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SUMARIO

CRISTOLOGÍA Y FRANCISCANISMO. DE LA FILIACIÓN A LA FRATERNIDAD: HOMENAJE AL PROFESOR FRANCISCO MARTÍNEZ FRESNEDA OFM

Bernardo Pérez Andreo (Dir.) <i>Presentación: Francisco Martínez Fresneda. Una vida entre Francisco y Cristo.....</i>	III-VI
ARTÍCULOS	
Nancy Elizabeth Bedford <i>Sororidad y Cristología</i>	1-22
Thomas Herbst † <i>From Theory to Practice: Understanding the Incarnation as a Mode of Union.....</i>	23-45
Marta M^a Garre Garre <i>Filiación divina en San Francisco y sus consecuencias en la «Regla de vida» de los Frailes Menores.....</i>	47-68
Martín Carbajo-Núñez <i>The Lord gave me Brothers and Sisters. Francis of Assisi, inspirer of the Encyclical Fratelli tutti.....</i>	69-91
David B. Couturier <i>Redeeming the Horrors of Racial Suffering: The Political Christology of M. Shawn Copeland.....</i>	93-118
Vincenzo Battaglia <i>Il «motivo» dell'Incarnazione in alcuni autori del XX secolo. Percorsi e prospettive di ricerca.....</i>	119-155
Antonio Piñero <i>A propósito de las citas del Corpus Henóquico en la edición española de los Apócrifos del Antiguo Testamento</i>	157-179
Miguel Álvarez Barredo <i>Las Tradiciones sobre el Arca en los Libros de Samuel (1 Sam 4-6; 2 Sam 6.....</i>	181-253
Lluís Oviedo Torró <i>El estudio de las creencias y del proceso de creer como reto teológico.....</i>	255-274
Rafael Sanz Valdivieso <i>Notas para un comentario a «Fratelli tutti», encíclica del Papa Francisco: Una propuesta de amistad social y de fraternidad. Puntos clave</i>	275-308
Francisco Henares Díaz <i>Taizé y el acompañamiento de los Franciscanos en las primeras décadas.....</i>	309-336
Vicente Llamas Roig <i>Ocaso de la metafísica. Epifanía del eikón.....</i>	337-373
Miguel Ángel Escribano Arráez <i>La necesidad del estudio de la teología y su relación con el derecho canónico como reflejo del primer principio en la construcción del Pueblo de Dios.....</i>	375-387
BIBLIOGRAFÍA.....	389-426
LIBROS RECIBIDOS.....	427-428

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Director / Editor

Bernardo Pérez Andreo (Instituto Teológico de Murcia, España)
Correo-e: carthaginensia@itmfranciscano.org

Secretario / Secretary

Miguel Ángel Escribano Arráez (Instituto Teológico de Murcia, España)
Correo-e: carthaginensia@itmfranciscano.org

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**THE LORD GAVE ME BROTHERS AND SISTERS
FRANCIS OF ASSISI, INSPIRER OF THE ENCYCLICAL *FRATELLI TUTTI***

**EL SEÑOR ME DIO HERMANOS Y HERMANAS
FRANCISCO DE ASÍS, INSPIRADOR DE LA ENCÍCLICA *FRATELLI TUTTI***

MARTÍN CARBAJO-NÚÑEZ, OFM
Pontificia Università Antonianum, Roma
mcarbajon@gmail.com
Orcid: 0000-0002-2814-5688

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Abstract: This article presents Francis of Assisi as an inspiring model of the universal fraternity proposed by the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. The Pope asserts that “it was the evangelical witness of St. Francis, with his school of thought, that gave the term fraternity the meaning it then preserved over the centuries.” Universal fraternity requires the harmonious development of our four fundamental relationships, something which is evident in both Francis of Assisi (part 1) and the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (part 2). Inspired by Saint Francis, the Pope invites us to welcome all human beings as brothers and sisters and thus to dream together “as a single human family.”

Keywords: Fraternity; Social friendship; Dialogue; Francis of Assisi; *Fratelli tutti*.

Resumen: Este artículo presenta a Francisco de Asís como modelo e inspirador de la fraternidad universal que propone la encíclica *Fratelli tutti*. El Papa enseña que “fue el testimonio evangélico de san Francisco, con su escuela de pensamiento, quien dio al término fraternidad el significado que ha conservado a lo largo de los siglos.” La fraternidad universal exige el desarrollo armónico de las cuatro relaciones fundamentales del ser humano, algo que resulta evidente tanto en San Francisco (1ª parte) como en la encíclica *Fratelli tutti* (2ª parte). Inspirándose en el santo de Asís, el Papa invita a acoger a todos los seres humanos como hermanos y hermanas para soñar juntos “como una única humanidad.”

Palabras clave: Fraternidad; Amistad social; Diálogo; Francisco de Asís; *Fratelli tutti*.

This article presents Francis of Assisi as the model and inspirer of the universal fraternity proposed by the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*.¹ Pope Francis teaches that it was the evangelical witness of St. Francis, with his school of thought, that gave this term [fraternity] the meaning it then preserved over the centuries.”² At the same time, he affirms that his last two encyclicals are inspired by Francis of Assisi, who “felt himself a brother to the sun, the sea and the wind, yet he knew that he was even closer to those of his own flesh.”³

Universal fraternity requires the harmonious development of our four fundamental relationships, something that is evident in St. Francis. By paying attention to each of these four relationships, the first part of the article shows how he opens himself to universal fraternity and privileges fraternal relationships over any other institutional aspects of his way of life. The second part will indicate some points of convergence between his vision and the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*.⁴

1. Universal fraternity according to Francis of Assisi

Francis of Assisi wants his friars to treat each other as equals and, at the same time, he appreciates the uniqueness of each one of them. In this line, the principle of fraternity is today associated with the equality of all human beings in dignity and rights, but each one with his own richness and individuality.

The little poor man of Assisi privileges fraternal relationships over any other institutional aspect of his way of life.⁵ In fact, the word “brother”

¹ POPE FRANCIS «*Fratelli tutti*. Encyclical letter on fraternity and social friendship,» [FT], (Oct. 3, 2020), LEV, Vatican City 2020. In the body of the text, the quotations of the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* will be indicated with just the numbers in parentheses.

² POPE FRANCIS «Fraternity as the governing principle of the economic order. Message to the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences,» (April 24, 2017), n. 1, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, [OR], 99 (April 29, 2017) 7.

³ FT2; cf. POPE FRANCIS, «*Laudato si'*. Encyclical letter» (May 24, 2015), [LS], in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, [AAS], 107 (2015) 847-945.

⁴ We have studied this topic in CARBAJO NÚÑEZ M., «Fraternity in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. Franciscan roots,» in *Revista eclesialística brasileira* 81/319 (2021) 295-319.

⁵ On fraternity in St. Francis: URIBE F., «La fraternidad en la forma de vida propuesta por Francisco de Asís,» in *Selecciones de Franciscanismo*, [SelFran], 32 (2003) 236-249; DOYLE E., *St. Francis and the Song of Brotherhood and Sisterhood*, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure (NY) 1997.

(*frater*) appears 179 times in his writings, second only to the word “Lord” (*Dominus*). He completely avoids the word *communitas*⁶ and, instead, he uses the term “*fraternitas*,” although his natural aversion to abstract terms leads him to use it only ten times. Moreover, he always refers it to the Order⁷ and does not offer a definition of it.

1.1. A theological concept: all is grace

Benedict XVI affirms that St. Francis’ being “a man of peace, tolerance, and dialogue, is ever born from his experience of God-Love.”⁸ Francis himself, reviewing his life in the testament, recognizes that, in his vocational journey, everything has been a divine gift. When he was still driven by a worldly logic and dreaming of becoming a knight, he experienced God’s gratuitous love in ways and moments completely unexpected. The Lord revealed to him that he should observe the holy Gospel, granted him “to begin doing penance,” taught him to be merciful, enabled him to perceive his presence in the poor and the lepers, granted him faith in churches and priests, revealed to him the greeting of peace, made him love Lady Poverty as a liberating path to universal fraternity.

Having experienced the divine gratuitousness, Francis becomes a universal brother and recognizes all people and all creatures as a divine gift. He asks his followers to be “Lesser Brothers,” for “you have but one Father in heaven” and, in Christ, “all of you are brothers” (*ER* 22,33-34). This fraternity is the fruit of the action of the “Spirit of the Lord” (*ER* 10,8) that

⁶ The word “*communitas*” does not appear in the writings of St. Francis, despite being a term widely used in medieval monastic life. ODOARDI G., «Il S. Francesco della Comunità nei sec. XIV e XV,» in GIEBEN S., (ed.) *Francesco d’Assisi nella storia: Secoli XIII-XV*, vol 1, Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, Roma 1983, 123-159, here 124.

⁷ Cf. FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «The Later Rule,» [*LR*], 8,1; 9,2; 12,3, in ARMSTRONG R.J. - HELLMANN J.A.W. - SHORT W.J., (ed.), *Francis of Assisi: Early documents*, 3 vol., New City Press, New York 2001, [*FAED*], here vol. I, 99-106; Id., «The Earlier Rule,» [*ER*], n. 5,4; 18,2; 19,2 (*FAED* I, 63-86); Id., «A Letter to the entire Order,» [*LOrd*], n. 2 (*FAED* I, 116-121).

⁸ BENEDICT XVI, «Address at the square in front of the Basilica of St Mary of the Angels,» (June 17, 2007), in *Insegnamenti di Benedetto XVI*, LEV, Vatican city III/1 (2007) 1139-1146, here 1145.

purifies our relationships, inserts us in Christ's filial relationship with the Father⁹ and makes us Christ's spouses and mothers.¹⁰

Francis presents this ideal of fraternity in the letter he writes "to all Christians" and "to all who dwell in the whole world,"¹¹ thus showing that no one is excluded from this ideal of brotherhood and sisterhood. He himself begins and ends this letter by identifying himself as "friar Francis" ("*frater Franciscus*") (2*LtF* 1; 87).

1.2. Healing the heart to be brothers and sisters

The path towards universal fraternity begins with poverty of spirit, which allows us to be meek, affable, and humble, making room for those who are different from ourselves. The model is the Incarnate Word, who lowered himself, assuming the condition of a servant, to engage in a face-to-face relationship with us. The poor man of Assisi, in fact, understands poverty not as a frustrating renunciation, but as a process of liberation from everything that impedes the free and fraternal encounter.

1.2.1. *A poor and lesser brother*

St. Francis' poverty responds to a motivation that is theological and relational rather than ascetic. This is what he tells the Bishop of Assisi, who was stunned by so much austerity:

"Lord, if we had possessions, we would need arms for our protection. For disputes and lawsuits usually arise out of them, and, because of this, love of God and neighbor are greatly impeded. Therefore, we do not want to possess anything in this world."¹²

⁹ FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «The Office of the Passion,» [*OfP*], (*FAED* I, 139-160). He knew "the infinite charity that made the Son become incarnate by obedience to the Father." FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «The Little Flowers of Saint Francis,» [*LFI*], n. 52 (*FAED* III, 566-658).

¹⁰ FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «Letter to the Faithful (longer version),» [2*LtF*], n. 53 (*FAED* I 45-51).

¹¹ 2*LtF* 1. An echo of this expression could be seen in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, which is intended to be "an invitation to dialogue among all people of good will." *FT* 6.

¹² FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «The Legend of the Three Companions,» [*L3C*], n. 35 (*FAED* II, 61-110).

Having embraced minority and poverty, Francis opens himself to universal fraternity and to the most absolute gratuitousness. He goes forth from his dreams of grandeur and from the security provided by the walls of Assisi to reach the peripheries of existence and meet the poor, the lepers, the infidels, the evildoers, and even the wolf of Gubbio (*LFI* 21). He appreciates them all in their concrete individuality, because he recognizes that God the Father has called each one of them into existence by name.

His inner dispossession enables him to establish serene and affectionate relationships with all human beings, without any fear or prejudice. Thus, although he considered himself “ignorant and stupid,”¹³ he wrote a letter “to all mayors and consuls, magistrates and governors throughout the world and to all others to whom these words may come.”¹⁴ This was completely unusual at the time and not even the Popes have had similar initiatives.

1.2.2. *Forgiveness and mercy*

Fraternity is always linked to forgiveness and mercy. For this reason, Francis asks his friars to be compassionate towards the physical and moral fragility of others¹⁵ and not to be angry for the sin they have committed.¹⁶ Thus, they must ask God for the grace to forgive fully, without reserve, with the most absolute gratuitousness.

“And what we do not completely forgive, make us, Lord, forgive completely that we may truly love our enemies because of You and we may fervently intercede for them before You, returning no one evil for evil”¹⁷.

¹³ *LOrd* 39. SCHMUCKI O., «“Soy ignorante e idiota.” (*LOrd* 39). El grado de formación escolar de San Francisco de Asís,» in *Selecciones de Franciscanismo* 9/31 (1982) 89-106; PELLEGRINI L., *Ignorans sum et idiota. Gli scritti del “illitterato” Francesco e la loro “fortuna” lungo i secoli*, Cittadella, Assisi 2017.

¹⁴ FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «A Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples,» [*Lrp*], 1 (*FAED* I, 58-59).

¹⁵ FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «Admonitions,» [*Adm*], 18,1 (*FAED* I, 128-137).

¹⁶ *ER* 7,3. “That there is not any brother in the world who has sinned—however much he could have sinned—who, after he has looked into your eyes, would ever depart without your mercy, if he is looking for mercy.” FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «A Letter to a Minister,» [*LMin*], 9 (*FAED* I, 97-98).

¹⁷ FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «A Prayer Inspired by the Our Father,» n. 8 (*FAED* I, 158-160).

The ministers should be merciful to those who are “an impediment”¹⁸ and, in turn, the friars should be sympathetic and forgiving to the prelate if he should go beyond his duties. A friar should not obey him if he “commands something contrary to his conscience,” but “even though he may not obey him, let him not, however, abandon him” (*Adm* 3,7-9). Perfect obedience, in fact, does not break the ties that bind us to others.

“We must love our enemies and do good to those who hate us [...]. Let him not become angry at the fault of a brother but, with all patience and humility, let him admonish and support him” (*2LtF* 38; 44).

Jesus also “placed His will in the will of His Father” and suffered persecution and contempt, “leaving us an example that we might follow His footprints” (*2LtF* 10-13).

1.2.3. Overcoming barriers and prejudices

Driven by divine grace, Francis overcomes walls, barriers, and prejudices to become a universal brother. In Montecasale, he goes beyond the limits of his own community to meet some thieves. That fraternal attitude moved those dangerous bandits to abandon their aggressiveness and to reintegrate into common life (*LFI* 25).

Lepers were another group of excluded people. In addition to posing a serious threat to public health, they were often considered guilty of the disease they suffered from. In some places there were special rites to keep them away from the community for life. These rites were like the funeral with which the dead were buried. By kissing the leper and living among them, Francis breaks down these mental, social, and ecclesial barriers. He also tells his friars that they “must rejoice when they live among people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside” (*ER* 9,2). This affectionate closeness to the poor is echoed in the Pope’s invitation to put at heart of politics a preferential love for “those in greatest need,” because they must “be acknowledged and valued in their dignity” (187).

Heretics and Muslims were also seen as a serious threat that the Christian community wanted to avoid at all costs. Francis broke through this wall when

¹⁸ *LMin* 2. “Do not wish that they be better Christians.” *LMin* 7.

he met the Sultan, thus building new bridges towards universal fraternity. Likewise, he lengthened the horizons towards cosmic fraternity when, in the canticle of Brother Sun, he embraces all creatures, including Sister Death.¹⁹

Exclusion occurs also within one's own group of relatives and neighbors. Francis experienced it in his own fraternity. The account of true and perfect joy (*LFI* 8) shows that he himself, like Jesus, had become "a stranger" to his friars.²⁰ The brother porter mistreats him and does not let him enter the friary, but Francis does not stop loving him. In this way he imitates Christ, who loves us even though "we are disgusting, miserable and opposed to good" (*ER* 22,6).

1.3. "The Lord gave me brothers"

"The Lord gave me Brothers"²¹ Francis exclaims in his testament. He neither sought them nor intended to make them into an elite group with precise roles. On the contrary, he wanted "the Order to be held in common by the poor and illiterate and not just by the learned and rich."²²

He welcomes with joy and reverence any candidate who is "faithful and devout, [...] able to obtain great grace from God," (*L3C* 32) even if he is not intelligent and lacks big skills. The friars will be minor, poor, and chaste, but he asks them, above all, to be brothers and to "show that they are members of the same family" (*LR* 6,7).

1.3.1. *Unity in diversity*

His faith in "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2Cor 1:3; *LFI* 6) leads him to value fraternal life more than community structures and external observance. The candidate's person and godness will be more im-

¹⁹ CARBAJO NÚÑEZ M., *Francesco d'Assisi e l'etica globale*, Messaggero, Padova 2011, 81-82.

²⁰ Jesus also "came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him." In 1:11. "I have become an outcast to my brothers, a stranger to the children of my mother" (Ps 69:9), *OPF* 5,8. The friars must always respond with unconditional love, even when rejected: "Whoever has become an impediment to you, whether brothers or others, even if they lay hands on you, [...] you must consider as grace." *LMin* 2.

²¹ *Test* 14. Also, in the human family, brothers and sisters are not chosen, but welcomed as a gift, because they are children of the same parents.

²² THOMAS OF CELANO, «The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul,» [*2Cel*], n. 145 (*FAED* II, 231-393).

portant than his social status and abilities. This is significant at a time when most monks were of noble origin.

In that rigidly structured society, Francis wanted the most absolute equality among his friars (*ER* 5,9), without annulling everyone's individuality. For this reason, he does not propose a static model of friar to which all must conform. The true Lesser Brother would be the "one who would possess the life and qualities" of some of his friars, "namely, the faith and love of poverty of Brother Bernard [...], the simplicity and purity of Brother Leo [...], the courtly bearing of Brother Angelo," etc.²³ It is, therefore, a dynamic conception, always "*in fieri*." This recalls the image of the polyhedron or mosaic that Pope Francis uses to underline the importance of unity in diversity.²⁴ Fraternity is built by integrating and enhancing the uniqueness of each person, rather than insisting on external uniformity and homogeneous living.

For Francis, fraternity is above all an interpersonal reality, since the "I-Thou" encounter takes priority over the relationship of each one with the institution. The Lesser Brother must integrate himself harmoniously into the group without losing his own individuality. Fraternity, in fact, allows equals to be different, that is, it allows each one to be fully himself/herself. The three dimensions of fraternity that will be echoed in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* are outlined here, namely: fraternity as service, as hospitality, and as dialogue.

1.3.2. *A fraternity rather than a community*

St. Francis wants a *fraternitas* rather than a *communitas*. He thus prefers the itinerant lifestyle of Jesus and his apostles to the model of the primitive community of Jerusalem, which "was of one heart and mind" (Acts 4:32). The monks followed this second model and expressed it in the uniformity of their common life. This was considered the ideal for the time of the Church (cf. Mk 2:20).

Rather than insisting on the authority of the prelates, Francis prefers to appeal to each friar's conscience. He often lets his friars make their own autonomous decisions based on their current circumstances and needs. For example, contrary to the general norm, he gives them the possibility to "wear footwear" (*LR* 2:15); to avoid fasting (*LR* 3:6,9); to ride a horse (*LR*

²³ FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «A Mirror of the Perfection,» n. 85 (*FAED* III, 205-252).

²⁴ "It is the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness." POPE FRANCIS, «*Evangelii gaudium*. Apostolic exhortation» (Nov. 24, 2013), [*EG*], n. 236, in *AAS* 105 (2013) 1019-1137.

3:12). He encourages friar Leo to act “in whatever way it seems better to you to please the Lord God.”²⁵

He asks that no one be called prior (*ER* 6:3) and that those who exercise authority be “ministers and servants” (*ER* 4:6; *LR* 10:6-7). “Let the one to whom obedience has been entrusted and who is considered the greater be the lesser and the servant of the other brothers” (*2LtF* 42).

1.3.3. *A maternal way of understanding authority and relationships*

Rather than the authority of the *pater familias*, that had been coined by the Roman law and somehow assumed by the monastic abbot, Francis prefers to appeal to mother’s care. He presents himself as a mother²⁶ (never as a father) and asks his friars to welcome Christ as mother²⁷ and to care for one another with maternal love.²⁸

Drawing inspiration from the saint of Assisi, the Pope affirms that rulers should act as mothers, because politics is “one of the highest forms of charity” (*EG* 205; *FT* 180) and “must make room for a tender love of others” (194).

More than ensuring formal observance and a homogeneous lifestyle, Francis of Assisi “wanted to unite the greater to the lesser, to join the wise to the simple in brotherly affection” (*2Cel* 191). For this reason, he exhorts them to “serve and obey one another voluntarily”²⁹ “and to show their need to each other with confidence” (*ER* 9,10). They should not call themselves teachers (*ER* 22,35) or claim to be considered wiser than others (*Adm* 7,2).

St. Francis invites his friars to behave like spiritual brothers, that is, moved by the Spirit, “for if a mother loves and cares for her son according to the flesh, how much more diligently must someone love and care for his brother according to the Spirit!” (*LR* 6,8). “Let each one love and care for his brother as a mother loves and cares for her son” (*ER* 9:11), even when “he is sick and cannot repay him” (*Adm* 24). This maternal and feminine care is also given to us by our Sister Mother Earth, which “sustains and governs” us.³⁰

²⁵ FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «A letter to brother Leo,» [*Lfl*], n. 3 (*FAED* I, 122-123).

²⁶ “I am speaking, my son, in this way—as a mother would.” *Lfl* 2.

²⁷ “We are mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give Him birth through a holy activity.” *2LtF* 53.

²⁸ “Let those who wish to stay in hermitages in a religious way be three brothers or, at the most, four; let two of these be «the mother» and have two «sons» or at least one.” FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «A rule for hermitages,» n. 1 (*FAED* I, 61-62).

²⁹ *ER* 5,14. “Service in great part means caring for vulnerability.” *FT* 115.

³⁰ FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «The Canticle of the Creatures,» [*Cant*], n. 9 (*FAED* I, 113-114).

1.4. Our sister creatures

The fraternity of St. Francis extends to all creatures. It is not by chance that his biographer Thomas of Celano places the preaching to the birds just after the meeting with the sultan.³¹ The openness to universal fraternity, represented in the encounter with the Muslim leader, is inseparable from the openness to other creatures. The Pope also recognizes that his encounter with a Muslim, the great Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb (5), moved him to write *Fratelli tutti*.

The irrational creatures “recognized his feeling of tenderness toward them” (*ICel* 59). Joining their song of praise, Francis overcomes his own unworthiness, because “no man is worthy to mention Your name” (*Cant* 2). Francis’ harmonious union with all creatures to praise the Most High is also evident in the celebration of the living Bethlehem at Greccio, in which “the forest amplifies the cries and the boulders echo back the joyful crowd.”³²

The preaching to the birds (*LMj* 8.9) and the meeting with the Sultan (*LMj* 9.8) are also placed close to each other by Bonaventure, although he reverses Celano’s order. Thus, cosmic fraternity serves as a framework for human fraternity.

Imitating the *kenosis* of the Incarnate Word, Francis learns to see himself “in relation to all other creatures” (*LS* 85) and wants to be submissive to all of them.

“He is subject and submissive to everyone in the world, not only to people but to every beast and wild animal as well that they may do whatever they want with it insofar as it has been given to them from above by the Lord.”³³

The fraternal relationship that he establishes with creatures is not the fruit of a heteronomous obligation. He feels himself neither as a dominator nor as a steward, but as a brother. There is no need for anyone to remind him of caring for creatures, for it comes spontaneously from within himself. “He felt a natural fraternity, neither pantheistic nor intellectualistic, with every creature.”³⁴ He knows that all of them are worthy, because they have been

³¹ THOMAS OF CELANO, «The Life of Saint Francis,» [*ICel*], n. 57-58 (*FAED* I, 171-308).

³² *ICel* 85. “The forest amplifies with their cries.” BONAVENTURE, «The Major Legend,» [*LMj*], n. 10,7 (*FAED* II, 525-683).

³³ FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «A Salutation to Virtues,» n. 16-18 (*FAED* I, 164-165).

³⁴ HAFFNER P.M., *Verso una teologia dell’ambiente. L’eredità ecologica di Papa Giovanni Paolo II*, ART, Roma 2007, 105, [my translation].

lovingly called into existence by God. He feels them to be part of himself, sisters that live with him in the same house. Together with them, he joyfully moves forward in pilgrimage towards the eternal home.

2. *Fratelli tutti* is inspired by St. Francis

At the beginning of his pontificate, Cardinal Jorge Maria Bergoglio chose the name Francis, thus showing that the saint of Assisi was going to be an essential reference in his pontifical magisterium. He underlines Francis' "universal heart," his joy, his "care for the vulnerable" and his generous self-giving (*LS* 10). He also highlights the importance of the fraternal closeness, "real and cordial" (*EG* 199), which characterized the saint of Assisi in his relations with all people and with all creatures.

"Then, right away, thinking of the poor, I thought of Francis of Assisi. Then I thought of all the wars, as the votes were still being counted, till the end. Francis is also the man of peace. That is how the name came into my heart: Francis of Assisi. For me, he is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation; these days we do not have a very good relationship with creation, do we?"³⁵

In writing his third encyclical on fraternity and social friendship, the Pope has been inspired again by Francis of Assisi.³⁶ Besides, he chose to sign it in Assisi, a city that invites everyone "to recognize each other as brothers and sisters."³⁷ It has also been a meeting point for religions.³⁸ The encyclical's title "*fratelli tutti*" is taken from the Italian translation of the sixth admonition of

³⁵ POPE FRANCIS, «Address to representatives of the Communications media» (March 16, 2013), in *OR* (March 17, 2013) 9-11.

³⁶ The Pope also acknowledges the influence of some other people on the encyclical: Charles de Foucauld, the grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, Martín Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi.

³⁷ "¿Por qué Dios ha concedido a Asís este encanto natural...? La respuesta es fácil. Porque los hombres, mediante un común y universal lenguaje, aprendan a reconocer al Creador y a reconocerse hermanos unos de otros." JOHN XXIII, «Pellegrinaggio ai santuari di Loreto e Assisi» (Oct. 4, 1962), in *Id. Discorsi, messaggi, colloqui del Santo Padre Giovanni XXIII*, vol. IV, LEV, Vatican City 1963, 555-566, here 564.

³⁸ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, «Message to bishop Domenico Sorrentino on the 20th anniversary of the interreligious meeting of prayer for peace» (Sept. 2, 2006), in *AAS* 98 (2006) 749-754.

St. Francis. It also quotes his admonition 25, where Francis praises the one “who loves and respects his brother as much when he is far away from him as when he is with him” (1). Scholars have usually agreed that St. Francis addressed these admonitions to his friars,³⁹ but the Pope considers them valid for all people, thus broadening their horizon and their final addressees.

The choice of the sixth admonition is significant, since it was written around 1220, shortly after the martyrdom of the first friars in Marrakech. Instead of wanting “to receive glory and honor” for the great things “the saints have accomplished,”⁴⁰ demonizing those who martyred them, Francis invites his friars to follow the example of the “good shepherd” and reminds them that, for Christians, martyrdom and evangelization are always linked to the proclamation of peace (*Test* 14) and to universal fraternity. They must privilege the affable and friendly presence,⁴¹ instead of looking directly for contrast and then praise their martyrs and belittle the infidels. Their followers must always be ready to donate their own lives, even in martyrdom,⁴² but Francis, in his testament, does not urge them to seek it at all costs as an ideal of perfection, but “wherever they have not been received, let them flee into another country” (*Test* 26).

2.1. Children of the same Father

Both Francis of Assisi and *Fratelli tutti* present fraternity from a Trinitarian and Christological perspective. This conception contrasts with the way it is usually understood in our society. We are not only “associates” or “partners who have signed a social contract “in the pursuit of particular interests” (102), but brothers and sisters in Christ, children of the same Father.

³⁹ The codex 308 of the communal library of Assisi confirms that Francis had addressed these exhortations to his friars.

⁴⁰ *Adm* 6,3. “Quando furono riferiti al beato Francesco il martirio, la vita e la leggenda dei suddetti frati, sentendo che in essa si facevano le lodi di lui, e, vedendo che i frati si gloriavano del martirio di quelli [...], rifiutò tale leggenda e ne proibì la lettura dicendo: «Ognuno si glori del suo proprio martirio e non di quello degli altri.»» «Cronaca di Giordano da Giano (Chronicle of Jordan of Giano),» n. 8, in *Fonti Francescane*, [FF], n. 278, Ed. Francescane, Padova ³2011, 2323-2412, here 2330.

⁴¹ “I like to recall what Saint Francis of Assisi used to say to his friars: ‘Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.’ Words come... but witness comes first.” POPE FRANCIS, «Address to participants in the international congress on catechesis» (Sept. 27, 2013), in *OR* (Sept. 29, 2013) 8; cf. *Id.*, «Homily» (April 14, 2013), n. 2, in *OR* (April 15/16, 2013) 8.

⁴² “Let them not resist anyone evil.” *ER* 14,4. “Do not fear those who kill the body.” *ER* 16,18.

“O how glorious and holy and great to have a Father in heaven!” (2*LtF* 54), Francis exclaimed. Indeed, “without an openness to the Father of all, there will be no solid and stable reasons for an appeal to fraternity” (272).

2.1.1. “Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give”

Everything is a gift and, therefore, our relationships must be based on absolute gratuitousness. “Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give” (Mt 10:8). Indeed, “life without fraternal gratuitousness becomes a form of frenetic commerce, in which we are constantly weighing up what we give and what we get back in return” (140). The Father who has given us everything has made his dwelling place in weakness, and it is there, in the leper and the wounded, that we find him.

Divine gratuitousness should lead us to assume a culture of care and tenderness (194). This implies “approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another” (198), beginning with the poor, the marginalized and the diverse. In fact, as “*imago Dei*,” “the human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion” (LS 240), because he/she “is by nature open to relationship” (111) and to universal fraternity.

2.1.2. “Love exudes compassion and dignity”

In the time of St. Francis, “doing penance” was usually associated with contempt for the world and for one’s own body. The poor man of Assisi, however, understood it as synonymous with “doing mercy.”⁴³ Having experienced the divine gratuitousness, Francis does not seek self-perfection but relation. Above all, he wants to be a brother, affectionately close to everyone, because “love exudes compassion and dignity” (62).

“Being able to have compassion: this is the key. This is our key. If you do not feel compassion before a needy person, if your heart is not moved, it means that something is not right. Be careful; let us be careful. Let us not allow ourselves to get carried away by egotistical insensitivity.”⁴⁴

⁴³ “The Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them.” *Test 2*.

⁴⁴ POPE FRANCIS, «Angelus,» in https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2019/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20190714.html

Using the Pope's words, we could say that Francis of Assisi overcame the relationship typical of associates that reigned in the walled city and went out to the peripheries, embracing the gratuitousness that "engenders an open world" (c. 3) and makes merciful fraternity possible.⁴⁵ We need to "know how to be responsible for the fragility of others" (115) and to form a community composed of "brothers and sisters who accept and care for one another."⁴⁶

The Pope insists on the need "to cultivate kindness" (222), because it "transforms lifestyles, relationships and the ways ideas are discussed and compared" (224). Francis of Assisi, in fact, "was naturally courteous in manner and speech."⁴⁷ In Perugia, "he was imprisoned with the knights because of his noble manners" (L3C 4). Moreover, he asked that his friars "not to quarrel or argue or judge others when they go about in the world; but let them be meek, peaceful, modest, gentle, and humble, speaking courteously to everyone, as is becoming" (LR 3,10-11).

2.2. The healing power of the encounter with weakness

The encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* emphasizes that "an awareness of our own limitations and incompleteness, far from being a threat, becomes the key to envisaging and pursuing a common project" (150). The encounter with weakness pushes us to "expand our circle of friends, to reach those who, even though they are close to me, I do not naturally consider a part of my circle of interests" (97).

The encounter with the leper's weakness cured Francis of Assisi of his dreams of grandeur and made him experience the gratuitousness of divine love. At the end of his life, he recognizes that, from that moment, "what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body" (*Test* 3). His gesture of kissing the leper is the fruit of divine mercy and he himself

⁴⁵ St. Augustine underlines that the word mercy derives from two Latin terms: *miser* (wretched) and *cor, cordis* (heart): "to have the heart close to the miserly." KASPER W., *Misericordia. Concetto fondamentale del Vangelo, chiave della vita cristiana*, Queriniana, Brescia 2015, 40. On its different meanings: ZYZAK W., «Mercy as a theological term,» in *The Person and the Challenges* 5/1 (2015) 137-153.

⁴⁶ FT 96; POPE FRANCIS «Message for the 47th World Day of Peace,» [WDP] (Jan. 1, 2014), in *AAS* 106 (2014) 22.

⁴⁷ L3C 3. Cf. DALARUN J., *Francesco: un passaggio. Donna e donne negli scritti e nelle leggende di Francesco d'Assisi*, Viella, Roma 2001; BATAIS L. «La courtoisie de François d'Assise. Influence de la littérature épique et courtoise sur la première génération franciscaine,» in *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome* 109/1 (1997) 131-160.

experiences it in the fraternal benevolence with which the leper accepts him. Welcoming the leper and feeling himself welcomed by him, Francis encounters the One who for our sake “appeared despised as a leper” (*LMj* 1,5).

He no longer fled in terror for fear of being contaminated, but “stayed among them and served them with humility” (*L3C* 11), for in those disfigured faces he recognized the crucified Christ. It is not in vain that Bonaventure situates this encounter just before the crucifix of San Damiano speaks to him.

2.2.1. Imitating the kenosis of Christ: the minority

St. Francis constantly meditated on “the humility of the incarnation” (*1Cel* 84). With this expression, the biographer Thomas of Celano summarizes his life and spirituality. Francis wanted to imitate the Incarnate Word by embracing the most absolute minority. He thus begins “a process of *kenosis*, of lowering himself to the condition of the other.”⁴⁸ The Pope admires Francis’ “humble and fraternal ‘subjection’” (3). This means to serve, to love, to treat with mercy, avoiding “arguments or disputes” (3).

Francis asks his friars to be minors, “neighbors” of any person they meet. Their fraternities should always be open to anyone who approaches them: “Whoever comes to them, friend or foe, thief or robber, let him be received with kindness” (*ER* 7,14). In fact, when Francis learns that his friars have just rejected some dangerous thieves, he asks them to go out to meet them, apologize, and treat them as brothers (*LFI* 26).

His friars are called to embrace universal fraternity, avoiding the temptation to become a closed membership club or an elitist group. To a minister who wanted to retire to a hermitage to avoid the difficulties of living together, he says: “Love those who do those things to you and do not wish anything different from them, unless it is something the Lord God shall have given you. And love them in this and do not wish that they be better Christians” (*LMin* 5-9). Instead of retreating to secluded places to keep themselves pure, well protected from the worldly noise, Francis prefers that his friars take the risk of living among the poor, weak, and sinful people. Above all, he wants them to be brothers.

⁴⁸ “Un processo di *kenosis*, di abbassamento verso la condizione dell’altro.” PRENGA E., *Il Crocifisso via alla Trinità: l’esperienza di Francesco d’Assisi nella teologia di Bonaventura*, Città Nuova, Roma 2009, 64.

“He had overcome the subtle and dangerous temptation that haunts every man in search of an ideal: the Cathar or Manichean temptation; the temptation of purity at any price: that of yeast which, in order to remain pure, refuses to mix with the mass; the one of the wheat field that is wanted clean of any kind of weed. It is the temptation to separate himself from mediocre men and withdraw into solitude, with a small remnant, to form a brotherhood of pure ones.”⁴⁹

Addressing all the faithful he says that “we must never desire to be above others but, instead, we must be servants and subject to every human creature for God’s sake” (2*LtF* 47). He declared himself “your lesser servant” and manifested his willingness to “kiss your feet” (2*LtF* 87). Also St. Clare “frequently and reverently washed the feet of the serving [sisters] who returned from outside and, after washing them, kissed them.”⁵⁰

2.2.2. *The Good Samaritan, example of the gratuitousness of love*

If the encounter with the leper was decisive in the conversion of St. Francis, also in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* the encounter with a marginalized, wounded, and mistreated person is the key to understand the whole encyclical. The Good Samaritan “presents the basic decision we need to make in order to rebuild” the universal fraternity (67). In the face of the needy, we cannot remain indifferent, enclosed in theoretical speculations. Their weakness forces us in conscience to make a vital, deeply ethical decision: Which of these persons do you identify with? Which of these characters do you resemble? (64).

This parable proposes the gratuitousness of love as the basis of the kind of selfless relationships that make fraternity possible. That wounded person was a stranger, incapable of offering anything in return and, moreover, he belonged to a people who despised the Samaritans. Despite everything, the Good Samaritan treated him with mercy and, once he had taken care of him, he “departed without expecting any recognition or gratitude” (79). The only bond that united them was their common human dignity. The Samaritan was not socially close, but nevertheless he became his neighbor.

⁴⁹ LECLERC É., *El sol sale sobre Asís*, Sal Terrae, Santander 2004, 74, [my translation].

⁵⁰ «Legend of Saint Clare,» in ARMSTRONG R.J., *Clare of Assisi: The Lady. Early Documents*, [CAED], part III, 8,8, New city press, Hyde Park (NY) 2006, 292; cf. ACCROCCA F., «Hacia Getsemani? Clara, la comunidad de las hermanas y la vida cotidiana en san Damián,» in *SelFran* 80 (1998) 239-254, footnote 22.

“Love does not care if a brother or sister in need comes from one place or another. For love shatters the chains that keep us isolated and separate; in their place, it builds bridges. Love enables us to create one great family, where all of us can feel at home” (62).

The Samaritan’s gratuitousness and love contrasts with the indifference of the Levite and the priest who, both socially and religiously, had the obligation to care for people. They were the closest, but they did not behave like neighbors.

2.3. Encountering diversity; overcoming walls and frontiers

The Second Vatican Council encouraged the openness to the contemporary world and a spirit of dialogue with other religions and cultures.⁵¹ It was then that Paul VI proposed J. Duns Scotus as a model of ecumenical dialogue.⁵² In this context, the meeting of Francis of Assisi with the “brother” Sultan, an event almost forgotten in previous centuries, was also revalued. Éloi Leclerc stressed then that the post-conciliar church must leave home and meet everyone, thus imitating Francis of Assisi, a saint who “approaches others, not to draw them into his own life, but to help them become ever more fully themselves.”⁵³

Taking up the testimony of Francis of Assisi, the Pope shows his desire for a Church that is poor and for the poor,⁵⁴ free of ties, joyfully close to all, and “in a constant desire to go forth” (*EG* 27) towards the peripheries of existence.

Fraternal relationships seek unity without renouncing difference. To indicate this graphically, the Pope uses the image of the polyhedron⁵⁵ and

⁵¹ “The Church must enter into dialogue with the world [...]. This kind of dialogue that will characterize Our apostolic ministry.” PAUL VI, «*Ecclesiam suam*. Encyclical letter» (Aug. 6, 1964), n. 65 & 67, in *AAS* 56 (1964) 609-659.

⁵² The teachings of Scotus can “provide a Golden framework for a serious dialogue between the Catholic Church and other Christian communities.” PAUL VI, «*Alma parens*. Apostolic letter» (July 14, 1966), n. 14, in *AAS* 58 (1966) 609-614.

⁵³ LECLERC É., *Exil et tendresse*, Éd. Franciscaines, Paris 1962, 205, quoted in *FT* 4.

⁵⁴ Cf. MENNINI M., *La Chiesa dei poveri. Dal Concilio Vaticano II a papa Francesco*, Guerini, Milano 2017; GUTIÉRREZ G., *La fuerza histórica de los pobres*, Sígueme, Salamanca 1982.

⁵⁵ “The image of a polyhedron can represent a society where differences coexist, complementing, enriching, and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations.” *FT* 215.

proposes Francis of Assisi as a model, the “saint of fraternal love” (2), an example of the culture of encounter that we need today.

2.3.1. *The encounter of St. Francis with the Sultan*

“There is an episode in the life of Saint Francis that shows his openness of heart, which knew no bounds and transcended differences of origin, nationality, color or religion. It was his visit to Sultan Malik-el-Kamil, in Egypt,”⁵⁶ in 1219, amid the Fifth Crusade.⁵⁷ That trip “entailed considerable hardship, given Francis’ poverty, his scarce resources, the great distances to be traveled and their differences of language, culture and religion” (3). Risking his own life, Francis approaches the Sultan as a brother and is received fraternally by him.

Both Francis and the Sultan are convinced of their own faith,⁵⁸ but they welcome each other with fraternal respect, listen attentively, and are open to learning. “Pray for me, - says the Sultan to Francis - that God may deign to reveal to me the law and the faith which is more pleasing to Him.”⁵⁹ The Sultan’s influence on Francis seems also evident. On returning from this trip, he began to write the “Letter to the Faithful” (1220-1223), his most universalistic writing,⁶⁰ thus showing that this encounter had enriched the way he understood his vocation, his mission, and his identity as a Lesser Friar. Having broadened his horizons, he now felt called to proclaim the Gospel to all peoples. In some of his writings, he shows his apprecia-

⁵⁶ FT 3. The meeting took place at the end of the first siege of Damietta (August 1219), in the month of truce that preceded the resumption of hostilities. FERRERO E., *Francesco e il Sultano*, Einaudi, Torino 2019.

⁵⁷ On the fifth crusade: MYLOD E.J. et al. (ed.), *The Fifth Crusade in context. The Crusading Movement in the early thirteenth century*, Routledge, London 2019; TYERMAN C., *Le guerre di Dio: nuova storia delle crociate*, Einaudi, Torino 2017.

⁵⁸ “The deeper, stronger and richer our own identity is, the more we will be capable of enriching others.” FT 282. The meeting between Francis and the Sultan shows that unity and social friendship do not imply “to opt for a kind of syncretism, or for the absorption of one into the other, but rather for a resolution which takes place on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides.” EG 228.

⁵⁹ JACQUES DE VITRY, «Historia Occidentalis,» [HO], n. 1 (FAED I, 581-585); cf. *1Cel* 57; *2Cel* 30; *LMj* 11,3.

⁶⁰ The Early Rule, written in 1221, appeals to “all nations and all peoples everywhere on earth, who are and who will be.” ER 23,7. This universal perspective is also found in other writings, such as the “Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples,” written in 1220. In addition, Francis met personally with Emperor Otto IV (*1Cel* 43; *2Cel* 200).

tion for some Muslim religious practices, for example, when he asks “that every evening an announcement may be made by a messenger or some other sign that praise and thanksgiving may be given by all people to the all-powerful Lord God;”⁶¹ and adds: When you hear His name, “adore His name with fear and reverence, prostrate on the ground” (*LOrd* 4).

In Francis’s time, Christianity was committed to promoting and financing the crusades to confront the Muslim enemy. This objective was considered so decisive that plenary indulgences were granted only to those who enlisted in these war campaigns or helped to finance them.⁶² No other motives were foreseen. In that difficult historical moment, Francis “demonstrated the breadth and grandeur of his love, which sought to embrace everyone” (3). In 1216, he even got Pope Honorius III to approve the plenary indulgence of St. Mary of the Portiuncula, which focused on reconciliation and did not require any material consideration.⁶³

Having assumed this prophetic, fraternal, and unconditional hospitality, Francis asks his friars that, when going among Saracens and other non-believers, they present themselves as Christians and do not “promote disputes and controversies, but to be subject to every human creature for God’s sake.”⁶⁴ This explicit reference to the mission among non-Christians was a novelty, since no other founder of a religious order had included it in his legislation. Instead of alluding to the possibility of martyrdom, Francis stresses peaceful submission, “poverty, and humility.” This is a special vocation, reserved to those who have received “divine inspiration” and are considered “fit to be sent” (*LR* 12).

⁶¹ FRANCIS OF ASSISI, «Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples,» [*Lrp*], n. 7 (*FAED* I, 58-59); cf. ID., «The First Letter to the Custodians,» n. 8 (*FAED* I, 56-57).

⁶² The plenary indulgence to the crusaders had been granted by Pope Urban II, in the Council of Clermont (1095). Later, in the Lateran Council IV (1215), Innocent III granted it also to those who collaborated economically with them.

⁶³ Cf. BRUFANI S. (ed), *Il Perdono d’Assisi. Storia agiografia erudizione*, Fondazione CISAM, Spoleto 2016; AA.VV., *Il perdono di Assisi e le indulgenze plenarie: atti dell’Incontro di studio in occasione dell’VIII centenario dell’Indulgenza della Porziuncola (1216-2016)* (S. Maria degli Angeli, July 15-16, 2016), Fondazione CISAM, Spoleto 2017; SENSI M., *Il perdono di Assisi*, Porziuncola, Assisi 2002.

⁶⁴ *FT* 3; *ER* 16,6. “Nessuna contesa, dunque, nessun uso della forza [...], accettazione anche di disagi e sofferenze per amore di Cristo.” MARTINI C.M., «Noi e l’islam. Lettera pastorale» (Dec. 6, 1990), in MOKRANI A. – SALVARANI B., *Dell’umana fratellanza e altri dubbi*, Ed. Terra Santa, Milano 2021, introduction.

“We are impressed that some eight hundred years ago Saint Francis urged that all forms of hostility or conflict be avoided and that a humble and fraternal ‘subjection’ be shown to those who did not share his faith” (3).

In proposing social friendship as a form of evangelization, the Pope is inspired by Francis of Assisi, who “did not wage a war of words aimed at imposing doctrines; he simply spread the love of God” (4). Rather than searching for a perfection that finds its apex in bloody martyrdom, the saint of Assisi seeks friendly encounters and unconditional hospitality. Indeed, in a bellicose context, “sought to live in harmony with all [...] and inspired the vision of a fraternal society” (4).

2.3.2. Pope Francis’ fraternal meeting with the Gran Imam

Commemorating the eighth centenary of that extraordinary meeting with the Sultan, on Feb. 2, 2019, Pope Francis and the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb met in Abu Dhabi and signed the “Document on Human Fraternity.”⁶⁵ The Pope included this document in *Fratelli Tutti* (285), thus giving it a remarkable relevance in the social doctrine of the Church.

The encyclical *FT* “takes up and develops some of the great themes raised in” that document (5). For example, that “God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters” (5). It also underlines the role of faith, which “leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved” (*DFH*, preface).

While inviting us to embrace universal brotherhood, the encyclical *FT* regrets that “still, there are those who appear to feel encouraged or at least permitted by their faith to support varieties of narrow and violent nationalism, xenophobia and contempt, and even the mistreatment of those who are different” (86).

2.4. A cosmic fraternity

The cosmic fraternity fostered by the encyclical *Laudato si’* serves as a framework for the human fraternity and the social friendship proposed by

⁶⁵ Pope FRANCIS – AL-AZHAR AHMAD AL-TAYYEB, «Document on Human Fraternity. For world peace and living together,» (Abu Dhabi, Feb. 4, 2019), [*DFH*], in *OR* (Feb. 4-5, 2019) 6.

the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, because in the common home “everything is connected.” We need to strengthen the culture of encounter that cares for life, overcoming the current technocratic and individualistic paradigm.

We are brothers and sisters of all creatures, we sail “in the same boat” (32) and, therefore, we need to listen to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor (*LS* 49). The two are inseparable, although *LS* focuses on the former and *FT* on the latter.

Saint Francis of Assisi “heard the voice of God, he heard the voice of the poor, he heard the voice of the infirm and he heard the voice of nature. He made of them a way of life. My desire is that the seed that Saint Francis planted may grow in the hearts of many” (48).

Fraternity is generated through “processes of encounter, processes that build a people that can accept differences” (217). We need to strengthen our four fundamental relationships: with God, with oneself, with others and with creation. The four go together, because in the common home everything is related.

Creatures are also our sisters and have a value in themselves that must be respected. They accompany us on the journey of life, until God will be “all in all” (1Cor 15:28).

Conclusion

Drawing inspiration from Francis of Assisi, the encyclical *FT* invites us to build universal fraternity together. “Let us dream, then, as a single human family, [...], each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all” (8). Fraternity is a gift and a task: we must ask for it with insistence and build it with commitment, generating “processes of encounter” (217).

St. Francis recognized that the Most High granted him “to begin doing penance” (*Test* 1). He thus began a long and demanding process of discernment⁶⁶ that led him to abandon his dreams of grandeur and to become a universal brother. His choices and intuitions were prophetic and often contradicted the general feeling of his contemporaries.⁶⁷ We have indicated

⁶⁶ URIBE F., «El proceso vocacional de Francisco de Asís,» in *SelFran* 88 (2001) 44-69.

⁶⁷ In fact, some of his first hagiographers presented him as a new crusader and “intrepid knight of Christ.” *LMj* 9,7. Francis, “like a soldier, well-trained in the battle camps of God,

some of them, for example, his understanding of authority, religious life, martyrdom, the Portiuncula indulgence, the mission among non-believers, the encounter with the Sultan.

The encyclical *Fratelli tutti* recognizes the saint of Assisi as a prophetic model and as the inspirer of “a new vision of fraternity and social friendship” (6). Appealing to dreams, the encyclical invites us to direct our gaze towards a symbolic horizon that helps to overcome polarities and conflicting dialectics. Indeed, “it is extremely difficult to carry out a long-term project unless it becomes a collective aspiration” (157).

“We know that our young people will be capable of prophesy and vision to the extent that we, who are already adult or elderly, can dream and thus be infectious in sharing those dreams and hopes that we carry in our hearts.”⁶⁸

Through the intercession of St. Francis of Assisi, let us ask God to inspire us with “a dream of renewed encounter, dialogue, justice and peace” (287), while we join forces to make it come true.

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challenging the enemy, he wanted to stir up fresh battles. With the Christ as leader.” *ICel* 103.

⁶⁸ POPE FRANCIS «Homily at the opening of the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,» (Oct. 3, 2018) in *OR* 225 (Oct. 4, 2018) 8.

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