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Authentic Vision
of Dialogue?*

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INTRODUCTION

It was the publication of the motu proprio *Traditionis custodes* in July 2021 and the subsequent reaction among some theologians and commentators which invites me in the present paper to ask: how dialogical is the theology of Pope Francis? To echo the words of Gregory Hillis, professor of theology at Bellarmine University in Louisville and regular commentator in the Jesuit magazine *America*, and certainly not one who would be described as a traditionalist (liturgically or otherwise): “I have long found Francis’ vision of dialogue attractive. For this reason, I find myself confused by his response to Catholic traditionalism.”¹ When one considers his encyclicals *Laudato si’* (2015, hereafter LS) and *Fratelli tutti* (2020, hereafter FT), the concept of ‘dialogue’ – especially dialogue with those beyond the church – is evidently an important element in the theological approach of Pope Francis. FT, in particular, is underpinned by the concept of dialogue with its call for universal fraternity and social friendship. While the current, ecclesial programme of synodality could rightly be understood as an outworking of a more dialogical magisterium, Catholics who feel particularly attached to the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite might be forgiven for thinking that Francis’ latest motu proprio is quite the opposite of his stated vision. After a cursory consideration of FT’s understanding of dialogue, this paper

1 Gregory Hillis, “I love Pope Francis’ commitment to dialogue – which is why his Latin Mass restrictions confuse me,” *America* (December 22, 2021), retrieved from <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/12/22/francis-latin-mass-traditionalists-synod-242111>

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will critically assess its approach with the help of the dialogical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and offer some tentative pointers for how theology might respond to Francis' call for dialogue in a way that views difference as a *privileged place* for dialogical encounter rather than something to be overcome.

THE CALL FOR DIALOGUE IN FRATELLI TUTTI

As with LS, FT is an encyclical concerned with the social doctrine of the church, but this time concerning the theme of fraternity and social friendship. The fact that Francis offers a second social encyclical is worth mentioning in itself: it reveals a central concern in his magisterium for those issues which touch the lives of *all* people, beyond membership of the Church. The universal scope of the topic and the fact that it is addressed, like LS, to all people of good will demonstrates a desire on the part of Francis to have the broadest possible reach in his teaching. The language of dialogue is central; "I have sought to make this reflection an invitation to dialogue among all people of good will."² The pope is not simply setting out new teaching to be adhered to by the faithful but entering an ongoing conversation about an issue of universal concern. Used no less than *48 times* in the encyclical, 'dialogue' is a constant theme throughout.

The structure and methodology of FT offers an example of how Francis engages dialogically with the topic at hand. Indeed, the document itself is a *call to* and an *example of* dialogue. Throughout the encyclical, the pope systematically makes references to the reflections of various episcopal conferences from every continent.³ What is more, Francis writes that he finds inspiration and encouragement for the topic of fraternity from the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb.⁴ Francis makes several references to their joint *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, published in Abu Dhabi in February 2019, which the pope says was not a "mere diplomatic gesture but a reflection born of dialogue and common commitment."⁵ A Jewish rabbi, Rabbi Hillel, is also referenced.⁶ Indeed, the pope not only includes the

2 FT 6.

3 Quotations from episcopal conferences in FT include every continent: the United States (§124), Portugal (§178), Australia (§205), the Congo (§226), South Africa and South Korea (§229), Columbia (§232), Latin American (§234), Croatia (§253), and India (§271).

4 FT 5.

5 FT 5. Mustafa Genc ("Fratelli Tutti: An Interpretation of Dialogue and Friendship in Society: An Islamic Perspective," *The Journal of Social Encounters* 5 [2021]: 33-35) offers an interesting Islamic perspective on aspects of FT and reflects the extent to which it mirrors, especially in chapter six of the encyclical, the views of Ahmad Al-Tayyeb.

6 FT 59-60.

reflections from various episcopal conferences, an imam, and a rabbi, but also those from individuals and groups throughout the world who have written to him. Francis evidently desires to offer a reflection that is as open and dialogical as possible.

Not only can one see FT as an example of how dialogue can operate theologically, but one might regard the entire encyclical as an apologia for the inherent need for dialogue which goes beyond the mere functional. Chapter two's exegesis and reflection on the Good Samaritan presents the foundational motivation for dialogue, that is, love. The call to love of neighbour, love of the other, is the very means by which we become truly human. Following the example of the Good Samaritan, the making of oneself as a gift to those who are completely other is part of the mystery of authentic human existence.⁷ Francis refers in FT to the ultimate source of love, the life of the triune God where "we encounter in the community of the three divine persons the origin and perfect model of all life in society."⁸ Moreover, Francis makes it clear that if we want to encounter each other, we have to dialogue.⁹ Our intrinsic need to encounter the other, and therefore dialogue, can be understood as both trinitarian and anthropological. While dialogue can often be mutually beneficial, encountering and welcoming the other in dialogue is worth pursuing even without any gain. It is a style of life, a way of being.¹⁰ Thus, for Francis, dialogue is *more* than just a method but a way of life.

It's worth noting the encyclical's references to and understanding of consensus. The end of dialogue is not some sort of ephemeral or superficially bartered agreement. Francis understands consensus as a dynamic reality whereby dialogue allows people to acknowledge fundamental values that rise above consensus and transcend concrete situations.¹¹ It's difficult to imagine everyone would agree with the pontiff on this point, but he is convinced that only dialogue in a pluralist society will result in the realisation of those values which always ought to be affirmed.¹² Francis adopts the image of "a many-faceted polyhedron whose different sides form a variegated unity" for this culture of dialogue where "differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations."¹³ The encyclical calls for a new cultural paradigm based on dialogue which can accept and welcome difference.

7 *Ibid.*, 87.

8 *Ibid.*, 85.

9 *Ibid.*, 198.

10 *Ibid.*, 216.

11 *Ibid.*, 211.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*, 215.

Even just a cursory reading of FT reveals how Francis has embraced the category of dialogue in his magisterial teaching and invites everyone to engage meaningfully in the same task. Indeed, the pope makes it quite clear that dialogue is not to be understood as a utilitarian means for some benefit, even if this benefit is mutual, but is a value in itself. It is not just that Francis employs a dialogical methodology in the way he approaches a theological issue, but advocates dialogue and encounter with otherness as a fundamental way of being human with both trinitarian and anthropological foundations. The relational and communal life of the Trinity is reflected in creation, not least the human person.¹⁴ Creation itself, therefore, as a part of God's revelation is inherently dialogical. Openness to otherness and openness to God go hand in hand; one is not possible without the other. While this trinitarian and anthropological foundation for dialogue is referenced in FT it could certainly be developed more fully.

FT is underpinned by the *four* principles Francis outlines in *Evangelii gaudium* (2013) which he claims are based on the pillars of Catholic social teaching and form what he regards as his own "social criteria."¹⁵ These four, which have been referred to as the 'Bergoglian principles,'¹⁶ include:

- i) Time is greater than space,
- ii) Unity prevails over conflict,
- iii) Realities are more important than ideas,
- iv) The whole is greater than the part.

These principles are a simplification and summary of the polarity model in the dialectical philosophy of Romano Guardini, which formed the inspiration for Bergoglio's unfinished doctoral research in the late 1980s.¹⁷ Guardini provides Francis with a synthesising model with which to hold polar, perhaps even contradictory, opposites together that can be "resolved" (in the words of Francis)

14 Francis' trinitarian and anthropological argument echoes *Verbum Domini*, which states that God discloses the filial and relational nature of human existence and that we cannot understand ourselves unless we are open to dialogue with God: "in this dialogue with God we come to understand ourselves" (§22-23).

15 Ethna Regan, "The Bergoglian Principles: Pope Francis' Dialectical Approach to Political Theology," *Religions* 10 (2019): 4.

16 Regan, art. cit., 1; cf. *LS* 178.

17 Massimo Borghesi, "The Polarity Model: The Influences of Gaston Fessard and Romano Guardini on Jorge Mario Bergoglio" in *Discovering Pope Francis: the roots of Jorge Mario Bergoglio's Thinking*, edited by Brian Y. Lee and Thomas L. Knoebel (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press Academic, 2019): 108. The first and second of the Bergoglian principles relates to Guardini's second pair of 'intra-empirical opposites,' *fülle-form* (fullness-form), whereas the fourth sums up Guardini's third of the intra-empirical ones, *einzelheit-ganzheit* (individuality-totally.) Only the third principle does not have a parallel in Guardini's philosophy.

at a higher level while maintaining the tension between them.¹⁸ Principles *two* and *four* are worth closer examination. The second, ‘unity prevails over conflict,’ embraces solidarity in its deepest and most challenging sense where the common good is more important than any individual position.¹⁹ While Francis makes it clear that this principle is not one that will result in some kind of syncretism, one can arguably see in it traces of a Hegelian dialectical vision of reality. He argues that this principle “overcomes every conflict by creating a new and promising synthesis”.²⁰ Regan notes, for example, that while Francis did not develop these principles in the Hegelian or Marxist sense, it’s difficult to claim Francis is completely uninfluenced by Hegel.²¹ For example, in one line he says that respectful dialogue aims at “achieving agreement on a deeper level.”²² He hopes for a time when “we will think no longer in terms of ‘them’ and ‘those’, but only ‘us.’”²³ What he means by a dynamic ‘consensus’ through dialogue, where fundamental values can be acknowledged by everyone, isn’t exactly clear. The priority of unity over conflict risks *suppressing* difference. While Francis actively calls for dialogical processes of encounter where people accept differences, the underlying tendency arguably sees the end of dialogue as leading to an overarching synthesis and therefore falling short of what one might describe as authentic dialogue.²⁴ The *fourth* principle underlying Francis’ social doctrine, ‘the whole is greater than the part,’ mirroring Guardini’s polarity between individuality and totality (*einzelheit-ganzheit*),²⁵ also risks marginalising ‘parts,’ or individuals, over a particular version of the whole.²⁶ Grounded in trinitarian theology, Francis wants to preserve unity in diversity for which the image of the polyhedron is proposed as a metaphor where there is convergence of every part, each of which can preserve its distinctiveness.²⁷ At the same time, FT interprets the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, as a call to “put aside all differences.”²⁸

For philosophers who think from difference, such as Emmanuel Levinas, authentic dialogue does *not* eliminate difference. Far from

18 Antonio Spadaro, “Le orme di un pastore: una conversazione con Papa Francesco,” in *Nei tuoi occhi è la mia parola: Omelie e discorsi di Buenos Aires 1999-2013*, Jorge Mario Bergoglio (Milan: Rizzoli, 2016).

19 Regan, *art. cit.*, 8-10; *EG* 226-230; cf. *LS* 198; cf. *FT* 245.

20 *EG* 230.

21 Regan, *art. cit.*, 9.

22 *Ibid.*, 201.

23 *Ibid.*, 35.

24 Cf. *FT* 217.

25 Borghesi, *art. cit.*, 108.

26 Regan, *art. cit.*, 13.

27 *EG* 234-237; cf. *LS* 141; cf. *FT* 145, 215.

28 *FT* 81.

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it! Dialogue is not an ‘I-Thou’ process which tries to transcend separateness and create a new ‘we.’ It is in the very gap between the I and the other where dialogue takes place in a way that respects and maintains the other *as other*. Dialogue is not the same as dialectics. Its purpose is not to lead towards a new synthesis or consensus as a way of overcoming the differences between dialogue partners. Indeed, Levinas uses the language of ‘totality’ in an extremely negative sense, in comparison to Guardini, and associates it with what he calls ‘dialogue of immanence’ whereby plurality and its contradictions are surpassed by an all-encompassing unity/totality.²⁹ ‘Dialogue of transcendence,’ on the other hand, is a non-violent exchange, which forms the condition of possibility for an authentic, unreserved, and peaceful relationship.³⁰ In this type of dialogue, plurality is not a source of violence to be overcome. In authentic dialogue, according to Levinas, the self involves itself with the other as the radical other and doesn’t assimilate difference but deepens it.

CONCLUSION: RESPONDING TO POPE FRANCIS’ CALL FOR DIALOGUE

While Pope Francis’ call for dialogue in FT is certainly welcome and marks a notable change in magisterial tone, there remains an underlying *risk* in his approach whereby one particular version of unity and wholeness has the definitive priority in any encounter with otherness, ultimately assimilating or ignoring that which is different. Perhaps one can see an example of this in the current ecclesial approach to the traditional liturgy mentioned at the outset. It is precisely in the name of unity that *Traditiones custodes* severely restricts more traditional expressions of the Roman liturgy. Such an approach is all the more surprising given the incredible diversity of liturgical rites within the church. And indeed, one could hardly describe the Extraordinary Form as ‘other’. Although it would be difficult to advocate for a wholesale theological adoption of the thinking of Levinas, such dialogical philosophies can help theology – not least the social doctrine of the church and ecclesiology – embrace diversity and prioritise the valuable place of the other, discovering therein what God, the ultimate Other, might be revealing of Godself *amongst* otherness and diversity. Greater appreciation of otherness might, for example, open space for a more grounded trinitarian foundation for dialogue that

29 Roger Burggraeve, “Dialogue of Transcendence: A Levinasian Perspective on the Anthropological-Ethical Conditions for Interreligious Dialogue,” *Journal of Communication & Religion* 37 (2014): 7. This monological, or symmetrical, approach to dialogue fits in with Levinas’ idea of the same and the self where plurality is viewed as a source of violence.

30 *Ibid.*, 8.

puts priority in neither the whole nor the part, neither unity nor difference, but sees *both* in a mutually dynamic interplay.

Perhaps we might turn to the Good Samaritan, cited in FT so prominently, as the example of an authentically dialogical approach. It is not *despite* the Samaritan's different identity – seen as radically, even insurmountably other to that of the priest and the Levite – but *because* of it that an authentic encounter could take place. Indeed, without this radically otherness the parable would lose its force. To quote Teresa:

The particularity of the Samaritan in the parable as belonging to a specific cultural group, as well as the identities of the other characters in the parable, is not incidental to the construction of a new set of relationships that are more solidary and just. They are described as essential to this process, not because some represent a superior or inferior way of life, or because the characters must strip themselves of these identities, but because the healing of relationships occurs within them.³¹

The parable teaches us that dialogue with the other, starting from one's own identity and at the same time resisting any negation of the other's difference, is in fact a *privileged* place of encounter. Indeed, therefore, authentic dialogue would highlight and celebrate difference precisely because it is the privileged place where fraternity and social friendship emerges.

31 María Teresa, "The Political Anthropology of Fratelli Tutti: The Transcendent Nature of People's Political Projects Grounded in History," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 19 (2022): 92.

War and Politics. The war threw me into political action. I joined the French Resistance. But total war makes for total politics as well, and anyone who is exacting discovers sooner or later that total politics justifies anything and everything. It justifies lies and violence, with no longer the recognition of any limits-whether what Camus calls a limit of honour or what Solzhenitsyn terms the limit of cannibalism.

– OLIVER CLÉMENT, *The Other Sun*, Gracewing, 2021, p.43. [Translated by Michael Donley].