

Three Themes from *Fratelli Tutti* for Religious Life

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Fratelli Tutti,¹ the encyclical of Pope Francis on fraternity and social friendship, affirms the inherent dignity of all persons affecting decisions in politics, economics, and social life. The encyclical is not addressing religious life in particular, nor does it draw conclusions directly pointed towards religious life. However, there are aspects of this letter that challenge all of us to think about the way we live our religious life in light of this global vision of Pope Francis.

This essay is based on a ten-minute reflection I offered at a webinar for the Conference of Major Superiors of Men on the encyclical's challenge to religious life. Given the limits of time for the presentation and space for this essay, I chose only three themes that immediately struck me as having relevance to our religious life: the individual and the community; digital communication and social friendship; and social friendship and social charity.

Individual and Community

Given how important community is to religious life, I begin with the relation of the individual to the community. In chapter 4, Pope Francis speaks of the tension between universal fraternity and social friendship on the local scene (*FT*, 146ff). There he expressed a concern about "local narcissism." He defines it as "born of a certain insecurity and fear of the other that leads to rejection

¹ Pope Francis, [Fratelli Tutti](#), 3 October 2020.

and the desire to erect walls for self-defense" (FT, 146). His recognizing "local" narcissism has implications for religious life.

Some have called our times "the age of narcissism." If narcissism is prevalent in society, then we can expect to find aspects of it in our communities as well. In short, narcissists are self-absorbed. They rely on themselves and pretend to be self-sufficient in order to hide their insecurity. They are preoccupied with their status and superiority.

I think we can best understand narcissism in light of its extreme, classic manifestation. For instance, in the popular long-running comedy series, The Big Bang Theory, the main character, Sheldon Cooper, manifests narcissism in the world of science. Sheldon makes himself the center of the universe. Everything is measured by how well it satisfies his self-interests, and how it gives recognition to his own achievements.

Though classic narcissists are likely to be screened out in the process of admission to our communities, we may still have candidates and members with narcissistic traits that incline them to seek special treatment and privileges. These tendencies can spawn clericalism that creates a culture reflecting values associated with seeing oneself as special, set apart, superior to others, entitled to favors, and exempt from accountability. If we know people like this, then we have met someone who is likely to interfere with our call to build bridges between differences within our communities. Since narcissism promotes individual interests, it weakens the communitarian, fraternal dimension of our life. The encyclical, by contrast, urges that we no longer think in terms of "me" and "them" but in terms of "us."

The prevalence of narcissism in society and in religious communities ought to make us raise questions about what is attracting people to religious life and what keeps them there. Are our candidates joining our community to be witnesses to our charism, or are they using the community as a platform to further their need for security or recognition that they couldn't get otherwise in a highly competitive and non-affirming world?

For reflection: What evidence can you find in your community of narcissistic traits giving rise to clericalism undermining community life?

Digital Communication and Social Friendship

The pandemic has forced us to communicate through electronic means more than ever before. As a result, digital communication is becoming the standard practice for meetings and long-distance communication. In Chapter 1, Pope Francis alerts us to limitations of digital communication that can undermine social friendship and, by extension, religious fraternity (*FT*, 42–43).

Social friendship is a key concern of Pope Francis. But it is not a relationship that we achieve quickly or easily. His great fear is that digital communication gives the appearance of a sociability that really doesn't exist. The missing piece is the whole-person contact with one another that promotes strong interpersonal relationships. Digital relationships do not require the slow cultivation of friendships and stable working relationships that mature over time to make coming to a consensus in a fraternal way possible. The Zoom-effect of meeting in those "Hollywood Squares" is that we can see part of each other, but we miss the larger realm of human communication that includes physical gestures and body language. This whole-person communication is needed to cultivate friendships and build relationships that will last over time.

Other circumstances can interfere, however. For instance, working groups that are already familiar with each other from having a history of in-person meetings can make Zoom meetings more effective than groups with new members in it. The past familiarity of members working together makes digital communication a little more effective than meeting someone freshly on the computer screen with the hope of building a strong social rapport.

This lesson came home to me recently when I was on a Zoom meeting with our Review Board for Praesidium. A new member was meeting everyone else for the first time through this Zoom connection. She said that it would be important for her to meet everyone in person soon if she was going to feel part of the group and pick up its spirit of working together. The Zoom meeting was not giving her the sense of belonging to this community and a means of establishing good working relationships. Her need was spot on. In-person meetings can produce ideas and build relationships that Zoom

meetings cannot. The cornerstone of collaboration is sitting in a room with people and seeing their reactions to things and having a chance to exchange ideas face to face.

While digital communication is not the best way to build community, it is certainly better than letter writing when you must keep in contact with members in another country. But when you are dealing with members who are more easily accessible, then person-to-person contact is the best way to build the social friendships that make for fraternity.

As the pandemic restrictions ease limiting personal contacts, we need to examine how much we rely on digital communication to establish relationships and then to sustain them.

For reflection: When the pandemic ends, what forms of digital communication should we keep, and which should we minimize or drop to strengthen bonds of community?

Social Friendship and Social Charity

The encyclical speaks at great length in Chapter 5 of the notions of political and social charity in the context of discussing the kind of love we need in order to build social bonds that are inclusive and responsive to human need. I want to suggest a way of getting behind the virtue of charity to think about the kind of social and political love that will build social friendships, not only within our religious communities but within society as well. The hermeneutical key is in Chapter 3 where Pope Francis talks about the power of hospitality as an example of the love that makes room even for the stranger.

Hospitality is the most accurate translation of the charity that is demanded for social friendships. We have all been on the receiving end of hospitality when invited into another person's home, for example. And we have all had the opportunity to extend hospitality in the process of building a friendship. Think about what hospitality demands.

I believe that the spiritual strength of a person's life and, by extension, community life is measured by what hospitality demands. Hospitality requires a response on our part from being caught up in what another is experiencing. The key to being hospitable is "paying attention." The price we pay for being attentive is what makes hospitable love so difficult. Paying attention comes at a price. It costs us time and a deliberate, conscious effort to divest ourselves of self-preoccupation, of being superior, or of deserving special favors. To be hospitable, we have to get over ourselves and out of ourselves and become interested in the other. For example, if one is hosting a dinner party, one pays attention to one's guests in order to see what they need in order to feel at home and to be welcomed. Do they need a refresher of their drink, a fresh napkin, or a chair to sit in? Is someone being excluded from the conversation and needs to be recognized? Hospitable love cares enough to create a space in our life that welcomes another in. The key to the space we create is that it is an environment where the other can feel at home and experience bonds of communion, connection, friendship.

In Chapter 2, the encyclical uses the parable of the Samaritan to show that when he looked in the ditch he stops to help because he sees himself lying there wounded. In this way he fulfills the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Pope Francis makes effective use of this parable to use it as the criterion for judging economic and political projects.

I want to suggest a complementary story to serve as the criterion for building fraternity within our communities. It is the foot washing scene in John 13:1-17. Here we find hospitality in action. In this gesture of washing feet, Jesus establishes a relationship with his disciples whereby he abolishes structures of domination. Jesus, who is master, deliberately reverses social positions by becoming the servant. In this he witnesses to a new order of relationships in the community whereby the desire to dominate and be superior has no place.

In the narcissism of selfishness, dominating power wants to make oneself great at the expense of another's freedom. In our world as religious, that is the worst form of clericalism. The evil of clericalism is that it seeks privilege and entitlement that lives off the energy of remaining superior while others are looked upon as inferior. Clericalism is the belief that religious form a

special elite in the church and so deserve preferential treatment setting themselves above the people they are called to serve. Hospitality is the antidote to clericalism and the spiritual energy of social friendships.

For reflection: What opportunities exist to express hospitality in your community life?

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