In chapter IV, entitled “A heart open to the whole world”, dedicated to safeguarding the plurality of human cultures and the relationship between them starting from the phenomenon of migration, Pope Francis recalls the meeting with the Great Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb with whom he fixed his gaze on the world in an open manner, focusing in particular on East and West: “good relations between East and West are indisputably necessary for both. They must not be neglected, so that each can be enriched by the other’s culture through fruitful exchange and dialogue. The West can discover in the East remedies for those spiritual and religious maladies that are caused by a prevailing materialism. And the East can find in the West many elements that can help free it from weakness, division, conflict and scientific, technical and cultural decline. It is important to pay attention to religious, cultural and historical differences that are a vital component in shaping the character, culture and civilization of the East. It is likewise important to reinforce the bond of fundamental human rights in order to help ensure a dignified life for all the men and women of East and West, avoiding the politics of double standards” (*Ft* 136).

Pope Francis repropose the document on Fraternity in Chapter V dedicated to “A better kind of politics”, a document in which, together with the Great Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, is called upon “the architects of international policy and world economy to work strenuously to spread the culture of tolerance and of living together in peace; to intervene at the earliest opportunity to stop the shedding of innocent blood” (*Ft* 192). The “better politics” must be placed at the service of the common good in order to build a human community united in fraternity and social friendship, in overcoming nationalism and populism.

As emerges from reading the Document signed in Abu Dhabi in this world of pluralities, in the globalised society a reconciliation between East and West, between North and South cannot be built unless we start from a common point: the condemnation and rejection of all kinds of violence and war..

The invitation to establish, in society, the concept of “full citizenship” also came from the Pope also, as well as to renounce the discriminatory use of the term “minorities” (*Ft* 129-131), as stated in the Document.

What is needed is a development in solidarity of all peoples based on the principle of gratuitousness. In this way, countries will be able to think as “a human family” (*Ft* 139-141). The other, different from us, is a gift and an enrichment for all, writes Francis, because differences represent a possibility of growth (*Ft* 133-135). A healthy culture is a welcoming culture that knows how to open up to others, without giving up on itself, offering them something authentic. As in a polyhedron - an image dear to the Pontiff - the whole is more than the individual parts, but each of them is respected in its value (*Ft* 145-146).

In the VIII and final chapter, the Pontiff focusses on “*Religions at the service of fraternity in our world*” and reiterates that violence has no basis in our religious beliefs, but rather in their distortion. “Deplorable” acts such as those of terrorists, therefore, are not due to religion, but to misinterpretations of religious texts, as well as to policies of hunger, poverty, injustice, oppression. Terrorism should not be supported by money, arms or media coverage because it is an international crime against world peace and security and, as such, should be condemned (*Ft* 282-283). At the same time, the Pope stresses that a path of peace between religions is possible and that it is therefore necessary to guarantee religious freedom, a fundamental human right for all believers.

“At times fundamentalist violence is unleashed in some groups, of whatever religion, by the rashness of their leaders”. Yet, “the commandment of peace is inscribed in the depths of the religious traditions that we represent. [...] As religious leaders, we are called to be true ‘people of dialogue’, to cooperate in building peace not as intermediaries but as authentic mediators” (*Ft* 284). The condemnation of violence, and the right to religious freedom are concepts strongly reiterated in the Document on Brotherhood.

Finally, the Encyclical concludes with the resumption of the “appeal for peace, justice and fraternity” made together with the Great Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb in the fraternal meeting in Abu Dhabi; an appeal preceded by a declaration on the need to free religions from the violence they have often caused in history: “we resolutely [declared] that religions must never incite war, hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism, nor must they incite violence or the shedding of blood. These tragic realities are the consequence of a deviation from religious teachings. They result from a political manipulation of religions and from interpretations made by religious groups who, in the course of

history, have taken advantage of the power of religious sentiment in the hearts of men and women... God, the Almighty, has no need to be defended by anyone and does not want his name to be used to terrorize people” (*Ft*, 285). The Pontiff takes up the appeal that, in the name of human fraternity, dialogue be adopted as the way, common collaboration as general conduct and mutual knowledge as the method and criterion.

### *Conclusion*

As aforementioned, the entire eighth chapter of the Encyclical focuses on the service that the different religions must offer to universal fraternity and to the defence of justice in society. “Dialogue between the followers of different religions does not take place simply for the sake of diplomacy, consideration or tolerance”. As the Bishops of India have taught us: “the goal of dialogue is to establish friendship, peace and harmony, and to share spiritual and moral values and experiences in a spirit of truth and love” (*Ft*, 271).

The Holy Father, beyond where, when and with whom, reminds us that we are called to realise what is, today and everywhere strictly necessary for our world, namely interreligious dialogue.

This is when the art of knowing how to communicate, in all its meanings, becomes an imperative. For Pope Francis it is the way to open up to the needs of the world and build social friendship.: “persistent and courageous dialogue does not make headlines, but quietly helps the world to live much better than we imagine” (*Ft* 6, 198). Dialogue respects and seeks the truth; dialogue gives birth to the culture of encounter, i.e. encounter becomes a way of life, a passion and a desire. He who dialogues is kind, recognizes the dignity of the other and respects them. As can be read in *Fratelli tutti*: “Kindness frees us from the cruelty that at times infects human relationships (...)” (*Ft* 6, 224).

The Holy Father is firmly convinced that through genuine collaboration among believers, we can work to contribute to the good of all, identifying the many injustices that still afflict this world, whilst also condemning all violence.

“Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all!” Thus, we read on His Holiness's official Twitter page on 6 October.

The "dream" of Pope Francis suggests that human rights are truly universal (*Ft* 206-cont.), and that all mankind can live in a world without frontiers (*Ft* 124). Pope Francis encourages everyone to a universal fraternity that overcomes hatred, domination, injustices. We are all called, as Pope Francis indicates in the figure of the Good Samaritan, to be close to each other (*Ft* 81), overcoming prejudices, personal interests, historical, cultural, or religious barriers. We are all co-responsible for building a society that can include, integrate, and lift those who have fallen or are suffering (*Ft* 77).

These brief references from me would be enough to grasp the importance of interreligious dialogue, starting between Islam and Christianity, in the genesis of the new encyclical. Despite this particular perspective, *Fratelli tutti* is not a document on interreligious relations. Rather, Pope Francis elevates the relationship between believers of different faiths to a paradigm of social friendship valid for all men and women, believers and non-believers alike, making fraternity that unifying principle which this sorrowful humanity needs.

In this unprecedented time due to the pandemic, the teaching of Pope Francis continues to chart a precise path that can be followed by all men of good will.

We must put aside prejudices, delays, and difficulties. While not renouncing our identity in anything or resorting to simple irenicism, with strength and courage, we must affirm the need for human fraternity and social friendship as necessary conditions for achieving the peace for which the whole world yearns. The imagination born of love for our needy neighbour will guide us to take the necessary steps in the building of a fraternal society.

Thank you for your kind attention.