

I

The Real Divides in Africa

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Introduction

THE ENCYCLICAL *FRATELLI TUTTI* calls for human solidarity and friendship, an exhortation that resonates with the mission of the church as outlined in *Lumen Gentium*, which describes the church as a sacrament of communion with God and of unity among all humans.¹ One hears the echo of Jesus's prayer to the Father, "that they may all be one" (John 17:21, NABRE). The encyclical thus focuses on what Pope Francis calls universal fraternity, and the first chapter deals with certain trends that serve as threats to the unity of humankind, threats described by the pope with the imagery of "dark clouds" and "a closed world."

With this intentional choice of words, Pope Francis tries to provoke thought and draw attention to what is happening in the world. He presents two strong dynamics at the core of human solidarity, namely, *hope* and *despair*. Speaking of "Dark Clouds over a Closed World" he points to the key issues that divide and threaten humankind today and argues that human solidarity is imperative. The African continent is more than ever in need of this solidarity. The ideas of communality, human relationality, and solidarity, expressed in concepts like "Ubuntu" and "Ujama," demonstrate Africa's

1. *Lumen Gentium* sees the church as a sacrament—a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all humans. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

desire for human unity. However, the ideals expressed in these concepts have remained yet unrealized on a continent that is ravaged by conflicts and wars, political instability, poverty, and underdevelopment.

In this chapter I seek firstly to appraise the work of Pope Francis from the point of view of how it addresses the real problems facing Africa. Secondly, I seek to raise critical questions relevant for an assessment of the threats to and strengths of human solidarity according to the spirit of the encyclical. I will do this by first giving a summary of the first chapter of the encyclical and then use the points raised therein in evaluating the situation in African society.

Despair: A Cloud of Gloom in a Closed World

Pope Francis's perception of the world as "closed" suggests a lack of sensitivity to the needs of "the other," which logically leads one to expect that the human race would seek and provide avenues for the opening up of the world. This expected opening does not seem to be happening. Hence, Pope Francis presents this chapter as an intentional and stark exposition of the challenges that confront human togetherness—challenges that he metaphorically sees as "dark clouds." He does this by revealing how the opportunities available to humankind are being misdirected toward destruction. For instance, unity and solidarity have been turned into "populist and ultra-nationalist" ideologies (*FT* 11) that sabotage humanity's ability to make progress toward integration. This is a regression of some sort, which as it is, further strengthens disregard for the common good in a world that advances ideas and practices that would have a global economy unify the world (*FT* 12). What is at stake is the loss of a historical consciousness, which leads to promotion of individualism and creation of a culture of manipulation of concepts to serve as tools for domination and injustice. This serves just a few while leaving many with "shattered dreams" (*FT* 10–14).

World leaders, the pope further contends, lack a plan that is inclusive of everyone (*FT* 15–28). In place of healthy political debates to plan for the improvement of lives are cacophonous arguments that create enmity and polarize society (*FT* 15). Manipulation is ever-present, and the extremes of those who live in luxury and those with denied rights and dignity persist (*FT* 22).

Acknowledging the positive advances of science and technology, the pope cautions that there are concerns about how innovations and developmental agendas are sometimes advanced without due consideration for the situations of, and possible repercussions on, others (*FT* 29). Thus, there

is “globalization and progress without a shared roadmap” (*FT* 29–31), in which poverty, hunger, and preventable deaths appear to have become an accepted reality. “Pandemics and other calamities in history” (*FT* 32–36) should teach humankind that “no one is saved alone” and that we need to create a society of people who feel a belonging to each other (*FT* 32). It is Pope Francis’s regret, however, that the current COVID-19 pandemic might just come and go, as another of the tragedies in human history, without humans learning from it.

Additionally, “creative openness to others” (*FT* 41), which is pivotal for the flourishing of people, is being threatened by the fear of otherness as seen in the migration crisis in the world. Forced by wars, persecutions, the desire for better living conditions, and natural catastrophes, many people emigrate to other countries, usually to the West, where they are routinely met with xenophobic sentiments. The world is experiencing an “absence of human dignity on the borders” (*FT* 37–41) in the face of the migration crisis. There is also “the illusion of communication” (*FT* 42–50) by which information media are abused as tools for promoting hatred, falsehood, and fear. All of these adversely affect the nature of the relationships between humans. The pope also condemns “forms of subjection and of self-contempt” (*FT* 51–53) engaged in by poor countries imitating the cultures and economies of more prosperous countries, even though these cultures and economies do not respect the values of the poor countries. The failure of developing countries to be innovative, creative, and when the occasion requires, proactive in growing in their own way, upholding, confronting, engaging, purifying, and making use of their own cultural values (*FT* 51), leads to a domination that destroys their self-esteem, which is an important determinant for self-development.

Pope Francis concludes the chapter with a call for “a new style of life” that is anchored in our interdependence as a people (*FT* 35). What is evident in Pope Francis’s concern is that human interdependence has been ignored and sometimes denied in ways that create camps of the “we” and the “them.” These camps, which are supported by ideologies of self-centeredness, individualism, nationalism, and rejection of historical consciousness, are what I shall look at in evaluating the reality of human interdependence in Africa.

The Real Divides in Africa: Mechanism at Play

The real divides in Africa can be described as a sharp contrast of two worlds. By this I mean a divide between people of different classes, whose situations are sharply and noticeably unequal.

Ethnocentrism and Politics

This sharp contrast of the two worlds is made visible in Africa by the presence of ethnocentrism, which has not only fueled division and the polarization of society but also has had a devastating influence on politics on the continent. In most African countries, ethnicity has determined the choice of political leaders more than the candidate's leadership qualities. Emmanuel Katongole puts it well when he says that what we usually refer to as ethnic conflicts in Africa are “often nothing more than a struggle for political power by Africa's ruling elites, in which the masses are recruited through an appeal to ‘ethnicity.’”² Such conflicts arise only when the people are mobilized along ethnic lines for the achievement of elite goals. This is possible because negative ethnic and parochial loyalties, which are as dangerous as racism, simply deny humanity to anyone outside the particular camp,³ thereby equating the meaning of human dignity and value with the interests of a particular group of people—the “we.” Overemphasis on the particular group with an inability to move beyond it is dangerous precisely because it leaves room for people to be easily mobilized along kinship lines for the advancement of a few elites' ambitions for political power.

The political divisions then degenerate into parochialism both inside and outside the ethnic groups, leading to the creation of even smaller camps aimed at domination in various local contexts, which the politicians acquiesce to. Against this backdrop, the same politicians are heard daily criticizing these parochial leanings and then begin to appeal to grand concepts like “democracy, freedom, justice or unity” (FT 14). Laws and policies then become tools for manipulation and domination and “as meaningless tags that can be used to justify any action” (FT 14). The result is that new forms of closed loyalties are created for those who are alike—the rich are friends, the elite understand each other, the poor share a lot in common, the urban folks endorse policies (like centralization or a false decentralization), and the rural folks are left behind. Certainly, the leaders are “lacking a plan for everyone” (FT 51). National plans and policies that protect the rich and continue to improve the urban experience receive approval by those who have been chosen to lead but who are incidentally of the same class. There is a fierce resistance to proper decentralization backed by spurious logic. All of the important projects that support growth, ranging from access to basic sources of livelihood, education, healthcare, and transportation are lobbied for by and provided in the cities.

2. Katongole, “African Theological Reimagination,” 46.

3. Wa Wamwere, *Negative Ethnicity*, 35–37.

Consequences of the Sharp Contrast of Two Worlds

Three consequences of this sharp contrast can be identified:

1. A desperate search for survival
2. The church modeling itself along the lines of the real divides
3. Following the expression of John Samuel Mbiti, “breaking the pot that once held us together”

With respect to the first consequence, the gap between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, continues to widen in ways that are not acceptable to those disadvantaged by such a system. Young men and women from many rural parts of Africa feel compelled to move away from the continent to places where they perceive the resources are coming from—the West. And there, they are not “entitled like others to participate in the life of the society, and it is forgotten that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person” (FT 39).

With respect to the second consequence, ethnocentrism has, sadly, been noted within the church. There have been several instances of strong opposition to the appointment of a bishop to a particular diocese on the basis of ethnocentric biases. A cursory look at parishes in the cities and those in the rural communities also presents a sharp contrast. The outstanding concerns then are, Is the church striving to serve as an example following the model presented in *Ecclesia in Africa*—the church-family of God?⁴ Why is parochialism still flourishing and creating patterns of leadership that divide people? Why are members of the same church-family living in sharply contrasting worlds?

Finally, concerning the third consequence, the rich African worldview of human relationality originating from the family and extending to the larger community is regrettably being manipulated as a tool used by politicians to dominate and cause despair. Thus, parochialism serves the ruling and elite class as a mechanism to create despair among the populace. As Pope Francis notes, “The best way to dominate and gain control over people is to spread despair and discouragement, even under the guise of defending certain values” (FT 51). Emmanuel Katongole unmasks this dynamic in the contemporary African sociopolitical context, noting how chaos, confusion, and conflicts have become the modalities by which the continent’s institutions work.⁵

4. In *Ecclesia in Africa*, John Paul II proposed the African understanding of family as a model for the Christian community. See John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 43.

5. Katongole, “African Theological Reimagination,” 47.

The “intrinsic human value” that is central to Christian teaching and not novel to the African worldview is in crisis. Hence, *Fratelli Tutti* should be understood as speaking about “the dark cloud” over Africa and Africans when it says that “one effective way to weaken historical consciousness, critical thinking, the struggle for justice, and the processes of integration is to empty great words of their meaning or to manipulate them” (FT 14). Pope Francis asks: “Nowadays, what do certain words like democracy, freedom, justice or unity really mean?” (FT 14). This question is significant for an Africa that is often democratic and yet suffering the adverse consequences of divisions, as exemplified in the persistence of inequities of all forms that threaten “our common being as brothers and sisters” who share a common home.

A “Rethink” Is Possible: Beyond Despair in Africa

Having recognized the real divides in African societies, we must acknowledge that the increased means of improving the lives of everybody—that is, the innovations and inventions in technology and the progress in medicine and science—are not reflected in the lives of all of the world’s people. This is because those things, which are made for the improvement of lives, are not only being used inequitably, but are actually sometimes abused to the disadvantage of a portion of the population. As a result, Africa suffers high rates of illiteracy and poverty and a general lack of access to facilities and amenities as compared to the Western world. This is so much so that whereas in the Western world people can still achieve reasonable comfort in their lives without being dependent on the central government, in Africa the situation is the contrary.

Pope Francis’s advice not to ignore historical consciousness and not to reject the experiences of those who came before us is an invitation to enter into dialogue with the wisdom that is found in the rich cultural heritage of Africa. Katongole talks about this in very pragmatic terms; namely, as a need “to ‘reinvent’ African institutions (in the style of Thomas Sankara), by inscribing them with a new imagination.”⁶ This is because there is need for our political leaders to be deliberately equitable in the distribution of the resources and the benefits that accrue from the exploitation of innovations, with a view to improving the lives of the people. It must involve moral imagination. And by moral imagination, I mean the “capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist.”⁷ In other words, contem-

6. Katongole, “African Theological Reimagination,” 47.

7. Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, ix.

porary Africans need to envision the desired future while learning from the experiences of the past and confronting the present disparities on the continent. This moral imagination demands a radically constructive change in mindset and deeds on two levels: the level of the political leadership and that of the general populace.

The call for the recovery of the African as a “being with” according to the understanding of life as Ubuntu will be a call for Africans to “never break the pot that keeps . . . [them] together.”⁸ This communal life is incompatible with the ethic of individualism. In Ubuntu the “emphasis is put on care and a sense of concern for the wellbeing of others as the main ideal which should guide human economic relations.”⁹ I remember, vividly, some three decades ago, growing up among my people, the Kasena of Ghana, that every adult female in the village was *nma* (mama) and every adult male was *dekwo* (dad), every older female and every older male was the *zembaro* (big sister and big brother) and they all wielded the authority that goes with their titles. As a result of this, one could be making noise in your house and your parents would admonish you to stop the noise, not really because of the need for there to be silence in your house, but because of the needs of a sick person in the next house. I fondly reminisce about those earlier days of my life when everybody’s welfare was everybody’s concern, children’s upbringing was a responsibility of all, and children ran errands for all, and there was nothing untoward about it. Everyone was part of the one organic entity.

That communal life, in which everybody’s welfare was everybody’s concern, had a direct effect on the socioeconomic needs of everyone in the community. When somebody came into prosperity, it was shared. Essentially, therefore, what the pope is saying to Africans of today is that they should return to the pristine values of Ubuntu. To return to those basic values of our community life means, “I am for the other person and that person is for me.” It also means being responsible for what we become. It is for us to affirm as a people that it is possible for the political arrangements to become more sensitive to the needs of the less privileged, so that the provision of infrastructure that brings about the betterment of the life of the average person is achievable, and so that providing basic amenities like water, electricity, healthcare, and education is considered an imperative.

8. John Samuel Mbiti uses this expression to admonish Africans to revisit, valorize, and cherish the communal spirit that was once used to create harmony and peace in society. See Mbiti, “Never Break the Pot,” 4.

9. Murovo, “Ubuntu,” 45.

Conclusion

In Africa, the real divides that threaten our common being as brothers and sisters manifest in conflicts, hunger, and other situations of despair that are deeply rooted in extreme parochialism. This breeds a denial and a rejection of the values that once made us more united, thereby promoting a pseudo-solidarity that is dangerous to humankind, in which “fraternity” exists only among equals; that is, among the haves and the have-nots.

To begin to break the walls of society, Africans need to use a new imagination that I would call “the moral imagination.” This demands affirmative actions that confront the real divides in Africa in pragmatic ways. These affirmative actions can rely on the ethic of communal life expressed as Ubuntu. With COVID-19 as an example, we realize that if one person is vulnerable, the whole population is vulnerable. In the same vein, it must occur to us that if one person dies of hunger, then we have all failed. For nobody’s life should be so miserable when we are Africans with Ubuntu.

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