

New landmarks of the social doctrine in the Catholic Church? *Fratelli tutti* and its social relevance for the contemporary world

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Abstract: Released in the end of 2020 on the tomb of Saint Francis of Assisi, *Fratelli Tutti* is at the moment the most recent social document of the Catholic Church. It comes to continue the direction suggested by previous encyclicals of nowadays head of the aforementioned institution, namely Pope Francis, like *Laudato Si* and in the same time, to offer a radiography of the contemporary society, showing why the Covid 19th pandemic times, migration or the misunderstanding of some of the economic principles that govern the society and in the same time to speak about the love for the neighbour, the compassion, the dialogue as solutions or to insist on the fact that the human rights are, in the contemporary form, insufficient, fact that should call to their re-evaluation and to the renewal of certain principles of dialogue at an international level. The present article therefore analyses the most recent social document of the Catholic Church, trying to bring it into attention its ecumenical relevance, its practical value and in the same time to present its minuses or the aspects that can be improved.

Keywords: *pandemic times, inter-religious dialogue, Pope Francis, social theology, migrant crisis,*

Introduction

With a long and rich tradition in the field of social doctrine that starts with the 1891 *Rerum Novarum* encyclical letter (Pontifical Council for the Justice and Peace 2004:47-56), has some clearly pointed landmarks (Morariu 2020:33), and surely surpasses under this aspect spaces like the Eastern Orthodox one (Ică, Marani 2002: 18; Morariu 2018:1-3), still without being as developed as the Protestant area, the Catholic space has, until today, an important word to say to the contemporary world.

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For this reason, each Pope publish at least one letter with relevance for the topic. Wishing most probably to remain in history as a leader with social impact and message, Pope Francis have already published in 2015, *Laudato Si* (Francis 2015), where he presents some of the aspects that he considers relevant for the life of the Church in the contemporary social field. Influenced by his Eastern Orthodox homologue, namely the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (Morariu 2019:19; Morariu 2020ba:27; Morariu 2020b:125), he will there take into evaluation the ecological aspect, showing its relevance and complexity and deepening elements like the ecology of daily life.

In 2020, with *Fratelli tutti* (Francesco 2020; https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, accessed 12. 08. 2021), he takes again into discussion the social topic, suggesting its understanding in the light of the faith (Petrini 2021:3). Touching sensitive aspects like the feminism and its impact on the social friendship,² the document offers new keys in the understanding of the social life. For this reason, in the following rows, we will try to analyse it and to see if it brings indeed new points of understanding the social life, teaching and doctrine from the Catholic space.

***Fratelli tutti* – an overview**

Released on 3rd of October 2020 (Petrini 2021: 2) in Assisi, on the tomb of the Saint who inspired the Roman Pontiff (Fortunato 2020:9), the letter has a clear purpose and wishes an effect that is related also with this aspect. While, as the scholars show, with *Lumen fidei* his first encyclical letter, Francesco become known as the „pope of the peace” (Fortunato 2020, 11), with this one, he continues the work in this field, trying to point on the actual dimension of this element and to use his skills in order to develop it. Using the Second Vatican Council outcomes he therefore re-brings *Gaudium et spes* that stipulates that the entire world is seen as a big human family having God as the father of all (Maranesi 2020, 209). This approach brings of course, important social consequences. If the previous letter signed by Francis was inspired, as we have already mentioned, by the Ecumenical patriarch Bartholomew (Morariu 2020b: 124), this one is, as the pope himself mentions, inspired by the meeting with the Great Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb (Francesco 2020: 23).

Segmented in 8 chapters, the documents deals with the idea of the fraternity (Francesco 2020:27-54) and tries to see different forms of its implementation: in the relationship with a foreigner (Francesco 2020:55-74), the open-world (Francesco

² „Social friendship is rooted in a fraternity between man and women, but the later, in turn, are dependent on a more inclusive society, where both men and women are willing to work together to overcome the existing social inequalities. This can be realized through an increasing involvement on the part of women, in the family as well as in every social, political and institutional domain” (Petrini 2021:4).

2020:75-100), the way how such a word can receive an open-heart (Francesco 2020:101-116), or aspects like the politics and their relevance on this topic (Francesco 2020:117-146). The dialogue and the social friendship (Francesco 2020:147-162), the roads of a new meeting (Francesco 2020: 163-192) or the way how the religions can contribute to the increase of the fraternity in the world (Francesco 2020:193-206) constitutes also topics that challenge Pope Francis to write and to transform his letter in a call. The entire document, inspired by Saint Francis as the author mentions it from the beginning (Francesco 2021:21) ends with a prayer, that comes to speak about the primary purpose of a religious institution like the Catholic Church (Francesco 2021: 207-208).

Covid 19 and the new challenges

An event with such a global impact like the pandemic crisis that started in 2020 could not be avoided by a document released by the most important authority of the Catholic space. Francis therefore use it as a pretext to speak about the mirage of the security that the world created it:

„As I was writing this letter, the Covid-19 pandemic unexpectedly erupted, exposing our false securities. Aside from the different ways that various countries responded to the crisis, their inability to work together became quite evident. For all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all. Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality.” (Francesco 2020: 24-25; https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, para 7 accessed 21. 08. 2021).

The fact that the pandemic times have proved more than ever the need for fraternity and cooperation in a common effort that aim is to overcome a common threaten is well-pointed there. In the same time, it must be said that there were still many other aspects of the social life that were impacted by this crisis and they should be surely at least mentioned here, if not investigated in a long and complex evaluation of the situation that affects the entire world. Indeed, Pope Francis will later come again to the topic and try to speak about it.

The need for unity

The need for unity was a topic approached also often in the Catholic space. While in the other confessional areas, the aforementioned so-called „Green Patriarch” did various efforts in order to determinate world’s authorities to unite their efforts for achieving the peace (Chryssavgis 2012) and in the Protestant area, diplomats like Dag Hammarskjöld (Morariu 2018a:1-5) even influenced practical global decisions using their position in organisms like the United Nations Organisation, in the Catholic one,

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almost every pope wrote in the encyclical letters and other documents about this aspect, preaching peace and inviting the political area to take important decisions in this sense.

Pope Francis too brings into debate this aspect, linking the idea of peace with the one of unity. In his mind, the peace brings unity and the achievement for the last one is meant to arrive to the accomplishment of peace. He therefore underlines the fact that macro-organisms like the European Union were created with this purpose. In the same time, he insists on the fact that nowadays in the context of the increase of the number of nationalisms, there can be found a regression of the seeking for unity and a real reinforcement of the ancient conflicts that come to challenge again the society, both at the political level, at the social, ethical, religious and economical one and to make again actual topics of debate like extremism, exclusion or aggressivity (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, para 11, accessed 11. 08. 2021).³. The loss of the historical consciousness that brings with it the responsibility in front of the future, together with the absence of the plans for the future from everyone's side are seen by him as the causes of the entire crisis. The fact that everything is nowadays related with the ecumenical field and this brings the loss of the mystical vocation and of the transcendent purpose is also emphasized there, together with other elements that, according to the pope, bring to the birth of a „*throwaway*” world. He also insists on the selfish dimension of the contemporary society, speaking about the fact that this aspect is also related with the decline of the human species and aspects like the disrespect for the human being and for life (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, para 10 accessed 21. 08. 2021).

For sure, this is one of the most consistent parts of the letter. At the level of the message, it attracts the attention on serious and relevant problems and comes to emphasize the main aspects that must surely be taken into account in order to improve the world.

Human rights and the social doctrine of the Catholic Church

Another important section of the document (paragraphs from 22 to 36) is the one dedicated to the human rights. The topic has been approached often in the history of the Catholic space and there are important moments that define its history, like the debate

³ „Our own days, however, seem to be showing signs of a certain regression. Ancient conflicts thought long buried are breaking out anew, while instances of a myopic, extremist, resentful and aggressive nationalism are on the rise. In some countries, a concept of popular and national unity influenced by various ideologies is creating new forms of selfishness and a loss of the social sense under the guise of defending national interests.” (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, para 11, accessed 11. 08. 2021).

coordinated by Bartholomew de las Casas (Claiton, Lantigua 2020) in the context of the Amerindian society. Nowadays, new challenges arrived. The migrant crisis, the 3rd world situation, the social inequalities and the economical emphasis, often bad marked or misunderstood, come to open new sections of a complex problem.

Pope Francis seems to be conscious of all these aspects and insists from the beginning, in the 22nd paragraph of the letter that the human rights are not equal for all, due to a complex conjuncture. He therefore underlines the fact that despite of the correlated efforts from the religious, political and social side and of the attempts to decrease it, contemporary slavery still exists under diverse forms. Human trafficking, kidnaping, but also other forms like bullying are mentioned by him among the examples that must be taken into attention (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, para 24 to 26, accessed 21. 08. 2021).

The mistrust brought by the contemporary society, the social insecurity together with the challenges that arrived by the migrant crisis, fact that was also emphasized by the social documents of the other churches (Morariu 2019:21), come also to fulfil the landscape offered by the Pope. In the same time, he speaks about the way how aspects like war, terrorist attacks or religious persecutions (cf. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20151208_messaggio-xlix-giornata-mondiale-pace-2016.html, accessed 21. 08. 2021) come to increase the fear and can bring to a global threat like a third world war.

The seeking for a common horizon is seen by him as a potential solution of all the future crises. Still, the approach seems to look rather too general and some secondary points would be rather beneficially in the understanding of the complex topic that he opened. Most probably, a future letter dedicated only to this topic would be recommended and could contribute to a better understanding, in a responsible key, of the relevance of human rights and peace and in the work of fighting against the different forms of „mafias”. (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, para 11, accessed 11. 08. 2021).

Globalization

Meetings like the Pan-Orthodox Council of Crete from 2016 have also taken into debate aspects like the evolution of the society (Morariu 2018:1-5; Morariu 2019a:1-6) and the way how the science and its evolution have impacted the entire world. Pope Francis does not avoid this aspect. He even confesses in the 29th paragraph of the document that it was on the list of the discussions with the imam that inspired him in the draft of the encyclical letter. Moreover, he insists on the fact that the idea of globalization understood as a form of belonging to a common family named the earth is not anymore a suitable concept:

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„In today’s world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia” (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, para 30, accessed 21. 08. 2021).

The rediscover of this sense would surely contribute according to the Pontiff to the re-calibration of the human realities and to the rediscover of the feeling of common responsibility, which is among the main aspects that can contribute to the improvement of the future.

Pandemic times

If in the beginnings of the document the Covid pandemics is taken into attention only shortly and rather in a superficial way, later, in a special small section (paragraphs from 32 to 36), which is still insufficient to our mind, due to the complexity of the problem, Francis come to bring again into debate the topic. The departure points consist the speech about globalization and about the lost of the consciousness of belonging to a common big family and the responsibility that should be its main outcome. The economical crush that accompanied it and the way how it came to hit into the character of social being of the human it is also emphasized there. Not without sadness, the Pope recognizes the fact that:

„Today we can recognize that “we fed ourselves on dreams of splendour and grandeur, and ended up consuming distraction, insularity and solitude. We gorged ourselves on networking, and lost the taste of fraternity. We looked for quick and safe results, only to find ourselves overwhelmed by impatience and anxiety. Prisoners of a virtual reality, we lost the taste and flavour of the truly real”. The pain, uncertainty and fear, and the realization of our own limitations, brought on by the pandemic have only made it all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence.” (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, paragraph 33, accessed 21. 08. 2021)

The orientation towards two directions can constitute, as Francis says, a solution in the re-shifting of the human social relationships. Learning from the lessons of the history, considered as a teacher of life, is a necessary aspect. Moreover, as a visionary, the pope insists on the need for a visionary approach. He therefore shows that it would be extremely important for the humankind that, at the end of such a crisis, to not return to the same consumerism and to the same forms of egoistic self-preservation (paragraph 35). According to him, the message that God sends thorough this pandemic times is the call to re-discover the love for the neighbour in the loneliness and to find ways to walk together towards the eternity. According to him, this will bring the reinforcement of the

global vision as a family,⁴ or, in case of misunderstanding, the arrival to a situation that will surely be worse than the pandemic one.

Communication and hermeneutics

If one would be called to speak about the second half of the letter and about the end of its first one using two keywords, they would surely be communication and security. Topics that have been previously approached also by other popes and are today used also in the ecumenical discourse (Keum 2013; Morariu 2019b:3), they constitute for sure important tools in the understanding of the contemporary society and in the evaluation of its challenges and threatens.

Francis seems to be conscious of their relevance and puts into the first rows the fact that the bad communication it is one of the problems of the world. He also insists on the fact that in some cases the economic reasons are the one that determinate a certain discourse and try to influence its course at the level of debate. Using the migration topic that was, at least previously to the pandemic times, a very relevant global one and now, in the context of the Afghanistan situation (<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/16/middleeast/taliban-control-afghanistan-explained-intl-hnk/index.html>, accessed 21. 08. 2021), arrived again among the priorities, the Pope also insists on the fact that the security at the borders is rather a story than a reality and there must be seeking for solution in fixing this problem that can contribute to the credibilisation of the international political and diplomatic structures in front of the public opinion. It must be said that this aspect is among the few ones of the entire document that contain references to an aspect that can be subsumed, indeed not without some comments, to the area of the political theology. Meant to be a theological paper written by a leader of a Christian Church which nowadays has the biggest number of adepts in the Christian World, and with a social impact, *Fratelli tutti* contains also political accents in a way that it has not been anymore encountered since the missiles crisis (Schelkens 2011:679).

In the same time, the letter also has a complex psychological relevance. Bergoglio therefore insists on the fact that both some of the political, social or cultural organisations, but also some economical ones, work hard in order to destroy the self-esteem of the people, being conscious of the fact that this help to their domination. He therefore writes:

⁴ „Unless we recover the shared passion to create a community of belonging and solidarity worthy of our time, our energy and our resources, the global illusion that misled us will collapse and leave many in the grip of anguish and emptiness. Nor should we naively refuse to recognize that “obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction”. The notion of “every man for himself” will rapidly degenerate into a free-for-all that would prove worse than any pandemic.” (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, paragraph 36, accessed 21. 08. 2021).

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„Destroying self-esteem is an easy way to dominate others. Behind these trends that tend to level our world, there flourish powerful interests that take advantage of such low self-esteem, while attempting, through the media and networks, to create a new culture in the service of the elite. This plays into the opportunism of financial speculators and raiders, and the poor always end up the losers. Then too, ignoring the culture of their people has led to the inability of many political leaders to devise an effective development plan that could be freely accepted and sustained over time.” (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, paragraph 52, accessed 21. 08. 2021).

The respect for the local culture and their heritage is not only something linked with the historical background of a place or a country. According to him, it is something that goes deeper and it helps both to the enrichment from the process of knowing the other, but also contributes to the development of the economic, social and cultural relationships. Committed to the social doctrine of his church and militant for the eradication of the poverty, Francis sees as a potential way in its accomplishment the fact of understanding and integrating the peoples from different social categories in the social mechanisms of the time, and not the destroy of self-esteem by creating the sensation that they are not so high or so performant like others. He therefore pleads for not using anymore the classification of a culture as being better to the other, but to use other criteria, meant rather to inclusion and enrichment, than to exclusion, punishment and social segregation.

The eternal life and the role of the social one in its achievement

The second part of the letter starts with the exegesis, in a social key, of the parable dedicated to the merciful Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), a text that has been previously emphasized several times and it is seen as paradigmatically for areas like the health-care one (https://www.academia.edu/7771564/The_Good_Samaritan_A_Model_for_Health_Care_Workers, accessed 21. 08. 2021). Pope Francis insists on the fact that that this passage of the New Testament should not be considered as being only a text with historical relevance that should be seen in relationship with the contemporary situation. How he suggests to put the accents it can be seen there:

„The previous chapter should not be read as a cool and detached description of today’s problems, for “the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.” In the attempt to search for a ray of light in the midst of what we are experiencing, and before proposing a few lines of action, I now wish to devote a chapter to a parable told by Jesus Christ two thousand years ago. Although this Letter is addressed to all people of good will, regardless of their religious convictions, the parable

is one that any of us can relate to and find challenging.” (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, paragraph 56, accessed 21.08.2021).

Later, the encyclical develops as an exegesis of the parable. The pope invites the readers to read carefully and to meditate to which category of people from the Gospel would like to identify themselves⁵ and then ends the presentation of the episode by an exhortation, insist on the social relevance at a macro-level, of the episode:

„Each day offers us a new opportunity, a new possibility. We should not expect everything from those who govern us, for that would be childish. We have the space we need for co-responsibility in creating and putting into place new processes and changes. Let us take an active part in renewing and supporting our troubled societies. Today we have a great opportunity to express our innate sense of fraternity, to be Good Samaritans who bear the pain of other people’s troubles rather than fomenting greater hatred and resentment. Like the chance traveller in the parable, we need only have a pure and simple desire to be a people, a community, constant and tireless in the effort to include, integrate and lift up the fallen. We may often find ourselves succumbing to the mentality of the violent, the blindly ambitious, those who spread mistrust and lies. Others may continue to view politics or the economy as an arena for their own power plays. For our part, let us foster what is good and place ourselves at its service.” (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, paragraph 77, accessed 21. 08. 2021)

Moving beyond ourselves

The love for God and for the neighbour is seen as a solution of the crises. If inside the trinity it represents the principle that brings into movement the Three persons, the one of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Stăniloae 1993:18), in the relationships among people, it represents not only a theological virtue with a more or less abstract relevance, but also the engine that allows to the people to move. The human brings are therefore encouraged to move on to the other pushed by the love for their neighbour, to understand and forgive and in the same time brings to the fact of living by and in the other, fact that fulfils the existence. Francis also insists on the fact that knowing oneself is conditioned by the relationships with other that he or she develops and that help to the

⁵ „Which of these persons do you identify with? This question, blunt as it is, is direct and incisive. Which of these characters do you resemble? We need to acknowledge that we are constantly tempted to ignore others, especially the weak. Let us admit that, for all the progress we have made, we are still “illiterate” when it comes to accompanying, caring for and supporting the most frail and vulnerable members of our developed societies. We have become accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, ignoring situations until they affect us directly.” (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, paragraph 64, accessed 21.08.2021).

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self-understanding and definition. He is also conscious of the fact that the committed love for the neighbour and the desire to help can bring to negotiation and dialogue and this represents the base of reconciliation:

„When conflicts are not resolved but kept hidden or buried in the past, silence can lead to complicity in grave misdeeds and sins. Authentic reconciliation does not flee from conflict, but is achieved *in* conflict, resolving it through dialogue and open, honest and patient negotiation. Conflict between different groups “if it abstains from enmities and mutual hatred, gradually changes into an honest discussion of differences founded on a desire for justice.” (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, paragraph 244, accessed 21.08.2021).

Semantic aspects like the difference between popular and populist⁶ are also brought into attention in the complex analysis of Pope Francis and the appeal to the memory, seen not as a revenge tool, but rather as a form of understanding and assuming in a responsible past and as an instrument that contributes to the healing of the wounds, is also present there, in Pope’s letter, among the relevant aspects brought into the debate.

Conclusions

Actual and having a complex and rich social message influenced by Francis of Assisi and his theology, *Fratelli Tutti* encyclical letter released in 2020 by Pope Francis is for sure an important document. By coming out from the confessional border and facing problems that have a global impact, like the pandemic times, the migration, conflicts, terrorism and others, it goes beyond some of the previous letter. By some of the solutions offered, it proves both its visionary and its practical relevance and it comes to show that in the future it may surely be possible a dialogue between spiritualities and cultures. It remains to see how there will be implemented some of the solutions suggested by the Pontiff and if there will be some potential openings and outcomes generated by the evolution of the society.

⁶ „In recent years, the words “populism” and “populist” have invaded the communications media and everyday conversation. As a result, they have lost whatever value they might have had, and have become another source of polarization in an already divided society. Efforts are made to classify entire peoples, groups, societies and governments as “populist” or not. Nowadays it has become impossible for someone to express a view on any subject without being categorized one way or the other, either to be unfairly discredited or to be praised to the skies.” (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, paragraph 156, accessed 21.08.2021).

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