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“Builders of
a New Social
Bond”: Reflections
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THE CHOCTAW NATION AND THE IRISH FAMINE

In 1847 the Choctaw people sent 170 US dollars to Irish women and men who were locked in the grip of the potato famine. This remarkable gesture is all the more poignant when one considers the plight of the Choctaw people themselves. They, along with many other Native American tribes, had been forcibly removed from their land by the US government, and made to march thousands of miles across America to be “relocated”. The route became known as the “Trail of Tears”, owing to the thousands of people who died from starvation and exhaustion along the way.

Despite their own hardships, and upon hearing about the Irish Famine, the Choctaw people felt compelled to do something. The 170 dollars they raised was sent to Ireland and distributed by the Quakers among the most needy. It was an amazing example of generosity on the part of a people who had already lost so much. But more than that, it reflected a deep and profound sense of solidarity with the suffering of others, even those far beyond one’s tribe or one’s land.

FRATELLI TUTTI AND THE CALL TO UNIVERSAL SISTERHOOD

It is this sense of sisterhood and brotherhood that Pope Francis wishes to promote in his latest encyclical. *Fratelli tutti* is very much a call to action: “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” (n.6). It is a lengthy document, echoing many of the themes that Francis discusses elsewhere in his pontificate.

But there is urgency in Francis’ tone. He writes against the backdrop of a global health crisis, of economic pressures arising

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from COVID and the shutdown of local economies, and of environmental destruction that appears to be accelerating across the world. His predecessors spoke of similar concerns of course, but one could argue that it was easier to ignore what John Paul II or Benedict, or Paul VI had to say. We now find ourselves running out of time, and the urgency of Francis' message feels more pronounced for that reason.

So what are the issues examined in this encyclical?

THE BETRAYAL OF TRICKLE-DOWN ECONOMICS

In *Fratelli tutti* we find a robust condemnation of trickle-down economics and free-market capitalism. "Some economic rules have proved effective for growth, but not for integral human development. Wealth has increased, but together with inequality, with the result that 'new forms of poverty are emerging' ... Poverty must always be understood and gauged in the context of the actual opportunities available in each concrete historical period" (n.21). A recent BBC report illustrates the growing inequality to which Francis refers.¹ While countless workers have lost their jobs or have had to take pay-cuts since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the world's billionaires have seen their wealth grow exponentially. "The world's richest saw their wealth climb 27.5% to 10.2 trillion dollars from April to July this year ... Among the billionaires, the biggest winners this year have been industrialists, whose wealth rose a staggering 44% in the three months to July". This comes as the World Bank announced that extreme poverty across the globe is set to rise this year for the first time in more than two decades.²

Francis not only condemns the idea of trickle-down economics, he queries the notion that market freedom somehow levels the playing field for all people.

Indeed, 'to claim economic freedom while the real conditions bar many people from actual access to it, and while possibilities for employment continue to shrink, is to practice doublespeak' ... A truly human and fraternal society will be capable of ensuring in an efficient and stable way that each of its members is accompanied at every stage of life. Not only by providing for their basic needs, but by enabling them to give the best of themselves, even though their performance may be less than optimum, their pace slow or their efficiency limited (n.110).

1 <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-54446285> accessed 7th October, 2020.

2 Ibid.

This is a point also taken up by the American philosopher Michael Sandel in his latest book *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good*.³ Sandel examines the idea of meritocracy and the notion that those at the top have earned their place. They are there on merit, or so the argument goes, while those who have lost out in society somehow deserve their fate. He rejects this way of thinking and is critical, therefore, of the idea that open-market economics will somehow solve inequality. Rather than an emphasis on greater market freedom, Sandel suggests that tackling *inequality* ought to be our fundamental goal. “Mobility can no longer compensate for inequality. Any serious response to the gap between rich and poor must reckon directly with inequalities of power and wealth, rather than rest content with the project of helping people scramble up a ladder whose rungs grow farther and farther apart”.⁴

Reliance on strictly economic or market-led solutions is dangerous for other reasons also, according to Sandel. “In the domain of the economy, it simply assumes that the common good is defined by GDP, and that the value of people’s contributions consists in the market value of the goods or services they sell”.⁵ This raises several problems. It reduces the person to the level of commodity, and the value of our presence in the world to one of utility. Second, it narrows the civic project and impoverishes public discourse, dominated as it so often is by economic arguments. Third, Sandel warns that reliance on economic measurements alone reconfigures the terms of social recognition. Deciding who counts and who does not becomes an economic matter rather than a moral one. What we are witnessing as a result is increased anger, polarization and toxicity in politics. For Sandel, the solution lies not in increasing overall wealth above all else, but in reducing social inequality.

Many of the criticisms raised here by Sandel are already familiar in Catholic social teaching. Popes have repeatedly reminded us that the key to a more just, more stable, and more peaceful world is the reduction of both poverty and inequality, coupled with a commitment to the integral development of all. As Pope Paul VI said, “Development is the new name for peace”.⁶ For without democratic and sustainable development, where all can reach their potential in a dignified manner, our civic foundations erode and crumble.

3 Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good*, (Allen Lane, 2020).

4 *Ibid.*, 24.

5 *Ibid.*, 28.

6 Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, (1967), n.76.

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THE RISE OF POPULISM

Growing inequality, and the resultant sense of frustration and disillusionment, can provide fertile ground for the rise of populist regimes. These movements appeal to skewed notions of national identity and national interest in order to create divisions within society. It is no coincidence that as we see far right political organizations gain momentum we also see a rise in racist and xenophobic sentiment. A fervent anti-immigrant agenda shapes much of the populist narrative, bolstered by a straight-talking, simplistic rhetoric that leaves little room for nuance, disagreement, or compromise. A politics of hate and exclusion replaces a politics of the common good.

It has allowed many populist groups to exploit the vulnerability and the legitimate fears of citizens, many of whom feel forgotten or ignored by the mainstream political elites. Michael Sandel notes that: “Like the triumph of Brexit in the United Kingdom, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 was an angry verdict on decades of rising inequality and a version of globalization that benefits those at the top but leaves ordinary citizens feeling disempowered. It was also a rebuke for a technocratic approach to politics that is tone-deaf to the resentments of people who feel the economy and the culture have left them behind”.⁷

Francis dedicates much of *Fratelli tutti* to this question. In a scathing critique, he says that “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 ... Amid the fray of conflicting interests, where victory consists in eliminating one’s opponents, how is it possible to raise our sights to recognize our neighbours or to help those who have fallen along the way? ” (n.15,16). Instead, Francis calls for “a universal love that promotes all persons” (n.106) and speaks about the sacred duty of hospitality. He continually defends the fundamental rights of persons, rights that are universal and not dependent on borders. Francis wants to develop *a new way* of understanding the relationships and responsibilities between countries. He is inviting us to become people of imagination, of vision, and integrity, people who can envisage a better way of living together rather than succumbing to the narrow politics of self-interest.

Throughout the encyclical Pope Francis uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate the bonds of solidarity necessary to create a more welcoming and generous world. He warns that we have become accustomed to looking the other way, barely noticing

⁷ Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 17.

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the suffering of others as we pass by. What is needed is a radical re-orientating, a *metanoia*. The Holy Father is clear: “Jesus’ parable summons us to rediscover our vocations as citizens of our respective nations and of the entire world, builders of a new social bond” (n.66). He continues: “We cannot be indifferent to suffering; we cannot allow anyone to go through life as an outcast. Instead, we should feel indignant, challenged to emerge from our comfortable isolation and to be changed by contact with human suffering” (n.68).

But there is another moral message in this parable if we look more closely. For even the Good Samaritan needed a nearby inn where additional help could be provided. The virtue of humility helps us to acknowledge that we cannot do everything needed to improve society, but rather we can only do what is within our capabilities. We must grow in prudence in order to identify the “inn keepers” of our time and place, the wise women and men who can guide us, who have different skills than us, and who can do the things we cannot do. We may not be able to change the entire world, but we may be able to change world of someone we meet along our way.

UNIVERSAL AND LOCAL

The Pontiff appreciates, of course, that real tension exists at times between the local and the global. We are each rooted in time, place, culture, story, song. We are shaped by our culture and traditions. There is a danger that much of what is unique to us will be lost in the rush towards globalization. And yet the parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us that although we are thus rooted, we must also be willing to see beyond the local and respond to the larger needs of humanity as they arise.

Francis explains that: “It should be kept in mind that ‘an innate tension exists between globalization and localization. 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, globalized universe ... In the other, they turn into a museum of local folklore, a world apart, doomed to doing the same things ... We need to have a global outlook to save ourselves from petty provincialism” (n.142).

It is good that we preserve and celebrate what is local, of course (n.100), but Francis warns that this cannot excuse the rise of groups that promote narrow identities or a type of tribalism that separates us from others. Ultimately, Pope Francis calls us to a more open-

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minded view of our world. “A healthy culture, on the other hand, is open and welcoming by its very nature; indeed, ‘a culture without universal values is not truly a culture’” (n.146). Authentic social dialogue is crucial here. Francis appeals for constructive public conversations, and for what we might call “critical citizenship”. To put it another way, engaged citizens and a vigorous civil society are pillars upon which strong democracies depend. And as societies become more pluralist the need for serious public dialogue is crucial. Consensus might be a necessary way forward, but as Francis reminds us, consensus is also dynamic!

SISTERHOOD? REALLY?

An earlier heading in this article refers, somewhat mischievously, to the universal call to *sisterhood*. On the face of it the title of the document does not appear to include sisterhood, and this has generated anger and disappointment among many. But I would argue that the bigger problem lies within the encyclical itself. To be clear, Francis does use inclusive language throughout, but the value of this is offset when one realizes that not a single female voice is to be found within *Fratelli tutti*. Of the 292 sources cited throughout the 288 footnotes, not a single one is female. What about Sr. Helen Prejean when he denounces the death penalty? Or Dorothy Day or Mairead Maguire or Betty Williams when he speaks about peace building and reconciliation? Or Elizabeth Johnson and Wangari Maathai when he discusses ecology and care for the earth? Or Mother Theresa as an example of someone who lived among the poor and most vulnerable? To say nothing of the many other female saints who inspire the Christian tradition.

This omission is all the more disappointing when we listen to Pope Francis speak so passionately about human rights abuses such as trafficking, sexual abuse of women and girls, poverty, and the displacement of millions due to war. It is a fact that women and young girls face disproportionate danger across our world today. They are at higher risk of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse than men; girls are more likely to be sold into early marriage; millions of women and girls are subjected to female genital mutilation every year; more women are trafficked for the sex industry than men; women continue to be paid less than men to do the same work in many professions, even in the so-called Developed World.

In paragraph 47 Francis says that: “True wisdom demands an encounter with reality”. Listening to women’s voices and taking seriously women’s lived experiences would have added greater weight to *Fratelli tutti*. And it is ironic that in paragraph 23 the

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Holy Father says: “the organization of societies worldwide is still far from reflecting clearly that women possess the same dignity and identical rights as men. *We say one thing with words, but our decisions and reality tell another story*” (n.23. Emphasis added).

CONCLUSION

There is no doubting that *Fratelli tutti* is an incredibly rich document. There is a summative feel to it, one could argue; Francis cites his own earlier pronouncements more than in earlier works. It seems as if he is here reasserting and cementing concerns which are fundamental to his pontificate.

Francis is calling us to imagine *a new and better way forward*. This requires a new way of thinking on our part as well as a new way of acting. We are being called to conversion. A change of heart is needed as well as reform of structures. It is true that the very foundations of our economic, social and political mechanisms need reform. But more than that, we need to think and see differently. There is a profound spiritual crisis that must be addressed, for without it we simply provide technical solutions to the problems of our times. And technical solutions will not resolve the deep human frailties that are contributing to a rise in populist groups, a growth of xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment, and the polarization of communities around the world.

It is for this reason that Francis believes a renewed public ethic, one based on solidarity, generosity, service and the common good is urgently needed to try to heal the wounds of a fractured world. We must, in order words, become “the builders of a new social bond”.