

# Fraternal Life as Mission

*A reflection starting from the Encyclical letter "Fratelli Tutti"*

Rome, 20 October 2020

Dear Brothers,

On Sunday, October 4<sup>th</sup>, Pope Francis has given us the Encyclical Letter "**Fratelli Tutti**", *on fraternity and social friendship*, and has invited us to dream *as a single human family, as fellow travelers 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.* (cf. FT, n. 8)

A dream that has been expressed even by our Founder, on many occasions. I quote one of his writings, in which he invokes, for himself and us, the gift of a "heart" that may become an altar of sacrifice in consuming itself, in order to offer to the Lord the "all brothers". Here is the text: *"Our heart must be an altar where this fire burns and shines continuously and unquenchably: the sacred fire of the love of God and men; an altar where a flame rises to the Lord, enveloping and bringing to Him our brothers and sisters: **all brothers and sisters**, whatever country they may be from, whatever religion they may belong to, and even those without religion, giving preference to the most needy, the most abandoned, the most suffering, the faithless, the untrustworthy, the most debauched, the outcasts of all!* (Scr. 55, 334).

It is a mystical prayer, very practical, more than a thought, according to the style of the "*vicarious substitution*" that leads Don Orione not only to remind God of the needs of humanity but also to consume himself with love before Him, to obtain the gift of the salvation of his brothers and sisters. In this regard, he confirms once again: *"May my secret martyrdom for the salvation of souls, of all souls, be my paradise and my supreme bliss!"*

The Orionine Charismatic Family, out of devotion to the Holy Father, but also because it recognized how much the message about fraternity was at the heart of our Founder, joyfully welcomed with a "*Feast of the Pope and with the Pope*", the arrival of the new Encyclical letter and undertook various initiatives to give prominence to the distribution of the Document among the Communities, Parishes and Works. In this, the restrictions imposed by the pandemic did not inhibit the creativity of the religious, nuns and laity of Don Orione. Our site ([donorione.org](http://donorione.org)) and that of the Sisters ([suoredonorione.org](http://suoredonorione.org)) have given the news about it.

Now that the thrill of celebration is over and also - I must say - the hurry to spread the text, we must avoid the risk of letting it fall into oblivion, so the most important

moment has arrived: to study its content and make it known and, above all, to take initiatives to respond to the appeal and wishes of the Pope.

All the creativity implemented for the welcoming feast must become even stronger and audacious to put into practice what the Fourth Vow of Fidelity to the Pope asks of us, which, as our Constitutions say (cf. Art. 48), engages us in a constant effort in the following directions: "*knowledge and diffusion of the pontifical documents; - work of communion within and outside the Church, working to be a ferment of unity; - preferential service to the poor, whose rights and petitions we will defend in the name of the Pope and in fidelity to him.*"

### **A Letter addressed to us, Religious!**

In truth, this letter is destined to all the faithful and, because of its theme on fraternity and social friendship; it has an even wider and universal destination. On the footsteps of St. Francis, the Pope addresses "*all brothers and sisters ... proposing to them a way of life marked by the flavour of the Gospel.*" (FT 1). Moreover, he warns: "*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)

Precisely because of its "universal destination", there is the risk, for us religious, of welcoming it in a generic, vague, almost superficial way, as if the Pope were speaking to others and not to us, not to me, not to our religious communities. As if he were addressing, with his proposal of "fraternity" and "social friendship", our brothers the Muslims or the nations at war, perhaps people in conflict, those who are not willing to welcome others, migrants and government authorities, separated brothers or families in difficulty, etc. Without a doubt, they are an important universe, however, somehow, it makes us think: it is directed "to others", not to me, not to us!

For us, pastoral workers, there is also the risk of accepting the pontifical message primarily as a subsidy or instrument for our priestly work and apostolate. Therefore, we may consider the Encyclical letter as important to qualify our work in the ecumenical sphere, as an inspiration for the homilies, to enrich our formation manuals, to motivate our commitment to promoting dialogue and fraternity in general. They are important things, no doubt, but if it is only so, we put ourselves "at a proper distance" from the text, detach ourselves and stand on the pulpit and lecture others. The Encyclical becomes a document... for others and not for me, not for us!

In the modern era - unfortunately, today too - there is also the risk of reductively qualifying the Encyclical (as social, political, communist (!)... ) and, moved by prejudice, not having that free spirit to receive the Christian message that is

fundamental to the context in which we live. Therefore, here too, the risk that it may be for others, but it is not for me, not for us!

To understand how a distracted or detached attitude toward the Encyclical may be mistaken, it would be enough to recall the following words of the Founder: "*The main purpose of our Congregation is to live with love for the Pope and to spread among the little ones, the humble and the people, the sweetest love for the Pope, and a complete filial obedience to his word and his wishes. And he further specifies: "Our submission to the Pope is not then restricted to ex-cathedra definitions: it is not restricted to a sincere submission to his teachings however they are imparted, (...); it is not restricted to obeying his orders promptly and cheerfully, nor to ensuring that they are carried out; but the Sons of Divine Providence must make it their law just to live, and to cause souls to live, with a life of the strictest, sweetest, filial union with the earthly Vicar of Jesus Christ: thus every notice, every advice, every desire of the Pope must be a command, the sweetest command, for us."* (05/01/1928).

Against the idea that it "*is for others; not for me; not for us*", Don Orione, in the same letter, tells us: "*Let us make it our great and sweet obligation to practise even the slightest recommendations of the Vicar of Christ.*"

In synthesis, for us, Orionine, this is how things are: it is a charismatic duty to set in motion our creativity and our ecclesial passion to know and spread the Encyclical letter "*Fratelli Tutti*" and to propose, as Pope Francis wants, "*a new vision of fraternity and social friendship that will not remain at the level of words.*" (FT 6). This task, however, cannot be fulfilled only through communication and publicity. To be credible, the message requires our testimony of life: "*Vox oris sonat, vox operis tonat! The word sounds, the examples thunder! The words move, the examples drag!*" (Don Orione, 1923).

## **The shadows of a closed world**

I once read the story of the rabbi who asked his disciples the question: *When does the night end?* He wanted them to think about when the night ends and the day begins. Since there were no satisfactory answers, the master continued: *The night ends when, looking at the face of an ordinary person, you recognize in him a brother. Until that moment, it will still be night in your heart!*

"*Fratelli Tutti*" starts from this vision, *from the night that is in the heart of humanity.* This is the content of the first chapter (nos. 9-55) in which Pope Francis says that he does not pretend to propose "an exhaustive analysis" on the shadows in the field of fraternity, nor to "*take into consideration all aspects of the reality we live*". He wanted to emphasize only "*some trends in today's world that hinder the development of universal fraternity*". Thus, he leaves us space to "*complete*" the analysis with an

examination of personal and community conscience about our life in fraternity in order to detect its shadows, discover its wounds and, then, identify, with the help of "Fratelli Tutti", the paths of care and hope. In this way, the Encyclical can speak *"to me, to us, to our communities"*.

In the recent survey we made in preparation for the next General Chapter, one of the questions provoked us to reflect on the fragile dynamics present in the Congregation. A significant majority pointed out that we are lacking in community and fraternal witness, since we have *"fragile communities, not very spiritual, with little resources to manage conflicts"*. In the spontaneous comments, a good number of you highlighted how much we lack fraternal dialogue, friendship (*"relations between us have become institutional"*); some even said that among religious *"charity is also lacking"*. Moreover, others said: *"It seems that we are losing the sense of being a family, as Don Orione wanted"*. As you can see, unfortunately, we too have our *"Dreams that are shattered"* (FT 10-12).

This data, although not scientifically rigorous, could indicate that, unfortunately, in recent years, we have not been able to achieve significant results in our fraternal life. In fact, the survey of 2015, before the last Chapter, highlighted the same issue when it examined the quality of life of the orionine communities. On that occasion, the coordinator of the survey, in his summary, compared two dissonant results, that is, the fact that 53% of the participants had evaluated that the Orionine communities were "Very" and "Enough" marked by "family spirit" (therefore, a positive judgment), while a similar percentage (52.8%) evaluated, negatively, that the Orionine communities were "Little" and "Not at all", "communities of fraternal life". The Coordinator's interpretation of this dissonance in the same question was this: *"It could be said that the family spirit is not expressed in fraternal relationships and fraternal life, or that the family spirit in our communities is not expressed in fraternal relationships"*. From this may come the suspicion that our *"family spirit"* is more a strong congregational brand, transmitted by the Founder, powerful only for communication, but not translated daily into vital attitudes of fraternity.

At a time when there is so much talk about the effects of the Coronavirus, it seems that another virus attacks the community and fraternal system, and would manifest its symptoms in our homes, communities and living environments. This virus would be able, particularly, to ruin the relationships between us, making them "strange fraternal loves", those in which we are physically next to each other, but emotionally distant; we live close and we cannot imagine that, sometimes, the brother next door, needs just a small opening, a smile, a little time, to surrender, confidently.

This virus would also have the very serious risk of infecting *"the service of authority and obedience"* conditioning the vision that some may have of the "superior" and no longer seeing him as a *"father"* or *"older brother"*, available and *"at hand"*, called to

exercise *"the task of being a sign of unity and a guide in the choral search for and in the personal and communal fulfilment of God's will"* (cf. *Faciem Tuam*, 1). Perhaps it was he who contributed to a *"hard"* image of the *"superior"*, setting his mission as a self-referential *"authority"*, almost exclusively, based on discipline and lacking in the quality of listening and sharing.

I am sure that some of the confreres never experienced, on the part of the Superior, an unexpected, unconventional, disarming reaction, in the style of that embrace in the Parable of the Prodigal Son; in these cases, it was preferred to start with the rigorism of discipline, of the *"hard face"*, instead of a disarming gesture of welcome, which can generate conversion and obtain much more satisfactory results.

It is not easy to recognize this, but in some situations of our life, there also seems to be a lack of the basic quality of a mature Christian, that is, the exercise of forgiveness and reconciliation between us; of overcoming conflicts, even personal ones, with a dialogue that avoids the breaking of relationships; of fraternal correction, done with justice and charity or, as Don Orione would say, *"done as the Gospel wants: inter te et ipsum solum"* [between you and him alone], which completes: *"When one cannot speak well of the other, it is better remain silent"* (14/07/1939).

These situations are very serious and do not belong - Thank God! - to the life of the vast majority of the confreres and communities. We just have to be more attentive, perhaps, to some other less serious situations, which end up weakening, progressively, the intensity of our fraternal relationships.

While technology unites us more with others, there is the risk of isolating ourselves more and more behind the videos and messages of our electronic devices. Therefore, we may spend the day connected with a virtual world, with the *"friends"* of social networks, maybe even during lunch (!) or in other events that would require my *"total"* presence. Moreover, it is important to be aware of the fact that it is very strong, today, the temptation to organize our living spaces, regardless of community spaces and times (kitchen, entertainment room, timetable ...) and of being a supportive help to the brother who is overloaded with work and responsibility. These kind of temptations can be overcome, with a collaborative availability of which Sister Maria Plautilla is an example. It is good to remember her: *"There are only two of us in the ward, we do not lack work, but we get along so well that one tries to lighten the other. When there is charity, how good it feels"*. (15/12/1945).

We are called to give witness of the charity, of *"lived fraternity"* in community. A fraternity made of welcome, respect, mutual help, understanding, courtesy, forgiveness and joy. And this, in little daily things, but also in more important situations, such as living together with brothers of different ethnic groups and nationalities. The fraternity lived among us, particularly in these circumstances, is

charismatic because it opens our hearts to fraternity towards all, to have a *"Heart without boundaries!"*

I truly believe that the Letter of the Pope can help us to relaunch the primacy of fraternal relationships. As the Pope has taught us, the shadows should not be ignored, but faced, in the awareness that there are also many reasons for hope and joy. It is important to speak clearly among ourselves, identifying and fighting the fragilities and weaknesses of our lives, making decisions in the community, to help us walk together, in hope (cf. FT 54-55). It is in this way that "Fratelli Tutti" will speak to me, to us, to our communities. In this operation, the credibility of our words and our witness as consecrated persons is at stake, in order to avoid that severe judgment: *"So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach"* (Mt 23, 3).

### ***Fraternal life as a mission***

Because of the lifestyle we have chosen, we are called to confront ourselves, often, with the new commandment, the commandment that renews all things: *"Love one another as I have loved you"* (Jn 15:12). It happens, however, that in some circumstances, *"having to make a community"* or the demands of *"fraternal life in the community"* may be felt like a burden, perhaps even a waste of time, thinking of other priorities of our apostolate.

Two Instructions of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life come to our aid. The Instruction *"Faciem Tuam"* of 2008 (cf. §22) reminds us that *"time dedicated to improving the quality of fraternal life is not wasted, since all the fruitfulness of religious life depends on the quality of fraternal life"*. Therefore, the effort to live well is an integral part of the mission, since *"fraternal communion, as such, is already an apostolate"*. The Lord himself said it: *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples: if you love one another"* (Jn. 13:35).

The other Instruction, entitled *"Fraternal Life in Community,"* although it is from 1994, has not lost its importance, especially in the clear and didactic way in which it deals with the theme. This is even more incisive and now becomes relevant in the context of understanding the *"Fratelli tutti"*. It is worth highlighting, "sine glossa", n. 56 of the Instruction:

*"The religious communities, aware of their responsibilities towards the greater fraternity of the Church, also become a sign of the possibility of living Christian fraternity and of the price that must be paid to build any form of fraternal life.*

*Moreover, in the context of the diverse societies of our planet, torn as they are by the divisive forces of passion and conflicting interests, yearning for unity*

*but unsure of what path to follow the presence of communities where people of different ages, languages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, and which remain united despite the inevitable conflicts and difficulties inherent in common life, is in itself a sign that bears witness to a higher reality and points to higher aspirations.*

*Religious communities, who by their life proclaim the joy and the human and supernatural value of Christian fraternity, speak to our society about the transforming power of the Good News".*

### ***Like the Good Samaritan, with the oil of fraternal affection***

Almost one hundred years old is a word that Don Orione pronounced to the clerics and priests gathered in the Chapel of *Paterno*, on October 8, 1923: *"I am so happy today to speak of fraternal charity and I wish to come to the practical"*.

His practicality starts from a life situation: *"When assisting the dying, and especially the fathers of families who have to leave their children, what are the most insistent and loving recommendations that they make?" Love each other, don't fight over stuff, help each other, be all for one and one for all". And when questions arise between siblings, there are always those who jump up and remember the words of the old dying parents who recommended union, and they add: do it for the love of our parents, for the love of our father and mother... Now if this is done in families, all the more, is a reason for us to do it"*.

The commitment to live as "All Brothers and Sisters" is also realized in memory of the wishes, dreams and words of our Father, whose his greatest sadness is, surely, not to see his children in full communion. Therefore, our commitment of fraternity is also that we must live it as a charismatic mission, out of love for him; to give witness to the world that the dream of a more fraternal society is possible, as the Pope proposed in the Encyclical.

To fulfil it, here are some points of attention, paths and dynamisms to be undertaken, which I gather from "Fratelli Tutti " and the words of the Father:

***- If it is true that we are "Fratelli Tutti", we are also "Fragili Tutti":*** the gift of fraternity and friendship is to be asked to the Lord because "without him, we can do nothing"; without the help that comes from the Lord, from our relationship with God, our fragility prevails and our fraternity can fail. For this reason, *"with prayer we can do everything; without prayer, we can do nothing. It is with the prayer that things are done"*. Don Orione says that in a text taken up in article 66 of our Constitutions, certainly thinking about personal prayer, community prayer and liturgical prayer with the faithful.

- **"Like the Good Samaritan, with the oil of fraternal affection":** this is a word of Don Orione that connects to an important part of the Encyclical, the one in which the Pope makes a lectio divina of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. If fraternity is a gift to be asked of the Lord, it is also a project to be fulfilled by attitudes of closeness, initiatives, understanding, mutual help, sharing and reconciliation.

- **We need a community that supports us!:** I leave the floor to the Pope and ask you, in the spirit of this letter of mine, to welcome it as a specific reference to the principles of our consecration: *"No one can face life in isolation. We need a community that supports us, that helps us and in which we help each other to look ahead. How important it is to dream together! Alone you risk having mirages, so you see what is not there; dreams are built together"*. (FT 8). These words make us think of a lament by Don Orione: *"..you tell me about waterways and cars, etc., but what do I care, O my son, about all of this, if there is no union and charity among you, and one has gone one way and the other wants to go another way?"* (1916)

- **Retrieve kindness!** Regarding our fraternal relationships, to face the big and difficult problems, it could also be valid for us the valorization of such a simple and, at the same time, very effective gesture: kindness. The Pope says that it *"is a liberation from the cruelty that sometimes penetrates human relationships, it is a liberation from anxiety that does not let us think about others, it is a liberation from the distracted urgency that ignores that others also have the right to be happy. Today we rarely find time and energy available to stop and treat others well, to say "permission", "sorry", "thank you"*. Each one of us can be such a religious: *"kind, who puts aside his worries and urgencies to pay attention, to give a smile, to say a word of encouragement, to make possible a space of listening in the midst of so much indifference"*. (FT 224). Besides, our Saint completes *"Charity finds its happiness in spreading around and radiating goodness, meekness, kindness; one thing it desires: to immolate itself to achieve happiness and salvation for others to the glory of God"*. (1934).

- **The art of encounter and dialogue:** The only time that Pope Francis in the letter uses the word "schism" is to define the distance between the individual and the human community (cf. FT 31). However, it seems the right word to interpret so many other situations that we live and would require reversing the wheel: from schism to union, from rupture to re-composition, from separation to encounter, from the rejection of the other to empathic listening and assertive dialogue. The



pontifical text is full of references that enhance these passages: *“The ability to sit down and listen to others, typical of interpersonal encounters, is paradigmatic of the welcoming attitude shown by those who transcend narcissism and accept others, caring for them and welcoming them into their lives”* (FT 48). *“As silence and careful listening disappear, replaced by a frenzy of texting, this basic structure of sage human communication is at risk”* (FT 49); *“approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word “dialogue”. If we want to encounter and help one another, we have to dialogue”* (FT 198).

All this, beyond being a wonderful speech of ecclesial and religious inspiration, we must feel it as an appeal for a true conversion and thus redeem the fundamental values of our consecration, that is, always being close to God, fertilizing our charism and creating a true fraternity among us. As Don Orione loved to repeat: *“Charity is hungry for action: it is an activity that tastes of eternal and divine. Charity cannot be idle”*. Therefore: *Hail Mary and forward!*

Fraternally,

P. Tarcisio Vieira  
General Superior