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**THE FEMININE CONTRIBUTION TO ‘SOCIAL
FRIENDSHIP’
INSIGHTS FROM THE SOCIAL ENCYCLICAL
*FRATELLI TUTTI***

Abstract

The latest social encyclical of Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), focuses on the theme of fraternity, which is a key concept of Catholic social teaching. The papal document reiterates that true universal fraternity implies the acknowledgement of the worth of each human person as a primary value of reference, always and everywhere. Fraternity, however, rooted in reciprocity and openness to mutual enrichment, needs to be consciously and carefully cultivated. Although men and women are both called to actively participate in building the culture of fraternity and solidarity that allows the pursuit of the common good, women can offer a particular contribution to promoting fraternity and social friendship. The feminine capacity to nurture and bring forth new life can effectively enhance an attitude of care, which integrates and completes the more masculine orientation towards justice, marked by a distinct sensitivity towards those who are more fragile and in need of help. From this perspective, a cultural change is needed, through education and practice, so that the feminine capacity for care can be recognized as a gift and promoted within organizations and all basic structures of common life.

KEYWORDS

fraternity, happiness, social friendship, ethics of care, human dignity, fragility, dependence, common good

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braterstwo, szczęście, przyjaźń społeczna, etyka troski, godność ludzka, kruchość, zależność, dobro wspólne

INTRODUCTION

The publication of the latest social encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (henceforth FT) on 3 October 2020¹ was accompanied by a few reservations raised by some theologians about the supposed partiality of its title, which some thought should have been extended to *Sorelle Tutte*, to include women more explicitly in Pope Francis's call to a renewed sense of universal fraternity.²

These reservations, however, do not seem to consider the scholarly interpretation offered by Fr. Niklaus Kuster,³ Swiss Capuchin friar and lecturer of Spirituality at the Theological Faculty of the University of Lucerne, who clearly stated that, in fact, the encyclical is meant to address all men and women, all believers, and every person as members of one human family. From a literary point of view, although the first words *Fratelli Tutti* are accurately translated from the original formula used by Francis of Assisi in his collection of undated writings known as the *Admonitions* – specifically number VI, 1 (*Imitation of Christ*), a spiritual exhortation spoken to his brother friars (*Omnes Fratres*) – research has shown that the final composition of the twenty-eight spiritual teachings, like all Medieval admonitions, was intended for all the faithful,⁴ so that all people could draw from them practical applications for daily life.

¹ Francis, *Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti*. Vatican City 2020. This paper is partially based upon a previous contribution offered in the context of the event *The Economy of Francesco* which took place in Assisi (Italy), on 19-21 November 2020.

² R. Petrini, *Fratelli Tutti. Highlights from a Feminine Perspective*, "Oikonomia" 2021, Vol. 2, p. 25.

³ N. Kuster, "*Fratres omnes*" – *fratelli e sorelle tutti* (accessed 26 October 2021) (<https://www.vaticannews.va/it/vaticano/news/2020-09/papa-francesco-enciclica-san-francesco-osservatore-romano.html>).

⁴ R. J. Armstrong, J.A.W. Hellmann and W. J. Short (eds.), *Francis of Assisi: Early documents*, Vol. 1, New York-London 1999, p. 131.

By way of analogy, in referring once again to the Saint of Assisi who inspires his pontificate, Pope Francis too addresses his latest social encyclical to men and women of good will, who are *all* called to cultivate universal fraternity beyond borders.⁵ Here is the unifying appeal that Pope Francis launches to humanity at a time when it appears to be torn apart by polarization and partial interests that prevent the pursuit of the common good. Such an earnest appeal to rekindle a seemingly lost ‘universal aspiration to fraternity’ recognizes an openness of heart in every human being, an openness which knows neither boundaries nor differences of origin, gender, nationality, color or religion (FT 3); an openness that is capable of seeing and valuing the goodness of the other. In this sense, in fact, fraternity is one step beyond solidarity, because it not only allows the unequal to become equal, but it also allows the equal to embrace the different.⁶ The human heart, however, needs to be shaped and trained in such an openness.

Like all social encyclicals, *Fratelli Tutti* aims to present the Church’s response to the ethical questions raised over time by human societies. Nevertheless, in this paper, a special focus is reserved to some reflections that may prove to be particularly significant from a feminine perspective, to identify women’s specific contribution towards the promotion of a renewed sense of fraternity, upon which a more just and equitable society can be built.

The following reflections were developed by reading the encyclical through the three phases that characterize the Catholic social teaching approach – *see, judge, act*, the three stages of which Pope John XXIII speaks in *Mater et Magistra* as ‘stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice’.⁷

⁵ It is interesting to note that, according to Sorge (B. Sorge, *Introduzione alla Dottrina Sociale della Chiesa*, Brescia 2016, pp. 97-103), the inseparable relationship between truth rooted in our shared ‘paternity’ (we are all sons and daughters of one Father) and charity as the natural outcome of a universal fraternity, is a fundamental and innovative concept in the evolution of Catholic Social Teaching, which already provided a basis for the social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate*, Vatican City 2009). Every man and woman, believer or non-believer, is called to experience this double gift of truth and charity. On the socio-cultural level, the radical human interdependence intensified by globalization requires a solidarity that recognizes this double gift and translates it on the moral level. Like his predecessors, Pope Paul VI and Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis reiterates that only fraternity allows development to be truly human and offers a soul in solidarity with globalization.

⁶ A. Spadaro, *Fraternity and Social Friendship*, “La Civiltà Cattolica” 2020, Vol. 10, pp. 105-119.

⁷ John XXIII, *Encyclical Letter Mater et Magistra*, Vatican City 1961, p. 236.

1. *SEE: A WOUNDED HUMANITY*

The first chapter of *Fratelli Tutti* allows us to assess where we are as a global society by looking – very realistically – at the paradoxes of our culture, the struggles, the pain engendered by the pandemic, the ‘dark clouds’ (FT 9) which obscure a world that tends to close in on itself.

Hence, when we look around us and we *see* troubling trends: ‘shattered dreams’ of unity and peace (FT 10); a growing loss of the sense of history, which is identified with the philosophical approach of ‘deconstructionism’ (FT 13), where human freedom claims to create everything starting from zero, instead of learning from passed mistakes and building upon a common heritage; widespread despair and discouragement, nurtured by a permanent state of disagreement and confrontation (cf. FT 15); a ‘throwaway’ world (FT 18), where *what* – or worse – *who* is no longer useful, is cast off; wars, conflicts and persecutions, caused by a mentality of fear and mistrust, which foster a culture of ‘walls’ (FT 27) to prevent meeting with other cultures and other people; inequality of human rights, particularly between men and women (cf. FT 23); lack of solidarity and ability for interpersonal encounter (cf. FT 10); progress and economic growth that unfold without a ‘shared roadmap’ (FT 29), but rather oriented by a short-term vision that does now allow us to sacrifice, nor plan for the next generations; the dramatic spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, ‘a worldwide tragedy’ that has exposed our common vulnerability everywhere (FT 32); finally, the illusion of communication based upon information without wisdom (cf. FT 42-50), when one can too quickly separate ‘likes’ from ‘dislikes’ and isolate herself from the real world, because digital connectivity is not capable *per se* of uniting humanity.

Despite these ‘dark clouds’, the first chapter of the encyclical ends emphasizing hope, one that is rooted in the human heart and can open itself to great ideals, because hope – as Pope Francis states – makes us all capable of looking beyond our personal convenience.

2. *JUDGE: WHAT TYPE OF PEOPLE ARE WE?*

If the first chapter of the encyclical allows us to *see* where we are, the second chapter leads us into the phase of *judgement*. This provides us with a model by which we can *judge* what we *see*: the evangelical parable of the Good Samaritan. Along the way of his journey, the Good Samaritan comes across a man who has been assaulted, injured and left by the wayside. Many simply ‘pass by’. The Good Samaritan is the only one willing to stop, to care for him, and to provide for his needs.

This is very relevant to us because there are signs – the Pope says – that show when a society is not ‘healthy’: when it seeks prosperity but turns its back on those who suffer (cf. FT 65). Hence, the parable poses a basic question to each one of us, to encourage us to move forward from a ‘globalization of indifference’ towards a ‘globalization of fraternity’.⁸ When confronted by human suffering, we too are called to decide every day in many concrete instances: What kind of people are we? Are we people who ‘care’ or are we people who just ‘pass by’?

3. ACT: WE CARE

Once we make the decision not ‘to look the other way’, not to simply ‘pass by’, then it is time to *act* and take responsibility for what we *see*. The next chapters of the encyclical – from 3 through 8 – outline various ways to do so, not necessarily offering ‘technical solutions’,⁹ but presenting guidelines for a better type of politics and a better kind of economics. Although it is not possible to take the time to reflect on the variety and the depth of the themes that emerge from the document in this paper, this section will emphasize that caring for those most vulnerable is proposed as the first action to take.

From this perspective, some relevant points of contact and convergence with the basic principles of the ethics of care can be pointed out, benefitting from¹⁰ the contributions offered by three well-known authors in this field: Carol Gilligan,¹¹ Virginia Held¹² and especially Eva Kittay¹³.

The paradigm of care, although not exclusive to women, is an alternative way of thinking that complements the traditionally masculine orientation towards justice.¹⁴ Care is a prevalently feminine attitude in so far as women are naturally

⁸ This basic theme highlighted by several commentators of *Fratelli Tutti* was already at the core of Pope Francis’ first Message for the World Day of Peace (1 January 2014) entitled *Fraternity, the Foundation and Pathway to Peace*.

⁹ This was more recently reaffirmed by Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate* (Vatican City, 2009, p. 9). The Pontiff, however, also specified that although the Church does not claim to interfere in any way in the politics of States, she does have ‘a mission of truth to accomplish, in every time and circumstance, for a society that is attuned to man, to his dignity, to his vocation [...] This mission of truth is something that the Church can never renounce’.

¹⁰ R. Petrini, *Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): a Path towards Integral Human Development*, “Oikonomia” 2020, Vol. 3, pp. 3-8.

¹¹ C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Cambridge 1982.

¹² V. Held, *The Ethics of Care*, New York 2006.

¹³ E. Kittay, *Love’s Labor revisited*, “Hypatia” 2003, Vol. 17, pp. 237-250; E. Kittay, *La cura dell’amore*, Milano 2010.

¹⁴ C. Gilligan C., *In a Different Voice*, Cambridge 1982.

'structured' to care for life in its earliest stages, called to nurture it and bring it to full development within their own bodies.¹⁵

Women, therefore, are called in a particular way – although not an exclusive way – to respond to this call to action: to protect the most fragile in every dimension of human existence, whether in the family, the market, the political realm, or social life. From a feminine perspective, caring for fragility contributes to building relationships of trust and reciprocity that are at the core of social friendship: a friendship that must 'take root in hearts open to growth through relationships with others' (FT 89), that does not exclude anyone, that is fixed on 'the worth of every human person' (FT 106) and thus, is open to dialogue, inseparable from the notion of universal fraternity (cf. FT 142), free from polarization and yet ready to preserve a sense of one's own identity, because dialogue cannot be founded on 'an openness that spurns its own richness' (FT 143).

This 'epistemological paradigm' centered on 'care' has, among its configuring elements, first and foremost the recognition that the human being is fundamentally a 'dependent' being, a being in relation to and dependent on others – and to the Other in openness to Transcendence. This recognition naturally strengthens the bonds of fraternity, acknowledges common rights, and upholds the vision of belonging to one single family.

Dependence and vulnerability are an inescapable part of everyone's life, leading each one of us to recognize more consciously that throughout our human existence, we are *all* – at different times – subjects and objects of care. This awareness in some way leads every member of the human family to 'weave networks of charity' as Pope Benedict XVI defines them in *Caritas in Veritate*,¹⁶ through subsidiarity, because caring for fragility becomes an integral aspect of the common good. From an economic perspective, caring for fragility not only fosters mutuality but also trust, which is an essential aspect of market relationships, as well as at the core of greater inter-generational and intra-generational solidarity, which is, in turn, a key factor of sustainability.

Caring for fragility, therefore, should be pursued as 'a practice and a value',¹⁷ that is to say as a response to the needs of the other – between people who share an interest in their mutual well-being – but also as an expression of *caring relations*¹⁸ that help bring people closer to one another, to build reciprocity and to promote the moral growth of individuals beyond a mere sense of justice, both personally and communally. This approach challenges individuals to change their lifestyles vis-à-vis the throwaway culture, as defined by Pope Francis.

¹⁵ R. Petrini, *Feminine Qualities against the Technocratic Paradigm: A Catholic Social Perspective of Women's Contribution to Fraternity*, "Pro Dialogo" 2017, Vol. 1, pp. 52-65.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate*, Vatican City 2009, p. 5.

¹⁷ V. Held, *The Ethics of Care*, New York 2006, p. 651.

¹⁸ V. Held, *The Ethics of Care*, New York 2006; S. Brotto, *Etica della cura*, Napoli 2013.

In fact, it is significant that this ethical paradigm of care understood as ‘a practice and a value’ finds a strong resonance in the current pontificate of Pope Francis¹⁹ (2015:231), who openly supports a ‘culture of care’ permeating all of society, where the protection of the ‘sphere of rights’ must be accompanied by the promotion of the ‘sphere of friendship’.²⁰ While the former, in fact, is one of safeguarded interests, external respect, and fair distribution of material goods, the latter offers selflessness and detachment from those same material goods, which are given freely and gratuitously, recognizing the needs of others. Social life is deemed to take on its full meaning only when it is based on this kind of social friendship, which is ‘the most genuine actualization of the principle of fraternity’, inseparable from that of freedom and equality (CSDC 390).

The paradigm of care counteracts the manipulative logic of another epistemological paradigm that Catholic social teaching has identified as the ‘technocratic paradigm’, that is the tendency – or the temptation one might say – to apply a ‘technological’ approach to relationships: the tendency to approach others as external objects assuming that they can be changed, transformed and adapted to perceived personal needs, irrespective of any limits.²¹ The dangerous logic of this omni-comprehensive paradigm against the development of a new humanism was emphasized in the social encyclical *Laudato Si’*.²² This paradigm, according to Hanby,²³ is characterized by ‘the confections of knowing and making, nature and art, truth and possibility. Missing in this contrast is an alternative sense of nature that can be regarded as rational, a nature that is a whole comprised of wholes, a comprehensive order of being inclusive of its own intelligibility and thus imbued with immanence, form, and finality’.

The feminine care for fragility, nevertheless, cannot be enhanced in opposition to the more masculine orientation towards justice. Social friendship cannot be founded upon polarization, which already dominates so many areas of our life in common. A profound cultural change is needed for the feminine capacity for care to be recognized as a gift and promoted within social, political, economic and juridical structures. In fact, social friendship cannot be built by women alone. It is only by entering a ‘new category of relation’ as indicated by Benedict XVI in

¹⁹ Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’*, Vatican City 2015, p. 231.

²⁰ Reference here is made to the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (CSDC), which at n. 390 specifies that ‘the profound meaning of civil and political life does not arise only from the list of personal rights and duties’, but that must be based ‘on civil friendship and on fraternity’. Individualistic and collectivistic ideologies have prevented modern societies from putting these principles into practice. They constitute, however, the solid foundations for a community to tend toward the integral promotion of the person and of the common good.

²¹ R. Petrini, *Feminine Qualities against the Technocratic Paradigm: A Catholic Social Perspective of Women’s Contribution to Fraternity*, “Pro Dialogo” 2017, Vol. 1, pp. 52-65.

²² Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’*, Vatican City 2015, p. 106-108.

²³ M. Hanby, *The Gospel of Creation and the Technocratic Paradigm*, “Communio” 2015, Vol. 42, pp. 724-747.

his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*,²⁴ a relation based upon a new 'alliance' between men and women,²⁵ that we can rebuild a renewed sense of reciprocity rooted in equal dignity and mutually enriching differences.

CONCLUSION

Some ethicists of care like Daniel Engster²⁶ as well as Eva Kittay²⁷ have supported in different ways the idea of integrating the concept of care into the theory of justice, by acknowledging a universal moral obligation to care for the other, which is rooted in the universal interdependence of human beings. Kittay has especially focused on the need to rethink our human constitutive dependence, which begins in the maternal womb, as a way to renew our vision of the autonomous and self-sufficient modern man. If some conditions such as age, pathologies, impairments or 'unfreedoms' that link closely to the lack of social care²⁸ can accentuate dependence, this latter in itself is not a condition of only some, but a characteristic trait of every human being. Dependence is an ontological condition of our existence and affects our social status as equal citizens. From this perspective, care of those who are most dependent, care for the 'least advantaged' according to Rawls' definition,²⁹ challenges society to solve a problem of justice and not merely to foster individual generosity. Rights need to be reconsidered not in terms of claims endorsed by some particular groups, but as a universal appeal to protect vulnerability, mutual trust, and reciprocity.

Interestingly enough, in his address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 25 November 2014, Pope Francis explicitly reminded the Parliament members that they are 'called to a great mission although it may seem useless', that is, to take care of 'the fragility of peoples'. This peculiar attention to fragility, which must always remain open to Transcendence, allows us – says the Pope – to overcome the 'throwaway culture' and put the dignity of the person back at the core of any decision, at the core of concrete policies and decision-making, beyond the trends and powers of the moment. More recently, in his 2021 Message for the World Day of Peace, Pope Francis reiterated the need to promote globally 'a culture of care as a way to combat the culture of indifference, waste and con-

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate*, Vatican City 2009, p. 53.

²⁵ E. Romeo, *Francesco e le donne*, Milano 2016, p. 21.

²⁶ D. Engster, *The Heart of Justice*, Oxford 2007.

²⁷ E. Kittay, *Love's Labor revisited*, "Hypatia" 2003, Vol. 17, pp. 237-250; E. Kittay, *La cura dell'amore*, Milano 2010.

²⁸ A. K. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, New York 1999, p. 4.

²⁹ J. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement*, (in:) E. Kelly (ed.), Cambridge MA 2003, p. 59.

frontation',³⁰ as a common path in the journey of humanity towards peace and as a means to protect the dignity of each person and to pursue the common good.

Rethinking justice in connection with dependence and human vulnerability may allow one to develop a renewed public ethics of care allowing for more balanced and sustainable choices. This invitation to preserve the dignity of the human person through care finds some resonance in Kittay's assumption that people possess both a sense of justice and a moral sense of care since it would be difficult to imagine 'human surviving without some sense of justice and without some elemental sentiment of care'.³¹ Yet, Kittay adds, 'for a more perfect society, both the moral sentiment of care and a sense of justice require cultivation through education and practice' (*ibidem*). To activate this radical cultural change, when much still needs to be achieved in terms of equal rights and freedoms, women can play a key role in this process of education.

If dependency is accepted as a normal part of human life, all caring services that arise from it and are necessary to respond to inevitable dependencies 'have no less a claim on the social sharing of burdens'.³² Moreover, if dependency is truly perceived as a normal feature of human existence in time, then someone must care for dependents. Because of their structural differences, even if men do not take up the role, Kittay states, 'women will not simply abandon it'.³³

In the past, because in many societies 'the moral sentiment of care has been cultivated and largely restricted to the private or domestic sphere',³⁴ the public domain has been more frequently dominated by the moral sentiment of justice. Today, as women assume more relevant leadership roles in the public sphere, in the economic and in political realms, they can offer a greater contribution in bridging and bringing together the moral sentiment of care with the moral sentiment of justice.

Yet not confrontation but collaboration is needed to cultivate social friendship. Both men and women are invited to reflect on and actively search for new ways to implement Pope Francis' exhortation: to speak to one another more, to listen to one another more, to get to know one another better, to love one another more.³⁵ This seems the only path to break through the poverty of isolation and fully live that 'sphere of friendship' which is an essential aspect of social life.

³⁰ Francis, *Message for the 54th World Day of Peace*, Vatican City 2021.

³¹ E. Kittay, *Love's Labor revisited*, "Hypatia" 2003, Vol. 17, p. 245.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 244.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

³⁵ E. Romeo, *Francesco e le donne*, Milano 2016, p. 21. It may be worth mentioning here that Francis of Assisi, who inspired the latest social encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, experienced fraternity in its fullness by way of his friendship with his brothers, but also with a woman, namely Clare of Assisi. Besides being a faithful follower, she was a precious source of support for him. She shared his suffering, his call to witness to charity, celibacy, and his mission to rebuild the Church albeit in a complementary, very different, more contemplative way, but first and foremost, she shared

In this perspective, sensitivity to 'care' – necessary for all individuals without distinction – can become a catalyst for fraternity; it can strengthen a 'spirituality of global solidarity' as defined by Pope Francis in his encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*;³⁶ it can offer a possible answer to that crucial dilemma of modernity which Bauman³⁷ refers to as the choice between the competition of the individual and the solidarity of the human family, which presupposes – maybe surprisingly for some – that *all* men and women not only can live together in a more collaborative way, but can also strive, together, for greater happiness.

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with him a very profound love for humanity in its diversity (M. Bodo, *Francis, the Journey and the Dream*, Cincinnati 1988). Therefore, Francis and Clare can be considered prototypes of the capacity of men and women to come up with shared goals that transcend their differences and allow them to engage in a common mission as encouraged in *Fratelli Tutti* at n. 157.

³⁶ Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si'*, Vatican City 2015, p. 240.

³⁷ Z. Bauman, C. Giaccardi and M. Magatti, *Il destino della libertà*, Roma 2016, p. 37.

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