

The Compelling Figure of St. Francis of Assisi in the Pontificate of Pope Francis and his New Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*

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When Pope Francis appeared on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica on March 13, 2013, he indicated that he had chosen the name "Francis." It proved to be a significant decision and prophetic message. Especially now, seven years later, with the publication of his latest encyclical *Fratelli Tutti/All Brothers*, the foundational significance of that choice for his Pontificate is only more clear.

As Pope Francis' legacy takes shape, the parallels between Pope Francis and St. Francis of Assisi are unmistakable. St. Francis of Assisi's (1181 or 1182—1226) ecstatic mysticism and love for the presence of God in nature are reflected markedly in Pope Francis' emphasis on a Catholic Integral Ecology. St. Francis' embrace of the Cross of Jesus Christ experienced in the stigmata, his radical living of the Gospel, and his love for the poor and suffering, find their complement in the Holy Father's Jesuit Formation, with its commitment to the Ignatian Exercises and principles of discernment. It is undeniable that the Catholic intellectual foundation of Pope Francis' global missiology and evangelization is rooted in a profoundly Franciscan spirit.¹

St. Francis of Assisi's influence reveals itself first in Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'/On Care for Our Common Home*, which grounds a Catholic integral ecology in the life and charisms of St. Francis. Pope Francis writes:

I do not want to write this encyclical without turning to that attractive and compelling figure, whose name I took as my guide and inspiration when I was elected Bishop of Rome. I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable, and of an integral

¹ See Bishop John Barres' February 2020 *Long Island Catholic* column entitled "The Catholic Intellectual Foundation of Pope Francis' Global Missiology and Evangelization," 3, 5.

ecology lived out joyfully and authentically...If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship to the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits and their immediate needs...The poverty and austerity of St. Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical; a refusal to turn reality into an object to be used and controlled. (10-11)

In the face of a world which sees creation as an object to be used, Pope Francis turns to St. Francis. He marvels at and sets up as a counterexample the holy friar's child-like humility, which celebrates all that humanity shares with the rest of creation and rejoices in the mission to respect and care for it.

Most recently in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis again draws deeply from this well of inspiration. The letter, released on October 3, 2020 from the Tomb of St. Francis of Assisi, relies on the saint's universal appeal through the centuries to speak to our own challenging times.

Pope Francis first highlights the developments which should give us hope that we are following this Franciscan path:

True, a worldwide tragedy like the Covid-19 pandemic momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person's problems are the problems of all. Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together...Amid this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about appearances, has fallen away, revealing once more the ineluctable and blessed awareness that we are part of one another, that we are brothers and sisters of one another. (32)

St. Francis' call for a universal brotherhood seems to have been answered through the solidarity of our shared suffering. We hear in Pope Francis' words an echo and fulfillment of those of St. Paul, that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."²

² Galatians 3:28

Yet, in section 35, Pope Francis is quick to lament that fallen humanity so often fails to learn from its errors:

All too quickly, however, we forget the lessons of history, ‘the teacher of life.’ Once this health crisis passes, our worst response would be to plunge even more deeply into feverish consumerism and new forms of egotistic self-preservation. God willing, after all this, we will think no longer in terms of ‘them’ and ‘those’, but only ‘us.’ If only this may prove not to be just another tragedy of history from which we learned nothing.

As we navigate our way through what are hopefully the waning months of the COVID-19 pandemic, we realize that the gains of the past can easily be lost. Humanity all too often slips back into old habits, rather than answer the call to imitate St. Francis’ detachment from the world and fervent love for Christ and his fellow men and women.

This prompts us to ask, therefore, what are the lessons of this pandemic for the future? Will they be superficial and fleeting, or can the figure of St. Francis of Assisi lead us to become a society much more deeply grounded in “fraternity and social friendship” (2)? Will the pandemic, like the hope-filled fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, simply usher in a new period of frenetic consumerism, or will we take advantage of such powerful historic opportunities to live the truth in freedom and charity?

Our hope should be that this sense of global community, so integral to the Christian ideal, continues as the pandemic fades. Particularly on our part, we are called to continue to live out the scriptural call to love our neighbor, by donating to our food pantries, checking in on our friends and family, and praying for suffering brothers and sisters even when we are not in the midst of an outbreak. As Christ tell us, “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”³ In St. Francis, the Holy Father gives us a model offering an inspiring way of applying history’s lessons of holiness and the Splendor of Truth to the world’s present challenges. As Pope Benedict reminds us in *Verbum Domini/The Word of the Lord* (2010), “The most profound interpretation of Scripture comes precisely from those [the saints] who let themselves be shaped by the word of God through listening, reading, and assiduous meditation.” (48) He specifically names St. Francis of Assisi

³ Matthew 25:40

as a saint who lived and interpreted the Sacred Scriptures so powerfully that his impact rippled throughout his own society and through the years to us today; if we intend to grow from this experience, we should look to this vivid expression of our faith to guide us.

The fulcrum of our reflection on *Fratelli Tutti* then should be Pope Francis' use of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Though not explicitly stated, it is clear that St. Francis of Assisi's life interpreted through the lens of the Good Samaritan parable underlies *Fratelli Tutti*'s vision of universal fraternity, charity and social friendship. Pope Francis emphasizes that "Wherever he [St. Francis] went, he sowed seeds of peace and walked alongside the poor, the abandoned, the infirm and the outcast, the least of his brothers and sisters." (2)

Perhaps most striking is the example Pope Francis cites of St. Francis of Assisi visiting the Sultan Malik-el-Kamil in Egypt at the time of the Crusades. Among those who would have been considered sworn enemies, St. Francis, in a spirit of humility, genuine love, and servanthood, "became a father to all and inspired the vision of a fraternal society." With "the breadth and grandeur of his love," St. Francis "sought to embrace everyone." (4) It was precisely St. Francis of Assisi's radical living of the Gospel and dedication to the Unique Redeemer of the World Jesus Christ and the Mission of Mercy of his Church, that enabled this historic interfaith moment to bear such fruit at that moment of history and in ours.

In a more modern vein, Pope Francis extends the Good Samaritan image of St. Francis in *Fratelli Tutti* by sketching him as an icon of Christocentric listening, someone who shows us how to connect with others in a world fragmented by social media. The Holy Father writes:

The ability to sit down and listen to others, typical of interpersonal encounters, is paradigmatic of the welcoming attitude shown by those who transcend narcissism and accept others, caring for them and welcoming them into their lives. Yet 'today's world is largely a deaf world...At times, the frantic pace of the modern world prevents us from listening attentively to what another person is saying... We must not lose our ability to listen.' St. Francis 'heard voice of God, he heard the voice of the poor, he heard the voice of the infirm and he heard the voice of nature. He made of them a way of life. My desire is that the seed that Saint Francis planted may grow in the hearts of many.'" (48)

St. Francis teaches us how to listen, that we may hear the voice of God, and the voice of our neighbor, and respond with the radical charity he exhibited.

The words of G.K. Chesterton in his inspired biography, *St. Francis of Assisi*, helps illuminate Pope Francis' admiration of his patron:

The Saint is a medicine because he is an antidote... He will generally be found restoring the world to sanity by exaggerating whatever the world neglects, which is by no means always the same element in every age. Yet each generation seeks its saint by instinct; and he is not what the people want, but rather what the people need.⁴

Saint Francis is the saint we need in our time, because in this moment of crisis when so many turn inward, he inspires us to look outward: caring for our neighbor, breaking down barriers, celebrating the shared humanity which unites us as one in Christ.

We find then the providential arc of Pope Francis' Pontificate and the themes he treats in *Fratelli Tutti* weaving in and out of the contemplative and revolutionary vision of St. Francis of Assisi. He is raised up as revolutionary precisely because he was obedient and faithful to Jesus Christ and the Splendor of Truth and Mercy expressed by His Church. May his example and inspiration lead us all from this crisis into a new appreciation of our faith and the gift of universal brotherhood as children of God.

⁴ Chesterton, G.K, *St Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002) 22.