

CHRISTMAS LETTER FROM THE FRANCISCAN MINISTERS GENERAL

Assisi, December 25th 2020

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.
(Is 9:1)*

To the Franciscan Family,
sisters and brothers all.

Hope is bold!

Dear sisters and brothers of the entire Franciscan Family,

May the Lord give you peace!

The language of Christmas is full of music and light. When Thomas of Celano recounts the story of Christmas at Greccio, he writes, *“The night is lit up like day, delighting both man and beast. The people arrive, ecstatic at this new mystery of new joy. The forest amplifies the cries and the boulders echo back the joyful crowd. The brothers sing, giving God due praise, and the whole night abounds with jubilation.”* (1Cel 30)

We already perceive *the Light from on high*, and so now we, the representatives of the great international Franciscan Family, wish to use the language of music to reflect on the beautiful resonances we find in the Encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*.



1. MUSICAL NOTATION

1.1. A new musical score

Advent is almost over, and Christmas is already upon us! Only a few days separate us from the end of the year 2020, but already we can say that it has been a very particular year. Over the last few months, it seems that we have experienced as much as we normally would in a decade. Because of issues such as the virus, political changes, protests in so many countries, tensions, wars, intolerance, environmental issues, chaotic streams of information, our experience is that the world has become darker and, as a result of factors that include assorted lockdowns, also more closed [see Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti* (FT), Chapter one: *Dark Clouds over a Closed World*, nos. 9-55]. It is precisely at this moment in history that Pope Francis has given us his Encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*. In it, he shares his desire that we have the courage to dream, to aspire to be a united human family, to a global embrace between sisters and brothers, “children of the same earth which is our common home”. (FT 8).

The Pope introduces *Fratelli tutti* with a specific reference to the fraternal love that was lived and fostered by friar Francis — love for those both near and far. Yes, indeed, love for the Lord’s creatures, but firstly love for “those of his own flesh” (FT 2), in particular for the poor and the marginalised. The Holy Father also recalls the profound significance of friar Francis’ historic and humble visit to Sultan Malik-al-Kamil in Egypt. The Poor Man of Assisi met the Sultan as a brother, as a person who has a “heart which knew no bounds and transcended differences of origin, nationality, colour or religion” (FT 3). Pope

Francis maintains that St. Francis himself had the gift of communicating God’s love and is “a father to all, inspiring the vision of a fraternal society” — this was the Holy Father’s principal motivation in writing the new Encyclical (FT 4).

All the more reason, then, should it motivate us as members of the Franciscan Family! We want to say more Last October 3rd, we the Ministers General of the Franciscan Family were present at the Tomb of St. Francis in Assisi, while Pope Francis celebrated Mass and signed his encyclical! We were able to greet the Holy Father on behalf of all of you. On this opportunity given to us by Providence, we want to take up a special invitation addressed to the whole Family, and firstly to us Ministers. It is the invitation to take *Fratelli tutti* and its insights seriously, to see it as a gift and an undertaking given to us by the Pope in the year 2020, to appreciate it as coming from St. Francis through Pope Francis, like a new musical score to be learned, practiced, and performed as part of the great composition of history.

1.2. Different musical notes combine in a chord called *Hope*

Pope Francis is a realist and has no qualms about naming things. In his analysis of the situation in which today’s world finds itself (FT 9-55), he speaks of the “dark clouds, which should not be ignored” (FT 54). But he does not leave it at that. What response does he propose to the sufferings faced by humanity? Hope! And what does he mean? “Hope speaks to us of a thirst, an aspiration, a longing for a life of fulfilment, a desire to achieve great things, things that fill our heart

and lift our spirit to lofty realities like truth, goodness and beauty, justice and love... Hope is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, the petty securities and compensations which limit our horizon, and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile” (FT 55).

But where does one find hope? Perhaps the instinctive answer is that one must find it in God — and that is absolutely true. The source of hope and joy is God and his Gospel. Pope Francis already reminded us of this in *Evangelii Gaudium*, when he stressed that true joy arises from the bond between God and the human person, between the Christian and Jesus Christ (*Evangelii Gaudium* 1-8). This is the first note of the musical chord of hope – the discovery that we are God’s children of God and also his friends.

This realization is the basis of every act of solidarity, and of all social friendship, because if we really are children of the same Father, then this means that everyone around us is a sister or brother, and no one is indifferent to their brother or sister. *Fratelli tutti* reminds us of something very important; hope is not something one acquires by oneself or by living alone, independently of others. No, hope is built up together, in the rediscovery of our sisters and brothers. This, then, is the second note of the chord — the realization that one is not isolated, that others exist, that we are all interconnected and necessary and that “no one is saved alone” (FT 54).

And because we live on this planet and at this specific time in history, our hope also is concerned with our dwelling place, the

earth. Pope Francis, in *Laudato si’* (LS), after acknowledging that “our common home is falling into serious disrepair,” invites us to have hope, because “hope would have us recognize that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems.” (LS n. 61). The third note of hope, therefore, has the taste of fresh water, the fragrance of the clean air of unspoilt forests, and the sound of the tropical forest filled with the song of thousands of birds. And this note completes the chord of hope — if the chord were truncated, if it were missing any one of the three notes, it would sound incomplete.

2. IN CONCERT

2.1. The first beats - relationship and encounter

Laudato si’ asks what we want our world to be in the future, what sort of planet do we want? *Fratelli tutti* questions us about what we want for our *relationships* in the future. The insights of *Fratelli tutti* invite us to discover and nurture hope for a world in which “everything is open” (cf. FT chap. III: *Envisaging and Engendering an Open World* nos. 87-127), and certainly they also pose questions about our identity, mission, and consequently, our Formation. Transferring these questions to the context of the Franciscan Family, we could ask ourselves the following. As Franciscans, what future Franciscan world do we wish to hand on to those who will come after us? What will its values, lifestyle, and thought look like? Crucially, what kind of relationships do we want within our Franciscan world? And,

finally, do we want this Franciscan world of ours to be accessible and open to all?

Laudato si' declared that the world is a network of relationships (remember that “relationship” is one of the central categories in Franciscanism), where everything is connected (cf. LS n. 117). *Fratelli tutti* says that this network of relationships is unfortunately deteriorating, that isolation is a threat. But the encyclical also proposes a remedy, reiterating that hope is to be found in the culture of encounter (cf. FT 30).

How to generate the culture of encounter? Pope Francis recalls that “change is impossible without motivation and a process of education” (LS 15) and that guidelines for this purpose can be drawn from the “treasure of Christian spiritual experience” (LS n. 15) — and, we might add, from the Franciscan experience too. This means that our various programmes of Formation and Studies (both our *ratio formationis* and *ratio studiorum*) need to specifically and clearly integrate the Pope’s convictions in regard to human, social, and ‘environmental’ Formation. We need to ask ourselves how our Formation programmes can respond to the question of how this culture of encounter can be fostered. Because *closeness* is what saves, saving not just humanity but also the earth, our home.

2.2. The introductory beats – paying attention and dialogue

Commenting on the parable of the Good Samaritan, Pope Francis reminded us that “we are caught up with our needs” (FT 65) and that consequently we risk being just like the priest and the Levite, indifferent to the man “assaulted by thieves and lying injured on the wayside” (FT 63). Perhaps, in order to

assess whether we pay attention to others, we could ask ourselves whether the “sight of a person who is suffering disturbs us . . . makes us uneasy, since we have no time to waste on other people’s problems.” (FT 65). One of the best things we could wish for in ourselves (and not just at Christmas) is to have more courage and really “look to the example of the Good Samaritan” (FT 66), “rediscovering our vocation as citizens of our respective nations of the entire world, builders of a new social bond” (FT 66). In fact, “any other decision would make us either one of the robbers or one of those who walked by without showing compassion for the sufferings of the man on the roadside.” (FT 67). While we wish for this, another question arises — how can we be even more creative and not surrender to “the creation of a society of exclusion”, but instead be “men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others” (FT 67)? How can we be more attentive to others? How can we be even bolder in being close to the least of all? (cf. FT 233-235)

When Pope Francis speaks about the source of inspiration for his Encyclical *Laudato si'*, he mentions “the beloved Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew” (LS 7) in addition to Saint Francis. Now, in writing about the source of inspiration for *Fratelli tutti*, the Great Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb is given acknowledgement (cf. FT 29). In this way, this Pope Francis offers a concrete and relevant example of the dialogue that Christians, without renouncing their own identity (cf. FT 3), are called to seek “among all people of good will” (FT 6). As Franciscan brothers and sisters, we are already involved in this dialogue in different places and ways; but perhaps we can ask ourselves how to increase opportunities for dialogue and

encounters with all, and especially with those who do not share our faith but may often live and work alongside us.

St. Francis left some practical suggestions; we could begin from his greeting, “*May the Lord give you peace!*” (cf. Testament 23) In order to greet someone in this way, one must first “*see*” them, and then the greeting becomes an overture for dialogue! Let us remember, however, that St. Francis’ greeting is addressed to all — in the same measure, and with the same courtesy towards all! (cf. also FT 222-224) There are no exceptions, because Francis recognised everyone as sister or brother and knew that in God’s heart there are no second-class children!

2.3. In the school of music

Pope Francis has given us a new musical score to learn. The piece may seem to be complicated, but we know that all pieces seem complicated at first. Note after note, beat after beat, we slowly work towards being able to give a good performance. This new piece speaks of the dream of an open world, of a world where *encounters* are what matter most, where new lifestyles, new ways of seeing and thinking are possible. We too are responsible for the performance of this piece. Therefore, it is necessary for us to come up with internal processes (within the Order, e.g., in Formation) and external processes (in regard to our service to the world), so that these same processes can allow us to be shaped by the music concealed in the score, *Fratelli tutti*.

So where can we learn the notes of this new piece of music? Christmastime comes

to our aid and invites us to attend the best music school. In fact, St. Francis attests that Christmas is the best time to practice: “On that day the Lord sent His mercy and at night His song” (OfP Part 5, 5). An encounter takes place in Bethlehem — God Himself contributes to the culture of encounter and draws near by becoming one of us. God establishes a dialogue that is wordless at first, expressed only by the exchange of a gaze. How wondrous it is that for the first time since the creation of the world, Mary of Nazareth looks into the eyes of God! On the feast of Christmas, God shows us His face, because “No one can experience the true beauty of life without relating to others, without having real faces to love.” (FT 87). Jesus, more than anyone, teaches us how to live a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, capable of rejoicing deeply without being obsessed with consumption.

This is the source of our identity, here is where we learn what it means to encounter those who are far from us and are totally different. Our Formation begins here, in the contemplation of the face of Jesus Christ, wrapped in swaddling clothes, kissed by Mary of Nazareth and embraced by Joseph. It is on this child’s face that we can read that God is love (1Jn 4:16), the Love that knows nothing except total self-giving and, aware of our need for salvation, has come to meet us. The “Most Holy Child [who] has been given to us and has been born for us on the way and placed in a manger because he did not have a place in the inn” (cf. OfP Part 5, 5) is the Word through which the Father renews dialogue with the whole of humanity. The Word became flesh and came to dwell among

us (Jn 1:14) in order to enter into dialogue with humanity.

This is the source of our hope! It is here, where God is and, at the same time, where our brothers and sisters are — it is in Him who came and dwelt among us.

We too, the Minsters General of the Franciscan Family, wish to contribute to writing the new score, featuring the chord of hope, relationship & encounter, and attention & dialogue. We do this in God's

school, which is embodied in the “Babe of Bethlehem” (cf. 1Cel 30), and we begin on the note of a joint Christmas greeting. On this very special Christmas, all of us in unison wish you to boldly desire, always and everywhere, in every circumstance, with everyone, with all our sisters and brothers, to hear the song of the angels who proclaim: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among [all!] people with whom He is pleased (cf. Lk 2:14).



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