

SOLIDARITY IN THE PROMOTION OF HUMAN DIGNITY IN THE LIGHT OF *FRATELLI TUTTI* (CHAPTER VIII)

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Preamble

In Chapter Eight, entitled *Religions at the service of fraternity in our world*, Pope Francis asserts states that “different religions, based on their respect for each human person as a creature called to be a child of God, contribute significantly to building fraternity and defending justice in society” (271). Let it be noted that the basis of this respect for each human person, leading to fraternity and defense of justice according to Pope Francis is not informed by pragmatic reasons for peaceful coexistence or “simply for the sake of diplomacy” (271) but by theological affirmation that each human person is a child of God.

This already gives us two indications of what we must do in order for our lives to go smoothly namely, to place God at the centre of our daily lives as individuals and groups. In paragraph 273, quoting from St. John Paull II (*Centesimus Annus*) he states that without reference to ‘transcendent truth (God) ... then there is no sure principle for guaranteeing just relations between people’. What the Pope is really saying is that any disregard or denial of God, which leads man disregard of norms above us will inevitably lead to the law of the jungle where the powerful and the majority trample the dignity of those are weak and in minority and violate their rights.

The second indication is that we must recognize and accept that we, as all God’s children, are to be open to each other, so as to readily and keenly contribute in building genuine brotherhood and sisterhood not only amongst local communities but also with peoples of different cultural backgrounds, racial and ethnic identities, religious and political leanings, social and economic status. The Church as a model of reconciled community with God and with each other must model “the beauty of this universal love” (277) as we try for example, in this meeting to create synergy between the Church Family of God in Africa and Europe, so that the Gospel message may permeate every soul on the two continents.

Ultimate Foundation of Fraternity and Human Dignity

The Pope basis the foundation of our mutual recognition as brothers and sisters on a major common trait among religions, namely belief in one God. The Pope asserts that, “we, the believers of the different religions, know that our witness to God benefits our society” (274). Thus, the Pope appears to affirm that despite different heritages and

traditions of religions, we share this bond in the belief in one God who created and sustains human beings and the whole of creation.

In talking about belief in one God, is the Pope here thinking about Abrahamic religions only, namely Christianity, Islam, and Judaism? Even if he was limiting himself to the Abrahamic religions, getting these three religions to coexist peacefully would be a great achievement because it is among them that destructive tensions have prevailed as can be clearly seen in the present raging conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis but the Pope is not limiting himself to them. In his celebrated Encyclical *Joy of the Gospel*, he extends his message of peace activism beyond religious affiliation to include everybody.

As believers we also feel close to those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, yet sincerely seek the truth, goodness and beauty which we believe have their highest expression and source in God. We consider them as precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation (257).

The Holy father then proceeds to clarify that if we are to succeed in recognizing each person as God's child and acquire the appropriate disposition towards each other, we must seek God first because "the effort to seek God with a sincere heart, ...helps us recognize one another as travelling companions, truly brothers and sisters" (274). Thus, by creating human beings in his image and likeness (Gn 1:26-28), God envisioned and destined all humankind, from the beginning, to be one single family, under one Father. This, coupled with compliance with transcendent and objective truth will allow adherents of different faith groups to be more cognizant about their common origin and destiny, which in turn fosters fraternity and human dignity. It is, therefore, crucial to always keep in view that as creatures, all human beings are subservient to God, who loves all, and ought to promote fraternity and the dignity of every person.

Religious Violence undermines Solidarity and Human Dignity

Though we are all created by the same God with equal dignity, people of various religions do not always live-in peace because some turn religion into an ideology. There is no agreed criterion for evaluating or distinguishing between true religion that seeks to do God's will and lead us to recognize one another as "truly brothers and sisters" from "ideologies" that lead us to "to impose our own interest or opinion with no regard for the rights of others" (273). As is known, ideologies implemented under the name of religion have led to violation of others' rights and brutal killing. The question is, how to know when we behave according to God's will towards each other and when we behave according to our ideologies which we dress up as God's will?

I think that the Pope responds to this question towards the end of the Encyclical when he quotes from the Abu Dhabi declaration to say that:

“Hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism, violence or the shedding of blood... 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...” (285).

According to the Pope, the noted reality above “is not due to religion, even when terrorists instrumentalize it, it is due, rather, to an accumulation of incorrect interpretations of religious texts” (283). In the same line, the Pope further notes that “policies linked to hunger, poverty, injustice, oppression and pride” also lead to hateful attitudes and violence. Thus, there are two reasons for terrorism, incorrect interpretation of religious texts and injustice. What results from correct understanding and practice of religion on the other hand is that which leads us ‘to recognize the fundamental values of our common humanity, values in the name of which we can and must cooperate, build and dialogue, pardon and grow’ (283). True religion, according to the Pope leads to “respect for the sacredness of life, respect for the dignity and freedom of others, and loving commitment to the welfare of all” (283).

It is good that the Pope mentions both injustice and terrorism together because the latter is often justified as means for achieving the former. Injustice is deplorable but the reaction of terrorism is equally deplorable. The way to deal with deplorable situation of injustice is not the deplorable means of terrorism. For this reason, the Pope condemns terrorism in all its forms as way of dealing with problems and calls instead “for the adoption of a culture of dialogue as a path” (286). The word “dialogue” appears 49 times in the document which he says, “calls for perseverance; entails moments of silence and suffering... patiently embrace(s) the broader experience of individuals and peoples...keeps our attention focused, to penetrate to the heart of matters, and to recognize what is essential” (50).

The present situation of conflict which has elements of religious motivation in Holy Land between the Palestinians and Israelis is one example of many situations in our world today that call for this silent, patient and suffering dialogue. History has shown that military solutions to conflicts do not work but dialogue does. Pope Francis has offered in this chapter a theological reason for the effectiveness of dialogue, namely the acknowledgment and respect of the other as made in God’s image.

Pope Francis has, similarly, identified “desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values and the prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic

philosophies that deify the human person and introduce worldly and material values in place of supreme and transcendental principles” as the other “important cause of the crises of the modern world.” To stem this development, he appeals for room to be created “for reflections born of religious traditions that are the repository of centuries of experience and wisdom.” (275) and nurture fraternity and human dignity.

Although, the Holy Father has proposed interreligious dialogue as a way to stimulate “friendship, peace and harmony,” and to guarantee religious freedom, which is a fundamental human right for all believers, he stresses that such a dialogue should not involve the “watering down or concealing of our deepest convictions when we encounter others who think differently than ourselves.” Rather, it is an invitation ‘to return to our sources, to concentrate on what is essential, namely, authentic “worship of God and love for our neighbour,” (282). It should also be a yearning for genuine openness to transcendent truth and to God, who is the Father of all humankind. All these will make the journey of peace between religions possible and bear “fruit not in discrimination, hatred and violence but in respect for the sacredness of life,” (283) and the dignity of every person.

In Africa the major religions are Christianity and Islam. While Christians and Muslims will find the path to dialogue challenging, both faith groups are, nevertheless, encouraged to improve their engagement with each other through developing a ‘theology of interfaith solidarity’ that begins with shared values, developing trust, and working toward deeper conversations and common concerns. Both should be motivated to know, love and cherish each other, care for the poor, eschew violence, and pursue peace, freedom, and justice for all (FT 281-284; see, Todd Johnson, *The Global Religious Context of “Human Fraternity*, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu>, 20th February 2019).

All this challenges us bishops to be more proactive with regard to interreligious dialogue in our local Churches and beyond. To achieve positive outcome, our first “point of departure must be God’s way of seeing things,” (281), as urged by Pope Francis. Our worship of God he notes, must be “sincere and humble”, and such that bears fruit in “respect for the sacredness of life, respect for the dignity and freedom of others, and loving commitment to the welfare of all.” (283) The Holy Father has also invited us religious leaders to be ‘true people of dialogue; cooperate in building peace’; and become “authentic mediators.” (284) who expend ourselves for the sake of peace.

Role of the Church in promoting Solidarity and Human Dignity

In this effort of dialogue instead of terrorism, the Church has an important role to play because it is a vocation of all her members to give primacy “to relationship, to the

encounter with the sacred mystery of the other and to universal communion with the entire human family” (277). Secondly the metaphor of the Church as a mother makes promotion of dialogue a top priority mission for the Church. For being a mother, she is to be “a home with open doors”; to sustain hope, build bridges, break down walls and sow seeds of reconciliation. In imitation of Mary, the mother of Jesus, “we want to be a Church that serves, that leaves home and goes forth from its places of worship, goes forth “in order to accompany life.” (276) It should be noted that “For many Christians, the “journey of fraternity also has a mother, whose name is Mary,” (278) one whose example, we ought to emulate.

To effectively promote solidarity and human dignity, Pope Francis has noted that the Church, while respecting the autonomy of political life, is not to restrict her mission to the private sphere or the sacristy but to work for “the advancement of humanity and of universal fraternity;” assist in the building of a better world and, thus, “reawaken the spiritual energy that can contribute to the betterment of society.” (276)

Although religious ministers are not engaged in party politics, the Holy Father has said that “they cannot renounce the political dimension of life itself.” (276) Because the Church’s public role obliges her to pay attention to the common good and concern for integral human development. Indeed, all that is human concerns the Church.

Solidarity and human dignity will further thrive everywhere when the Church’s prophetic voice and teaching do not only resonate with, but also become an integral part of the debates in parliaments at local, national and continental levels; and form the basis upon which political, policy, business or economic decisions are taken by leaders of every country. Here the courage shown by John the Baptist (Mk 6:17-29) and the early apostles comes to mind (Acts 4:1-22; 7:55-8:2).

According to St. John Paul II, “we need to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up. Communion must be cultivated and extended day by day and at every level in the structure of each Church’s life.” (*Novo Millennio Inuente*, nos. 43 & 45)

Based on this, it will be noteworthy to include in our educational, catechetical and pastoral programmes, issues dealing with the cultures and worldviews of both continents. Public propaganda against prejudice should also be carried out and opportunities created for accurate information about each other’s beliefs and customs between the continents for better understanding and interaction. A deepened knowledge of one another’s cultures, worldviews and idiosyncrasies will

(among others) pave the way for recognition of each other's dignity and mutual respect.

Conclusion

Addressing the audience at the Presentation of the *Fratelli Tutti*, a member of the Higher Committee and First Muslim to ever co-present a Papal Encyclical, Yoannis Lazi Ghaid, a judge, appealed to the followers of Christianity and Islam "to support each other on the path of fraternity, mutual knowledge and collaboration... We are in favour of uniting religious energies to tackle discrimination, racism, and hatred," he added. "At the same time, we strive for the consolidation of our own doctrine, deepening our own specific aspects and avoiding disunity or disintegration", which should be "the goal of every person faithful to his or her religion. Universal fraternity remains, yesterday, today and tomorrow, an absolute necessity for the whole world, and is indispensable for salvation because it will give life to a balanced and happy civilization, as it centers on man regardless of skin colour, sex, language and religion." (Gerard O'Connell, *First Muslim to ever present a Papal Encyclical praises 'Fratelli Tutti'*, <https://www.americamagazine.org>, 5th October 2020)

✠ **Bishop Sithembele Anton Sipuka**