

A New Pacem in Terris

By Massimo Borghesi, 2 January 2021



Fratelli tutti, the newly-published encyclical, must be read carefully to be properly understood. We must avoid the risk of trivialisation that focuses on two or three points and reduces the document to little more than a series of pious intentions. First of all, we must understand the perspective from which it is written: that of a world that is headed towards war. Popes do not write encyclicals on fraternity for a peaceful world. John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* came out after the Cuban missile crisis, which brought us to the brink of a third world war. This is not the case today, fortunately. And yet it is undeniable that problems including the crisis of globalisation, the increasingly persistent tension between nations (United States, China, Russia), ongoing wars fought through intermediaries, and religious terrorism create a highly unstable world, ready to flare up at any time. Add to that our enormous economic inequality, the tragedy of COVID (and its repercussions on the poorest countries), and immigration.

Since the epochal change of 1989, we have seen the buttresses and counterweights that humanity worked hard to build after the terrible tragedy of the Second World War progressively crumble: from the great international organisations, to the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights, to the European unification process. Everything is decomposing: the UN, the EU, and the ties between the US and Europe. Meanwhile, cultural relativism continues to exalt partisanship and isolationism. The spirit of the times has brought Manichaeism back into vogue in several forms: political, economic, and religious. New barriers, ancient grudges, and old nationalisms are arising everywhere.

It is in this context that Francis introduces his dream of a renewed fraternity— religious, political, economic, and social—between peoples and individuals. A dream like that of Martin Luther King, whose name is mentioned at the end of the document alongside those of St. Francis, Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, and Charles de Foucauld. “*I have a dream.*” This is not a naive surrender to a utopian spirit or humanistic philanthropy, as the Pope’s critics complain. Francis is a realist who understands St. Augustine’s criticism of political theology perfectly well —the confusion between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of men. He is a realist, however, who knows that realism—in order to avoid crossing into cynicism— must take the risk of reaching out towards the ideal, must be open to hope. The Christian is a person of hope and not of resignation. Authentic realism is *real-idealism*. This is why today *Fratelli tutti* represents a powerful rock in the swamp of ideas, of politics, of a stagnant faith.

The encyclical is addressed to “all people of good will, regardless of their religious convictions” (FT 56), but it is undeniable that Christians, particularly Catholics, are among those to whom this letter is primarily directed. Many of these, far from being protagonists of change, are part of the problem today—part of that political-religious Manichaeism that characterises the present moment. They too participate, often without being aware, in the great wind of history. In the 1970s the wind blew to the left, to the encounter with and subordination of Christianity to Marxism. Since the fall of communism, the spirit of the world has turned to the right. Thus, at this moment, as we face an abstract and often violent economic globalisation dominated by an unscrupulous neocapitalism, there is a populist reaction. We see the re-emergence of political-religious nationalisms and the territorialisation of religion reduced to ethnicity. We see fundamentalism and terrorism in the name of God.

Fratelli tutti began in February 2019 with the great “[Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together](#),” signed in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis together with the Grand Iman of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb. Francis deepens it in all its implications and

now proposes it to the world as the ideal for the present moment. From religious fraternity a universal fraternity can arise; a peace movement capable of expanding across peoples and nations. This movement must be accompanied by a cultural revolution, by a new culture: the culture of encounter. A culture “capable of transcending our differences and divisions. This means working to create a many-faceted polyhedron whose different sides form a variegated unity, in which ‘the whole is greater than the part.’ The image of a polyhedron can represent a society where differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another” (215).

Chapters III and IV, dedicated to openness to the world and the heart, presuppose a relational anthropology that unites personalism and dialogical thought. The names of three thinkers, Georg Simmel, Gabriel Marcel, Paul Ricoeur (quoted twice), are cited to support this perspective. Similarly, the polar anthropology of Romano Guardini, present in several parts of the document, is fundamental. It is this polar anthropology that allows us to warn against today’s false “polarisation”—the contrast between a liberal globalism, falsely universalising, and a particularistic populism that falsifies the concept of the people. The law of polarity, according to Francis, unites and distinguishes universal and particular; it recognises its antinomy, its complementarity in difference. It is proposed as a solution, on the theoretical level, to the fierce contrasts of the present.

I offer one final observation that will help avoid hasty readings and misunderstandings of the document. This encyclical provides a response to those who in recent years have accused the Pope of philanthropism, irenism, and humanism—those who say he has separated Mercy and Truth. It would benefit them to begin by reading the document’s final chapters, from the sixth chapter forward. As with Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate*, we can observe here that dialogue is firmly anchored to the idea of truth. This is an objective truth—the only kind that allows the rational recognition of a unique and universal human nature—as opposed to the relativism dominant in today’s culture.

Truth, justice, and mercy cannot be separated. The Pope thus responds to his right-wing critics who have not ceased to attack him, beginning with *Amoris Laetitia*. He provides an answer that does not hesitate (in the eighth chapter, dedicated to dialogue between religions) to quote the “memorable statement” from John Paul II’s *Centesimus Annus*: “If there is no transcendent truth, in obedience to which man achieves his full identity, then there is no sure principle for guaranteeing just relations between people.” (273). He does not hesitate, above all, to highlight how Christian identity is an essential factor in fraternal

dialogue with everyone. For this reason, while appreciating God’s action in other religions, “we Christians are very much aware that ‘if the music of the Gospel ceases to resonate in our very being, we will lose the joy born of compassion, the tender love born of trust, the capacity for reconciliation that has its source in our knowledge that we have been forgiven and sent forth. If the music of the Gospel ceases to sound in our homes, our public squares, our workplaces, our political and financial life, then we will no longer hear the strains that challenge us to defend the dignity of every man and woman.’” (277).

Pope Francis’s dream of a new fraternity in a shattered world has its roots in the “music of the Gospel”—in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. *Fratelli tutti* addresses all of humanity but does not lose sight of the roots of our hope. It will benefit the critics of the pope to understand this and to read the text carefully.

This article has been translated into English and published on Where Peter Is with the permission of the author. It was first published in Italian in L’Osservatore Romano with the title, [Una nuova «Pacem in terris»](#).

Massimo Borghesi is professor of moral philosophy at the University of Perugia. He is the author of several books, including volumes on Augusto del Noce, Luigi Giussani, and political theology. More recently, he is the author of [The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s Intellectual Journey](#).

With thanks to [Where Peter Is](#) and Massimo Borghesi, where this article originally appeared.