

Fraternity. A dream and a shared passion.

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INFO SSCC Brothers No 148 – 2 November 2020



Pope Francis beside the monument "Angels Unaware" dedicated to migrants in St. Peter's Square (Rome)

Dear brothers,

On 3rd October of this year, on the eve of the Feast-day of Saint Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis released the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (FT) which addresses fraternity and social friendship. In it, Pope Francis outlines a dream, a guiding vision:

"Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all. (FT 8)

Pope Francis wishes to associate all men and women - believers or not, all loved by God - to this dream. For such a dream to become possible, for progress to be made, a shared passion is required. It is an ambitious dream. It is about nothing less than "recovering the shared passion to create a community of belonging and solidarity". (FT 36)

FT is an inspiring, critical and stimulating text not only for the Christian life which holds fraternity as one of its greatest signs of attraction and visibility, but also for the political life upon which it is based and which aspires to a social friendship between all human beings. In this way, Christian fraternity embraces the deepest longings for social friendship, while also paying attention to sister-mother earth and the care of the common home that shelters us.

I would like to share with you a chapter from this encyclical that caught my attention in a particular way: Chapter VII - *Paths of Renewed Encounter*. In this chapter, the pope acknowledges the fact that the longing for fraternity and social friendship that is inscribed in the hearts of

men and women and in creation, finds in those very same hearts obstacles and resistances that fracture community and hurt brothers and sisters. It is thus about helping to overcome those resistances and to heal wounds. The paths of renewed encounter of fraternity and social friendship are, ultimately, paths of reparation. As such, not only can our congregation not remain indifferent to this reparative dimension, but drawing from our spirituality, we can also contribute in bearing witness to it. The chapter begins with a sentence that already contains a whole programme:

"In many parts of the world, there is a need for paths of peace to heal open wounds. There is also a need for peacemakers, men and women prepared to work boldly and creatively to initiate processes of healing and renewed encounter." (FT 225)

During this time of pandemic, we have experienced how our fears grow greater as people in our closest circle become contaminated with the virus. Such fear is the normal reaction of an individual or social body that feels its life threatened. More profoundly, fear can stop us from seeing that the lives of others (near and far) and of our planet are also threatened. However, these times are helping us to see the importance of bonds of affection, proximity, esteem, and service: even more so, as sanitary measures - in place for the care of others as well – are imposing physical distancing, confinement at home or in a room, restrictions, even prohibition of meetings and visits (in hospitals and prisons, for example). Physical distancing and isolation have revealed how important these bonds are for living and how good health depends on wounds being healed.

On the other hand, Christianity's most visible attractiveness is the quality of the bonds that shared faith in Jesus is capable of creating among believers and with humanity. It is the community of disciples whom Jesus calls together that makes the Kingdom of God that he is announcing visible and attractive. The first Christian communities knew how to give a communal shape to the new presence of the risen Jesus. Christian life and the religious life therein is nothing but "a way of life marked by the flavour of the Gospel" (FT 1). The people with whom we walk, with their infallible sense of faith, recognise the truthfulness of our preaching, of our vows, of our pastoral and missionary projects, precisely in the quality of fraternal life that we live among ourselves and with them. And this helps us to assess the damage that occurs when, for example, we speak ill of the brothers or sisters with whom we live, or when a cold indifference distances us from them. More painful is recognising that this fraternity has also been betrayed by the abuse of power, conscience and sexual abuse that some members of the Church and also of our congregation have committed against other people, especially against minors and vulnerable people.

In order to help repair these wounds and rediscover the taste of fraternity, Pope Francis proposes some paths.

Start again from the truth

Those who today as brothers or sisters, whether in the congregation, or in the Church or in society, find themselves damaged or confronted, are called to make the patient journey to establish the truth. For sure, the truth is in each one of us, but it is also in front of us, and must be sought out, because no one is the holder of it. To address the truth, the Pope first invites us

to cultivate a "penitential memory": "one that can accept the past in order to free the future from one's own dissatisfaction, confusion or projections. Only by basing themselves on the historical truth of events will they be able to make a broad and persevering effort to understand one another and to strive for a new synthesis for the good of all". (FT 226)

Even those who feel damaged or harmed need to patiently walk the path of memory, so as not to be trapped by a wound from the past that mortgages their freedom for the future. It is not enough as a motivation to assert "my" truth, however painful it may be, as "the" truth to be imposed. The truth can be established if I agree to seek it with others, having as a horizon the commitment to mutual understanding and the good of all, not just my own.

Part of the work necessary to open oneself up to the truth will be to banish the hatred that nests in our hearts. This will involve banishing resentment from our hearts, the thirst for vindictive self-assertion that, ultimately, eliminates the other. Ultimately, it is about healing "those instances of struggle" (FT 243) that each one carries within. The point is not that there are no tensions, conflicts or fights between brothers. All of these are signs of the vitality of a group. But they can become the root of death for myself and for the brother, when I can no longer see the other except through the wound, shutting myself up in it and not accepting the genuine offer of help from others. How disheartening it is for our brothers in formation or, sometimes, for our parishioners when we speak badly, aggressively and violently against brothers!

Open to the promise of the other

The search for truth carries with it a promise and is animated by hope. It recognises that the other, even the one who I think caused me harm, has the possibility of offering me something (clear and hard) that helps to rebuild the truth that has been shattered: "The path to social unity always entails acknowledging the possibility that others have, at least in part, a legitimate point of view, something worthwhile to contribute, even if they were in error or acted badly". (FT, 228)

If the other is seen merely as an adversary, an abuser, an enemy, or if I already have a fixed idea or a prejudice about him, I deny him not only the possibility of giving to me what can help to remake the truth but, above all, I close the door to him continuing to be, despite everything, my brother and sister. How sad it is to see brothers not speaking to each other, even when living in the same house! What a failure in fraternity when the prejudice that I have towards a brother has become a judgment, one that cannot be appealed and one that disqualifies!

In family?

A broken community is the painful side of the fact that we are united to one another by a shared faith, by religious vows, by daily living together. The conflicts or wounds that weigh on our community are not a reason to ignore the brothers. It is with them that we together seek a way to heal wounds. In times of difficulty and conflict, we need to cultivate the grateful memory of fraternity, that what we are today, to a great extent, is because our brothers have

given us confidence, have given us opportunities to grow and form, have sustained us, have forgiven us and “put up with us”. We need to grow in a “basic sense of belonging” (FT 230). In our congregation we recognise the family spirit as a distinctive trait which, from the beginning, has made us feel at home – a fraternity for which we first gave thanks on the day of our profession or ordination. It is this family spirit, this simple fraternity, that the people with whom we walk in the pastoral appreciate. But it is precisely when there is conflict between the brothers that the entire family feels affected and how difficult it can become to continue to believe in it and, with simplicity of heart, ask the brothers to help us overcome these conflicts! How difficult it is at such moments for brothers-fathers-mothers affected by our not loving each other to emerge among us in order to go come to our aid with the intention of restoring fraternity and not deepening divisions!

With a sense of forgiveness

Forgiveness given and received between siblings is what allows communities to overcome conflicts. True, forgiveness cannot be imposed, but it can be sought. It is the desire of Jesus, when he says that the brother who has offended us must be forgiven up to seventy times seven. Such a desire nourishes the long journey undertaken by peacemakers and restorers of community. It assumes that at some point in our own lives we have experienced God's forgiveness mediated through our brothers and sisters. How difficult it is to forgive if there is not in our grateful memory an experience of forgiveness given and received from God through our brothers and sisters!

A sense of forgiveness does not mean forgetting what has happened or ignoring the damage received or caused. It is about being able to see - always with the help of others, my brothers - and recognise the damage I have suffered or the damage I have caused. The exercise of recognising the damage which we, for example, as brothers and sisters and as a congregation have caused in people who are victims of abuse, is essential for the work of truth and reparation and to make us credible mediators of the Gospel. To love the brother, even the one who has hurt us, is to commit ourselves to him, intelligently and charitably, so that he does not continue to hurt. Speaking of the oppressor (one could also say the abuser), Pope Francis reminds us that: “true love for an oppressor means seeking ways to make him cease his oppression; it means stripping him of a power that he does not know how to use, and that diminishes his own humanity” (FT 241). In other words, it is doing everything possible to disarm the violent, the oppressor, the abuser, and as such requires the commitment of the entire religious or ecclesial community, since all suffer from the wounds or ruptures caused to the community by these acts.

The most beautiful face of the fraternal life is not to be found in the community where there are no conflicts or tensions or hurts between brothers. Rather, it is where there are brothers who accept to undertake the long journey of reparation, who seek to establish truth, who are free from grudges, eager for justice, open to the benevolent gaze of others, humble enough to recognise the damage they have caused to others, without giving up their desire for forgiveness. This beautiful face of community life radiates in people who have been able even to forgive their torturers or their abusers. They are great, those who have allowed God, the artisan of peace and the one who truly knows what we are made of (Ps 103:14) - with the help

of the community - to heal wounds and disarm the desire for fratricidal vengeance. It is these who are able to receive and offer forgiveness. They present a strong and yet humble offering to the torturer, to the enemy, to the abuser, so that he, in turn, while on the road still to be travelled (possibly a long road) will recognise the damage caused, forgive himself and even ask for forgiveness, not forgetting that he is and continues to be a brother, our brother.

Fraternally,

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