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An Unhealthy Society

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Introduction

POPE FRANCIS'S FUNDAMENTAL PURPOSE in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* is to propose "a way of life marked by the flavour of the Gospel" (FT 1). It is "a modest contribution to continued reflection, in the hope that in the face of present-day attempts to eliminate or ignore others, we may prove capable of responding with a new vision of fraternity and social friendship that will not remain at the level of words" (FT 6). *Fraternity and social friendship* are at stake (the goals/objectives) in the current world (the context/reality). For this reason, the encyclical's starting point can only be a consideration of the "present-day attempts to eliminate or ignore others" and of the "many new paths of hope" available in our world (FT 54).

Fratelli Tutti is the most recent addition to the tradition of the church's social teaching (the social encyclicals), which is engaged in discerning the "signs of the times." The Second Vatican Council's pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* on the church in today's world affirmed that at all times "the church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" and that, for this to happen, "we need to recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often-dramatic characteristics."² It is a

1. Translated by Cristina Silva.

2. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.

matter of laboring “to decipher authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which [the people of God] has a part along with other men of our age.”³ It is interesting to note how the expression “signs of the times” refers as much to *current events* as to God’s presence and purposes in these events. This apparent conceptual ambiguity is, deep down, an indication of the historicity of salvation (it happens in history and in a historical way) and/or of the theological character of historical events (expression/mediation of or a denial of/obstacle to salvation). This explains the importance and centrality that Francis gives to consideration of our present-day reality in *Fratelli Tutti*.

The pope is not discussing a “cool and detached description of today’s problems” (FT 56), nor a simple appropriation of the “flood of information” about them (FT 50), but rather an authentic “wisdom” that is the result of meeting, listening, and dialogue (FT 47–50) that enables us to address the “dark clouds” by finding “new paths of hope” (FT 54) in our world and to react with a “new vision of fraternity and social friendship” (FT 6). In other words, the pope’s consideration of reality takes place in the broader context of the exercise of the church’s mission in the world, which is to propose “a way of life marked by the flavour of the Gospel” (FT 1).

Our reflection is centered on the first chapter of the encyclical, which deals with the “dark clouds over a closed world” and draws attention to “certain trends in our world that hinder the development of universal fraternity” (FT 9). We will begin with a brief review of present-day trends presented by Francis and we will then analyze them, highlighting the root or fundamental problem that causes and expresses itself in these trends.

Current World Trends

Pope Francis’s intention in the first chapter is neither “to carry out an exhaustive analysis [n]or to study every aspect of our present-day experience,” but simply to draw attention to “certain trends in our world that hinder the development of universal fraternity” (FT 9). It will be useful to set forth these trends so that we can understand the dimension and complexity of the problem.

The starting point is the observation that the integration efforts developed in recent decades in several regions of the world seem to now be “Shattered Dreams” (the heading for FT 10–14). An example of this is that “ancient conflicts thought long buried are breaking out anew, while instances of a myopic, extremist, resentful, and aggressive nationalism are on

3. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 11.

the rise" (*FT* 11). Another is that "opening up to the world" has become increasingly synonymous with "openness to foreign interests or to the freedom of economic powers to invest without obstacles or complications in all countries," creating a culture that "unifies the world, but divides persons and nations" and in which "political life becomes increasingly fragile in the face of transnational economic powers" (*FT* 12). This also favors "a growing loss of the sense of history, which leads to even further breakup," (*FT* 13), which leads to the creation of fertile ground for "new forms of cultural colonization" in which peoples lose "not only their spiritual identity but also their moral consistency and, in the end, their ideological, economic and political independence" (*FT* 14).

The fact is that we are "Lacking a Plan for Everyone" (the heading for *FT* 15–28): the strategy of economic globalism is to "spread despair and discouragement," using "hyperbole, extremism, and polarization" as political tools, and to cause politics to no longer involve "healthy debates about long-term plans to improve people's lives and to advance the common good, but only . . . slick marketing techniques primarily aimed at discrediting others" (*FT* 15). Going hand in hand with this is that "some parts of our human family . . . can be readily sacrificed for the sake of others considered worthy of a carefree existence" (*FT* 18). In addition, "human rights are not equal for all," and there are "many forms of injustice" (*FT* 22); "women . . . suffer situations of exclusion, mistreatment and violence" (*FT* 23); some persons "live in conditions akin to slavery" (*FT* 24); there are many wars, terrorist attacks, and persecutions, what Francis calls "a real third world fought piecemeal" (*FT* 25); and "the loneliness, fear and insecurity experienced by those who feel abandoned by the system creates a fertile terrain for various 'mafias'" (*FT* 28).

Our time involves a great paradox: "Globalization and Progress without a Shared Roadmap" (the heading for *FT* 29–31). Certainly, there are "positive advances . . . in the areas of science, technology, medicine, industry and welfare, above all in developed countries" (*FT* 29). But there is also "a moral deterioration that influences international action and a weakening of spiritual values and responsibility," as well as "major political crises, situations of injustice and the lack of an equitable distribution of natural resources" (*FT* 29). With this, "the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading," "the dream of working together for justice and peace together seem like an outdated utopia. What reigns instead is a cool, comfortable and globalized indifference" that makes us forget that "we are all in the same boat" (*FT* 30). We live together but are not close: "How wonderful it would be, even as we discover faraway planets, to rediscover the needs of the brothers and sisters who orbit around us" (*FT* 31).

To all this can be added (as a consequence and/or aggravating factor) “Pandemics and Other Calamities in History” (the heading for *FT* 32–36). What could be a chance to change course often becomes an occasion for the radicalization of selfishness and social exclusion. A “worldwide tragedy” like the COVID-19 pandemic “momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person’s problems are the problems of all” (*FT* 32). And “if everything is interconnected, it is hard to imagine that this global disaster is unrelated to our way of approaching reality. . . . The world itself is crying out in rebellion” (*FT* 34). The pope continues: “All too quickly, however, we forget the lessons of history, ‘the teacher of life.’ After this health crisis passes, our worst response would be to plunge even more deeply into feverish consumerism and new forms of egotistic self-preservation” (*FT* 35). It should not be ignored that “the notion of ‘every man for himself’ will rapidly degenerate into a free-for-all that would prove worse than any pandemic” (*FT* 36).

Particularly dramatic is the situation of those who face “An Absence of Human Dignity on the Borders” (the heading of *FT* 37–41). It is sad to see how, both in the propaganda of populist regimes as well as in certain liberal economic approaches, it is argued that “an influx of migrants is to be prevented at all costs,” as well as that it is proper to limit “aid to poor countries so that they can hit ‘rock bottom’ and find themselves forced to take austerity measures,” forgetting that “behind such statements, abstract and hard to support, great numbers of lives are at stake” (*FT* 37), including people who “have fled from war, persecution and natural catastrophes” or who are merely “seeking opportunities for themselves and their families” (*FT* 37); who become victims of “unscrupulous traffickers, often linked to drug cartels and arms cartels” (*FT* 38) or of a xenophobic mentality and in the countries of arrival, “often fomented and exploited for political purposes.” What is more serious is that sometimes “Christians” do not treat migrants as fully equal human beings, prioritizing “political preferences” over the “deep convictions of our faith” (*FT* 39).

A decisive factor in all of these processes is the “Illusion of Digital Communication” (the heading of *FT* 42–50). The pope states that “oddly enough, while closed and intolerant attitudes towards others are on the rise, distances are otherwise shrinking or disappearing to the point that the right to privacy scarcely exists” (*FT* 42). He further maintains that “digital movements of hate and destruction . . . are not . . . a positive form of mutual help, but simply an association of individuals united against a perceived common enemy” and that with digital communications there is a “risk of addiction, isolation and gradual loss of contact with concrete reality” (*FT* 43); he continues by warning that “social aggression has found unparalleled room for

expansion through computers and mobile devices” (FT 44). Francis notes that we cannot forget that “there are huge economic interests operating in the digital world, capable of exercising forms of control as subtle as they are invasive, creating mechanisms for the manipulation of consciences and of the democratic process” (FT 45). True wisdom presupposes “an encounter with reality” (FT 47) and “the ability to sit down to listen to others” (FT 48).

All of this produces or triggers “Forms of Subjection and of Self-Contempt” (the heading of FT 51–53). Faced with the temptation to take “economically prosperous countries” as “cultural models for less developed countries,” Francis warns that “this shallow and pathetic desire to imitate others leads to copying and consuming in place of creating, and fosters low national self-esteem” (FT 51). It should never be forgotten that “destroying self-esteem is an easy way to dominate others”; that “behind these trends that tend to level our world, there emerge power interests that take advantage of such low self-esteem, while attempting . . . to create a new culture in the service of the elite”; that “ignoring the culture of their people has led to an inability of many political leaders to devise an effective development plan that could be freely accepted and sustained over time” (FT 52); and, finally, that “there is no worse form of alienation than to feel uprooted, belonging to no one” (FT 53).

Francis concludes the chapter by warning that, “despite these dark clouds,” there are in the world “many new paths of hope,” because “God continues to sow abundant seeds of goodness in our human family” (FT 54). This will be covered in the following chapters.

An Unhealthy Society (FT 65)

Throughout *Fratelli Tutti*, these “trends in our world that hinder the development of universal fraternity” (FT 9) are taken up again and again and made concrete in different contexts and in reference to different problems and challenges. But the indications offered in the first chapter are enough for us to realize that these are not easy matters to understand and even less to solve. At issue is a way of conceiving and configuring human life in all its dimensions that is dynamized by the logic of the market: profit, competition, consumption, success, and merit. Let us not delude ourselves or simplify the issue—the problem is the model and pattern of civilization and society that has imposed itself on the world: “a profit-based *economic* model that does not hesitate to exploit, discard and even kill human beings” (FT 22); a “*political life*” that is “increasingly fragile before transnational economic powers” (FT 12); a *culture*, in which “the sense of belonging to

a single human family is fading” and in which “there is a cool, comfortable and globalized indifference” (FT 30). All this leads to a *world* in which “some parts of our human family . . . can be readily sacrificed for the sake of others considered worthy of a carefree existence” (FT 18). It is this way and model of life that destroys fraternity, reduces nature to a mere economic resource, subordinates the common good to the interests of money, makes people cold and insensitive to the suffering of others, produces victims and discards the poor, the Black, the migrant, women, the elderly, and others.

Three often-recurring blocks of expressions are very important for describing this way of life: *liberal/liberalism/neoliberalism* (FT 37, 155, 163, 167, 168), *market/commodity/trade* (FT 12, 33, 109, 122, 138, 140, 168, 189, 248), and *individualism/selfishness* (FT 11, 13, 43, 89, 105, 113, 166, 170, 209, 222, 275). These expressions form a semantic constellation that are present in all of the church’s social encyclicals when they discuss liberalism/capitalism, and they are also key to the social teachings of Pope Francis, specifically as contained in *Fratelli Tutti*.

His critique of liberal/neoliberal logic is clear and radical and can be summarized in the following points: (1) “The marketplace, by itself, cannot resolve every problem, however much we are asked to believe this dogma of neoliberal faith” (FT 168); (2) “neoliberalism . . . reproduces itself by resorting to the magical theories of ‘spillover’ or ‘trickle’—without using the name—as the only solution to societal problems,” without accounting for the fact that “the alleged ‘spillover’ does not resolve the inequality that gives rise to new forms of violence threatening the fabric of society” (FT 168); and (3) “radical individualism is a virus that is extremely difficult to eliminate,” making us believe that “everything consists in giving free rein to our own ambitions, as if by pursuing ever greater ambitions and creating safety nets, we would somehow be serving the common good” (FT 105).

The reasons for this radical criticism are also very clear: “This culture unifies the world, but divides persons and nations . . . it makes us neighbours, but does not make us brothers” (FT 12); “wealth has increased, but together with inequality” (FT 21); “the notion of ‘every man for himself’ will rapidly degenerate into a free-for-all that would prove worse than any pandemic” (FT 36); “if a society is governed primarily by the criteria of market freedom and efficiency, there is no place for [people with disabilities] and fraternity will remain just another vague ideal” (FT 109); “development must not aim at the amassing of wealth by a few, but must ensure ‘human rights—personal and social, economic and political, including the rights of nations and of peoples’” (FT 122); “the right of some to free enterprise or market freedom cannot supersede the rights of peoples and the dignity of the poor, or, for that matter, respect for the natural environment” (FT 122); and “the right to

private property is always accompanied by the primary and prior principle of the subordination of all private property to the universal destination of the earth's goods and thus the right of all to their use" (FT 123).

At stake here, therefore, is the civilizing pattern or the model of society, as dynamized by the logic of the market in its global phase, which has imposed itself on the world in recent decades. This is not a criticism of the market per se as a mechanism of exchange—it is fundamental in complex societies and economies like ours—but of its absolutization or its transformation into an absolute criterion and measure of economics, politics, culture, and even of interpersonal relationships and religions: "There were those who would have had us believe that freedom of the market was sufficient to keep everything secure" (FT 33); and "the marketplace, by itself, cannot resolve every problem, however much we are asked to believe this dogma of neoliberal faith" (FT 168).

In fact, this way of conceiving, dynamizing, and organizing life, as indicated in the first chapter of the encyclical, in addition to transforming post-World War II efforts toward pacification, integration, and economic-social development into "shattered dreams" (FT 10–14), created a world "lacking a plan for everyone" (FT 15–28), was responsible for "globalization and progress without a shared roadmap" (FT 29–31), produced the "illusion of communication" (FT 42–49), generated "subjection and self-contempt" (FT 51–53), and left many people "with an absence of human dignity on the borders" (FT 37–41). This is its ethical-theological and humanitarian failure.

And this became even more visible and serious in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed "our false securities," our "inability to act together," and "a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all" (FT 7). The pandemic "momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person's problems are the problems of all" (FT 32); further, "the brutal and unforeseen blow of this uncontrolled pandemic forced us to recover our concern for human beings, for everyone, rather than for the benefit of a few" (FT 33). The pope also stated about the pandemic that "if everything is interconnected, it is hard to imagine that this global disaster is unrelated to our way of approaching reality. . . . The world itself is crying out in rebellion" (FT 34); it "enabled us to recognize and appreciate once more all those around us who, in the midst of fear, responded by putting their lives on the line. We began to realize that our lives are interwoven with and sustained by ordinary people" (FT 54); and it "demonstrated that not everything can be resolved by market freedom. It has also shown that, in addition to recovering a sound political life that is not subject to the dictates of finance, 'we must put human dignity back at the centre'" (FT 168).

In the catechesis cycle during the pandemic, throughout the months of August and September 2020, which was entitled “To Heal the World” (now available in book form), Francis strongly insisted on the link between the COVID-19 pandemic and the pandemic of the dominant system. This new pandemic “has highlighted how vulnerable and interconnected everyone is,” “shed light on broader social ills” that view people as “objects, to be used and discarded,”⁴ and social inequality that is “the fruit of unequal economic growth”;⁵ it “exposed the plight of the poor and the great inequality that reigns in the world”;⁶ helped us understand that “these injustices are neither natural nor inevitable” and that “to come out of the pandemic, we must find the cure not only for the *coronavirus* . . . but also for the great human and socioeconomic *viruses*.”⁷ Francis’s insistence on the close link between the “small but terrible virus” and the “larger virus”⁸ of social injustice helps us understand the scale of the problem and the challenges that lie ahead. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis states that we live in an “unhealthy society” (FT 65). Richard Horton, borrowing the expression from epidemiologist Merrill Singer, warned that COVID-19 is more than a “pandemic”; it is a “syn-demic,” in which biological, social, economic, political, and cultural factors play and interact.⁹ Santiago Alba Rico insists that the underlying problem is the capitalist system.¹⁰ A way of life dominated by *market logic* is at issue. Building a way of life driven by *the logic of fraternity* is the big challenge.

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4. Francis, *To Heal the World*, 27.
5. Francis, *To Heal the World*, 43.
6. Francis, *To Heal the World*, 35.
7. Francis, *To Heal the World*, 91; emphasis original.
8. Francis, *To Heal the World*, 35.
9. Horton, “COVID-19 Is Not a Pandemic,” 874.
10. Alba Rico, “Capitalismo pandémico.”

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