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Reflection on *Fratelli tutti*.

Pope Francis' Encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, calls us to renew our sense of universal fraternity, trusting that every human being created in the image and likeness of God is of equal value and that whoever and wherever we are we are brothers and sisters of one another. This shared humanity both calls us to see beyond our differences and at the same time to respect and cherish them as we all make up the rich tapestry of humanity. No-one has any right to think of themselves as better than their neighbour or entitled to any special advantage over that neighbour.

As well as recognising our shared humanity we are also challenged to put this awareness into practice in the charity and care we offer to our neighbour, particularly to those most in need or most disadvantaged. As in other sermons and writings, Pope Francis turns to Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan to help us answer the questions "Who is my neighbour?" and "What are my responsibilities to that neighbour?" My neighbour is the poor person injured and lying at the roadside needing help and my responsibility is to be the one who stops to offer that help. The quality of life everywhere is determined by the constant loving actions of the "Good Samaritans" and it is that self-sacrificing love that reveals the fullness of our humanity. The absence of this practical love of our neighbour is felt also when we ignore the suffering of others, hurrying by on the other side of road, not choosing to stop to offer a helping hand.

Pope Francis explores how this practical charity extends to all areas of human activity, and encourages an attitude of and commitment to shared human endeavour, which chooses the common good over the individual's personal choice and advancement. The right to, and enjoyment of, private property, for example, cannot be an absolute right if it means others are denied the basic essentials of life. It is necessary that the person who has more than enough for their own well-being shares with the one who has not. St Francis of Assisi and his radical call to poverty is again chosen by the Holy Father as an inspiration for a world in which both the earth itself is protected and the people on it sustained by the generous sharing of the good gifts we receive from the earth. To care for the earth and to care for the poor go hand-in-hand and this synthesis in the life of St Francis calls for our imitation. Pope Francis often exhorts us to tackle and leave behind our culture of waste in modern life, not only of food and material resources but also of human life itself at its most vulnerable stages.

St Francis stands out also as a man of peace and reconciliation between those who are considered as enemies. This was exemplified when he embarked on a mission of encounter and peace-making when he visited the Sultan of Egypt during the 5th Crusade. In doing so he wished to reach out to those considered as enemies of the Christians and express a desire for peace and reconciliation. It was an attempt to see beyond the category of "enemy" and recognise opponents in warfare as our brothers and sisters. Pope Francis makes a plea against all warfare as its results, especially with the use of modern weaponry, are always tragic and more destructive than the supposed "good" that it is hoped will come about by trying to resolve conflict by fighting. The terrifying power of nuclear weapons, as so awfully displayed when they were used, impels us to oppose not only their use but also their possession. True fraternity on earth cannot be realised when some are able to impose might and overwhelming power over their neighbours.

The ability of states, and smaller geographical entities within states, to live in harmony with one another does depend on the political institutions established for the proper governance of the people and their proper relationships with other states. The use of political power and the quality of those who have that power are vital therefore for the well-being of each country and for the harmonious co-existence with their neighbours. Pope Francis references the noble vocation of being a politician and calls for a “politic of charity”, in which fraternal love and concern for all, especially the most needy in every society, are at the heart of all political decision-making and use of power. The search for the “common good” must predominate over partisan interests of particular groups within each society.

Most societies include people of different cultural backgrounds and religious affiliations and this should be seen as a benefit rather than a cause of suspicion and disharmony. The wisdom and heritage of the diverse groups that live in a country enhance the life and vision of the whole of its civic society and indeed its understanding of itself and its standing in the world. It is very painful therefore when minority groups are discriminated against or, worse still, persecuted and regarded as unwanted in their own homeland. This threat of persecution is one of the causes of people fleeing their countries and seeking refuge elsewhere. Pope Francis calls upon us to have an open and compassionate concern for all migrants, recognising their desire to seek shelter and safety and their total dependence on a welcome and acceptance by the people on whose shores they arrive or over whose borders they cross. In this area he does ask countries, and their citizens, to rise above their own protective instincts and make room for new people who seek a better life for themselves and their families. It is imperative though that the international community, and the international organisations, work to try to improve the security and quality of life in the poorer areas of the world where people are more likely to flee from. There are no easy answers to the problems of maintaining peace and security but closing our borders, and our minds and hearts, to our needy neighbours cannot be presented as an adequate and just response when they arrive at our door.

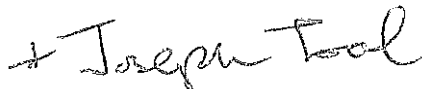
Being comfortable with difference seems a necessary ingredient for social integration and respectful harmony among people from different groups or with different beliefs and political philosophies. A willingness to dialogue and to reach required resolutions through dialogue is necessary at all levels of human interaction. Sometimes modern media, and its preponderance of sound-bites and instant comments, militates against the necessity of people with differing views sitting down together and patiently listening to one another in order to resolve differences and construct a reasonable way forward. When hasty comments are made and people retreat into their own certainties the possibility of reasonable dialogue and sound compromises are much reduced.

Another source of inspiration for *Fratelli tutti* was Pope Francis’ fraternal meeting with the Grand Iman Ahmed Al-Tayyed in Abu Dhabi in February 2019. The greetings exchanged and the powerful words expressed in their joint appeal for justice, peace, and fraternity, portrayed the responsibility of people of religious faith everywhere in the world to live in harmony with one another, recognising shared aspects of our faiths in a loving God, creator of all human life, and source of our common humanity and our desired fraternity. Religious faith should not be a cause of disharmony and division, far less still of terror and violence, but rather an inspiration in recognising the transcendent dignity and truth of our shared humanity and the necessary fraternity which we are called to offer and share as God’s children.

I commend Pope Francis’ Encyclical to you and ask you to reflect upon its message. He draws together many things he has said before and encourages us to be filled with a true spirit of fraternity and love for our neighbour. As we seek our way forward in the present pandemic, we know that we do depend on one another and we need to offer what we can in service of our brothers and sisters in the fullest way possible. Some people have taken wonderful personal initiatives during these recent difficult times, but most of us need the support and encouragement of working together, being part of a team. In the Diocese of Motherwell some great work has been done through this common endeavour in our parishes and it seems important that the projects which reach out to the needy and vulnerable should continue, and perhaps others be started. It is a time for identifying what we can do together and allowing

the Lord to inspire us anew in how we respond to the needs of our times. Much of this is reaching out to all we can help, but some of it also involves opening our own “borders” to let people in and this can be challenging, especially if those who appear are a bit different or ask more of us than we would wish. It has been a strong part of Pope Francis’ teaching that the Church be open and ready to engage with those on the margins. *Fratelli tutti* certainly calls us to overcome tendencies towards exclusion and to reach out both to the stranger and those we already know but are in some way distanced from. I leave the last word to Pope Francis from his paragraph on *Recovering Kindness*:

“Kindness frees us from the cruelty which sometimes infects human relationships, from the anxiety which prevents us from thinking of others, from the frantic flurry of activity that forgets that others also have a right to be happy. Often nowadays we find neither the time nor the energy to stop and be kind to others, to say “excuse me”, “pardon me”, “thank you”. Yet every now and then, miraculously, a kind person appears who is ready to set everything else aside to show interest, to give the gift of a smile, to speak a word of encouragement, to listen amid general indifference. If we make a daily effort to do exactly this, we can create a healthy social atmosphere in which misunderstanding can be overcome and conflict forestalled. Kindness ought to be cultivated. Because it entails esteem and respect for others, once kindness becomes a culture in society it transforms lifestyles, relationships and the ways ideas are discussed and compared. Kindness facilitates the quest for consensus; it opens new paths where hostility and conflict would burn all bridges.”



+ Joseph Toal
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