

Brother Bishops, staff of the Southern Africa Conference of Catholic Bishops:

Allow me to begin by expressing to you a word of sincere gratitude for the fraternal affection shown me during my years here. I am most grateful. I am thankful to all those, bishops, priests, religious, and laity whose dioceses I have been pleased to visit for various occasions. The kind invitation and gracious hospitality that I have enjoyed in your local churches for so many particular gatherings has exemplified the inestimable gift of faith and community spirit among the many faithful. As the Holy Father's personal representative in this part of this wonderful continent, I assure you of his paternal and fraternal love and communion with all of you through his prayers and support for your efforts as you carry out the invaluable mission entrusted to you, as you continue to shepherd those under your pastoral care. Over the last year the entire world has suffered through an unchartered moment in our shared history. There has been so much loss both personally and collectively. I am aware of the horrible toll the pandemic has taken on our local churches and I offer all of you my heartfelt condolences and solidarity. In a special way I offer my heartfelt condolences to Cardinal Napier and to the priests, religious, and faithful who are suffering the tragic loss of Archbishop Gabuza. I would assure them, and the family of the late Archbishop, of my prayers. May this good and faithful servant rest in peace. I find solace in knowing that in faith it is Christ who is our true hope, and it is He who wipes every tear dry.

Introduction

Throughout the course of her history and particularly in the last hundred years the Church has never failed to speak what Pope Leo XIII described as “the words that are hers” regarding questions concerning social and political life in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*). Continuing in this tradition to expound and update the Church’s rich patrimony of Catholic social doctrine, Pope Francis since taking up his Petrine ministry has now published two extraordinary social Encyclicals, “*Laudato Si*”, and “*Fratelli Tutti*” that represent fundamental stages and insights of Catholic thought in this area. “*Fratelli Tutti*” which has just recently been published, is called to inspire and transform the thinking and behaviour of Christians in this area as well.

Because of its height of vision, which challenges not only Christians but also all those concerned with the dignity of the human person and interested in building a more humane society Pope Francis explains that he offers:

“this social Encyclical as 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. Although I have written it from the Christian convictions that inspire and sustain me, I have sought to make this reflection an invitation to dialogue among all people of good will.” (FT 6).

My brother Bishops, in my comments to you, this day, I want to propose to you as the Holy Father urges us a few themes for your consideration in further enriching your pastoral ministry. The Encyclical whose title, *“Fratelli Tutti”*, reflects the words with which St Francis of Assisi addressed his brothers and underlines the continuity with *“Laudato Si”*. Once again, the Pope invites us to turn our gaze to his beloved Saint of Assisi, the Saint of fraternal love who *“sowed seeds of peace and walked alongside the poor, the abandoned, the infirm and the outcast, the least...”* (FT 2). Thus, *“Fratelli Tutti”* is an invitation to refocus our attention and approach to social and political life, within the context of a consciously cultivated universal fraternity, which is necessary for dialogue and the mutual enrichment of values. (FT 103).

On the subject of our pastoral ministry *“Fratelli Tutti”* is an invitation to imagine the construction and development of social and political life in the light of that evangelical radicalism, which, according to Pope Francis, calls for the building of communities that support and respond to the material and spiritual needs of their members (FT 8).

Themes

At the beginning of his document, the Holy Father presents us a panorama of today’s world with its problems and challenges ranging from the debilitating effects of the covid-19 pandemic, to the many social wounds inflicted on humanity. These ubiquitous wounds are due to many factors including among others the mismanagement of immigration, racism, xenophobia, unemployment, discrimination against women, slavery and trafficking, populism, wars, financial speculation, technological abuse of power, and an incredible failure of modern society to respect the sanctity of human life in all its stages.

Although there are many and very diverse themes that the Encyclical deals with, the reflections necessarily have links between one theme and the next, and how the present Encyclical is connected to other social Encyclicals that came before.

The document has a clear guiding thread running through the reflections, namely: we will only be able to recognise in our neighbour a brother or sister regardless of race, borders, language and culture, if we open ourselves to others: that is if we adopt the attitude of the Good Samaritan. We have not changed enough the Holy Father insists if *“caught up as we are with our own needs, the sight of a person who is suffering disturbs us. It makes us uneasy, since we have no time to waste on other people’s problems. These are symptoms of an unhealthy society.”* (FT 65).

Universal Humanity

Rediscovering universal brotherhood and sisterhood in the world, and feelings of belonging to the same humanity is the ‘key’ to understanding the Holy Father and his path for the faithful and for all people of good will. Recalling that Christians are called to foster social friendship, and therefore to contribute to the building of a common humanity, his reflections resonate with believers and non-believers who sincerely strive to become neighbours to others.

Pope Francis interweaving his thought with Pope Benedict XVI in his Encyclical *“Caritas in Veritate”*, which was dedicated to the human orientation of globalization, emphasizes the fact that all the commitments that flow from the Social Doctrine of the Church are *“derived from charity which according to the teaching of Jesus, is the synthesis of the whole Law (cf. Mt 22.36-40)”* (FT 181). In practice, this thought means recognizing that *“love overflowing with small gestures of mutual care is also civil and political and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world. For this reason, love is not only demonstrated or expressed in close and intimate relationships but also in “macro-relationships such as social, economic and political relationships”* (FT 181).

Much of this discourse on social charity illuminates many themes in both the independence of thought and action in the daily life of the individual.

Sadly, as the Holy Father points out, the feelings of belonging to the same humanity in today’s world are weakening and the dream of building justice and peace together seems like an *“outdated utopia”* (FT 30). Pope Francis like a *“father of a family who brings out of his treasure new and old”* (Matthew 15:52) has wanted in this encyclical to focus on the aspects of the Christian message that can best illuminate a social reality that in itself is in a state of flux. Given a

world that is marked by social and political polarization, by growing economic and social inequalities, by the “*globalization of indifference*”, the Pope with uncommon insights reveals our misguided complacencies, our false self-sufficiency, and self-centeredness particularly on issues affecting the universal recognition of human dignity and human rights.

It is not coincidental that in dedicating this encyclical to its subtitle “Fraternity and social friendship”, the Holy Father hopes to prick our conscience; in helping, us to recognise and perhaps acknowledge that our misplaced sense of self-sufficiency and “globalized indifference” are part of a more fundamental problem of our capacity for sin and self-delusion. Thankfully, this capacity is not and cannot be the last word. Rather, the Pope reminds us to recognise our human dignity as persons created in the image and likeness of God. The implications are that by acknowledging the dignity of each human person we can continue to work collectively on those challenges, problems, responsibilities, duties and concerns that we all share ('since we are all in it together in the same boat as human beings') drawing on our human connectedness, in closeness rather than in closure and isolation.

“No one can face life in isolation...” (FT 8) This isolation is the temptation that lies ahead of an inward looking society, believing that we can go it alone and forgetting that closure in oneself, or one’s own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal. Instead, Pope Francis teaches that it is the culture of personal encounter and “*dialogue*” (FT 198), that invariably helps us to rediscover our universal brotherhood and in turn facilitates that movement towards a “civilization of love” (FT 183). In other words, very simply stated: culture of confrontation “no”; culture of encounter “yes” (FT 30).

Formation

We can therefore understand and appreciate the fundamental importance of the personal formation of the laity for rebuilding this world that hurts us. This goal we can achieve by giving them back hope, so that the holiness of their lives and the strength of their witness will contribute to human progress. Thus, hope is not an abstract idea but an experience of a beautiful secret to dream of and make our lives collectively a beautiful adventure. The Holy Father desires that each person experiences hope. How important it is to dream together. Alone we run the risk of focusing on mirages in which you see what is not there, however dreams are built together (FT 8). It is this togetherness, of dreaming as one

humanity, as sojourners of the same human flesh, as children of the same land that shelters us all, each one with the richness of their faith, their voice and convictions, all brothers (FT 8), that the Holy Father wishes us to share by word, and deed with the Church and with the world.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is all about personal conversion, that is capable of revealing the fundamental choice that we have to make in the face of so much pain, so much hurt, so much neglect. The only way out as the Pope teaches is to become the Good Samaritan. Every other option ends up either next to the robbers or next to those who walked by from a distance. Except for the innkeeper who as St John Paul II reminds us in his book, “Rise let us be on our way”, was specifically asked to look after the victim. *“It was really the innkeeper, behind the scenes, who did most of the work. We can all do as he did—carrying out our duties in a spirit of service”*, quietly, discreetly and humbly. St John Paul II offers us another indispensable insight into our formation and relationship with our life. By faithfully carrying out our vocational duties, we are faithfully expressing our love for individuals and for society.

Furthermore, Pope Francis’ reflection on the parable of the Good Samaritan is an illuminative evaluation of the fundamental choice that we need to make to rebuild the world, and to reconcile the communities that hurt. The Holy Father reminds us that there are men and women who authentically care about the marginalised, i.e. those who live on the fringes of society. These men and women want to respond to the needs of others and do not tolerate or allow a society or community of exclusion to be erected or encouraged. Instead, they would want to become neighbours to others, through taking the initiative for instance in rebuilding communities so that the downtrodden are raised and rehabilitated for the good of all (FT 67).

Citing a document of the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference, Pope Francis affirms that true reconciliation in rebuilding communities is achieved proactively:

“by forming a new society, a society based on service to others, rather than the desire to dominate; a society based on sharing what one has with others, rather than the selfish scramble by each for as much wealth as possible; a society in which the value of being together as human beings is ultimately more important than any lesser group whether it be family, nation, race or culture.” (FT 229)

The Holy Father insists that the new order which seeks to integrate humanity is not *“mere utopia”* (FT 180) but the fruit of a personal conversion that will eventually reach all communities, institutions and cultures.

Bishops as bridge builders

Dear brothers in the episcopate, it is precisely this personal conversion, which the Holy Father addresses that will gradually allow progress towards *“a social and political order whose soul is social charity”* that is a love capable of generating *“social processes of brotherhood and justice for all”* (FT 180).

We are not created by God to live alone. Living in community is an essential practical expression of who we are. However, community does not just happen. It is something men and women must work together to develop. *“A community needs a soul if it is to become a true home for human beings. You the people must give it this soul”* (John Paul II).

The mystery of the vocation of the bishop as St John Paul II teaches consists precisely in being situated *“both in this particular visible community, for which he is [was] made a bishop, and at the same time in the universal Church. ... The bishop is the sign of Christ’s presence in the world, going out to meet men and women where they are: calling them by name, helping them to rise, consoling them with the Good News and gathering them into one around the Lord’s Table.”* (Rise, Let us be on Our Way).

The role of bishops as “bridge builders”-men who are universal, not parochial – reaching out to others creating opportunities for fruitful and engaging encounters is what Pope Francis emphasizes in urging the world to dream together and build together (FT 8). For this reason, the bishop, while belonging to the whole world and the universal church lives out his vocation by his closeness to the people whom in Christ’s name he calls together in his local or particular church. It is so easy for Church leaders today, like other leaders, to fall into the provincial, regional trap, seeing nothing beyond our own borders and our own community needs. This in many ways is one of the greatest challenges we are facing in a world which seems to be creating groups who are evermore protectionists, self-centred and isolated from the suffering of their neighbours next-door.

At the same time, the Bishop must also be a sign of hope for the community, in the sense that helps to foster an end to isolation. As their bishop, he helps to

carry the very people of the community into fellowship with Christ and their participation in a “*shared roadmap*” with the rest of humanity towards a “*common life that needs to be sought out and cultivated*” (FT 31). In other words, our challenge as bishops is to be leaders who foster “the dream”.

The encyclical, “*Fratelli Tutti*”, is deeply inclusive and addresses all the women and men who make up the great family of humanity, not just Christians. As bishops with a priestly hearts, we need to catalyse concrete pastoral and educational action in not only helping the faithful to look ahead in confidence, in trust, and in hope in God, but also to imbue them with a Christian spirit in carrying out their family, vocational and social duties and obligations. Any effort along those lines is a noble and worthy exercise in charity.

We need perhaps a new language, new methods, and a new missionary ardour, which emphasize how the laity is to experience in concrete and complete ways the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of love and social friendship. Our methods of evangelization may require a profound reconsideration to see whether they are effectively communicating the authentic Christian experience of the Church’s social teaching – with closeness, simplicity, warmth and transparency.

As the Holy Father observed, the worldwide tragedy of the Covid-19 pandemic and the attendant social and economic consequences has momentarily reminded us that we are a global community, where one person’s problems are the problems of all. The pandemic has increased the pressure on us, causing many more people to feel stressed and anxious. May I also add that throughout this period of the long and extended lockdowns one or two of my major concerns has been and still is the concern for the physical and spiritual (interior life) well-being of the people of the Southern African countries. How to bridge the gap, to heal the physical and spiritual wounds of uncertainty and anxiety. Many people from the region have personally reached out to me to voice their frustration and anxiety with what has been happening.

Clearly, there is the urgent need to address not only the physical needs of the flock but more importantly the interior or spiritual life of the people. We cannot dampen the voice of the Church or mitigate our intervention because of extraneous considerations borne out of human respect. We need to nourish the spiritual life of the faithful, which includes providing sound doctrine and spiritual formation for their personal sanctity. As Catholics and shepherds, we need to

give witness to hope, to carry on through the coming days and months, so that we can truly be a people of faith united in common purpose and open to divine providence in order to truly become beacons of hope for our *fratelli tutti*.

Turning to God does not mean we deny the role of government in handling public health emergencies. It means acting as the Church has always done, with common sense, wisdom, charity, but, above all, with faith and confidence.

The coronavirus comes at a time when many in society feel they do not need God. For them, God has long been put in parenthesis and replaced by other forms of idolatry. It is not news to any of you that we are living in a society that is becoming increasingly secular. Our task here is to live the faith we profess.

What then must the Church do?

The Holy Father reassures that even though the Church esteems the way in which God works in other religions, *“yet we Christians are very much aware that ‘if the music of the Gospel ceases to resonate in our very being, we will lose the joy born of compassion, the tender love born of trust, the capacity for reconciliation that has its source in our knowledge that we have been forgiven and sent forth.’”* He continues, *“If the music of the Gospel ceases to sound in our homes, our public squares, our workplaces, our political and financial life, then we will no longer hear the strains that challenge us to defend the dignity of every man and woman”*. Others drink from other sources. For us the wellspring of human dignity and fraternity is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” (FT 277).

Pope Francis knows that we must preach the Gospel joyfully to everyone, even to those at the peripheries. The Church goes out. She fulfils her mission through imbuing Christian principles in the laity and spreading the Christian message that every single person is called to holiness by virtue of their baptism. This teaching was at the heart of the Second Vatican Council, which was enormously influential in shaping the Catholic Church’s understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ in the modern world.

It is imperative that the local churches give back hope to the lay people. Giving back that hope means fostering holiness and a personal encounter with God.

With a priestly heart, the Holy Father realizes that sooner than later each one of us would experience at some point the interior struggle the parable of the Good Samaritan evokes as we gradually come to know who we are as a result of our relationships with our brothers and sisters (FT 69). Each day we have to decide

whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders. These decisions are likely to be made in our Church communities, family situations, in our workplaces, in our social environments, in the streets and townships, as well as in other contexts.

For the faithful, one way to help them to go about embracing the messages of the Holy Father is for the bishop to have a rapport with his people, especially the youth, and to know how to relate to them well. Such personal knowledge of the good shepherd of his sheep St John Paul II observes comes from not infrequent meetings but rather *“from a genuine interest in what is happening in their lives regardless of age, social status or nationality, whether they are close at hand or far away”*. In other words, Bishops and the people who make up the local Church must necessarily engage in authentic dialogue, for the benefit of the community and for the good of the local and universal Church. Thank you and God bless.