

Emerging from Covid to Caritas, via *Fratelli Tutti*

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We are gathering together today in dark times. Many of us will have spent much of this week looking west to America's election results which, whatever the outcome, is the fruit of polarised and fractured relationships; closer to home we are each newly in lockdown ourselves; and we are grappling with all the pressures that were already part of our communities even before that – precarity and poverty, isolation and injustice. If any of you have had the chance to read parts of the new letter, *Fratelli Tutti*, it begins with these sorts of reflections on what Pope Francis calls these 'dark clouds' (§54).

So in many ways I am very grateful personally to have the chance to join today a group of women and men who are actively engaged in the transformation of our world. It is a very hopeful thing to share this time with you all. All the sacrifices of lockdown – whether that is isolation or working through lockdown at risk to oneself – is something we are doing for the sake of our bonds with others. It's these bonds of kinship the letter is all about. It calls these past months a realization:

that our lives are interwoven with and sustained by ordinary people valiantly shaping the decisive events of our shared history: doctors, nurses, pharmacists, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caretakers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, priests and religious... They understood that no one is saved alone. (§51)

It is for this reason that the letter also turns to hope.

'hope "speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning. Hope speaks to us of a thirst, an aspiration, a longing for a life of fulfillment, 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".' (§52)¹

That is the encyclical, quoting an earlier Greeting of Pope Francis, but it is rooted profoundly in the idea that has already gathered us here today – the idea of *caritas*, of active love and kinship with all. That is what drives us out of the darkness.

What I want to suggest with this reflection is that the *caritas*, the love that is motivating our work is not only a sentiment, a feeling – albeit a feeling that is deeply rooted. It is also a way of thinking and hoping; it is a logic.

¹ Citing *Greeting to Young People at the Padre Félix Varela Cultural Centre, Havana, Cuba* (20 September 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 21-22 September 2015, p. 6

The logics in play in times of danger or scarcity are often logics of fear, of self-protection, I must buy lots of extra tins, extra milk to make sure I have enough and that leaves none for the shopper coming behind us. This connects perhaps to this morning's chat exchanges about divesting from fossil fuels, where there may be fear to do so when responsible for investment income. Maggie, from CAFOD, tells us that this has already been done in this Diocese though.

That's encouraging! Because the logic of fear, of scarcity, is the logic that is refused by our faith.

The narratives of scripture are of superabundance. They are a logic not of mere exchange, but of a replenishing stream, of drinking and never going thirsty, of justice that rains down, of the joyful cry on the mountains and in the cities, of giving beyond what is reasonable in fulfilment of justice and love. They reflect communities' encounters with the boundless love of God. Even before Christ, this was framed in increasingly universal ways as an imitation of the love of God – to love God and one's neighbour, not to harm anyone as one would not wish harm against oneself².

In our specific Christian trajectory from that great insight is also the call to attend to the real face of Christ in the person in need, as Bishop Patrick mentioned this morning.

This for me is the defining character of the Christian narratives which give particular content to Christian hope, to Christian love. I quote from Paul Ricoeur, who is cited in *Fratelli Tutti*, when I say that "seen from the standpoint of hope, life [itself] is not only the contrary of but the denial of death... it is the capacity to live according to the paradoxical law of superabundance, of denying death and asserting an excess of sense over non-sense, in all desperate situations."³ What this means is that our faith refuses the fear of precarity, the self-protecting rejection of others who need us – that it says is non-sense. Sense is found in our commitment to the *possibility* of the overflowing of love, the *possibility* of another way of relating to each other.

That is the logic in which *Fratelli Tutti* is also rooted, the logic of Catholic Social Teaching. It proposes another way of relating – a relationship of universal kinship and social friendship. These are its two great pillars. Nothing could be a more powerful response in this time and in this place. 'it is truly noble to place our hope in the hidden power of the seeds of goodness we sow, and thus to initiate processes whose fruits will be reaped by others. Good politics combines love with hope and with confidence in the reserves of goodness present in human hearts.' (§196).

At the same time it does not pretend that that logic of giving, of superabundance is an easy thing. It continues:

We do well to ask ourselves, "Why I am doing this?", "What is my real aim?" ...The real, and potentially painful, questions will be, "How much love did I put into my work?" "What did I do for the progress of our people?" "What mark did I leave on the life of society?" "What real bonds did I create?" "What positive forces did I unleash?" "How much social peace did I sow?" "What good did I achieve in the position that was entrusted to me?" (§196).

The encyclical goes on to talk about what this new way of relating might mean for our practices, in all sorts of ways. One of those ways is dialogue, the sharing of ideas and practices, as Maggie also emphasised earlier. This includes dialogues where we disagree, if we disagree well and

² Rabbi Hillel; Babylonian Talmud

³ Paul Ricoeur, "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems", 206-207.

thoughtfully. So a closing thought is to realise that already the work that we are engaged in together today is itself the drawing out of *caritas* from these dark times. The conversations we have today can themselves be the new way of relating, of imagining ways of relating, in concrete ways, new structures, new organisation.

I am going to conclude with some words from the African American Catholic Theologian M Shawn Copeland, about what the work of theology, of faith, of social action is really for. She speaks of 'the fragile yet resilient webs of relation' as the very reality in which we live. Faced with those ties, she says, our work is to:

collaborate in a most fundamental way in healing and creating relations in history and society. We want to coax forward a different sociality... Our work is to open that sociality to the desire, hope, and loving expectation of something (even Someone) transcendent.⁴

In your relations, established and new, the work of hope has been begun amongst you already. It is in the nature of even the conversations we will have together today; this is, already, *caritas*.

Afternoon Response

The conversations through today may prompt three further thoughts:

- **Radical mutuality.** What has been emphasised by many people is the need for further and deeper inclusion in our shared work. This relates to who is enabled to participate in gatherings of this kind and recognising the work already being done by groups not yet represented here. Nancy reminded us for work being led on by diaspora communities, and others noted other people such as those with intellectual disability who weren't visibly participating today. What this seems to underline is the profound commitment amongst the group to the reality of that universal kinship that is not characterised by inequality but by new recognition of what each can offer the whole.
- The principle of Ubuntu named by Nancy is a striking expression of that. We might also want to speak in the terms Paul used about our **shared vulnerability** or woundedness.
- **Subsidiarity**, part of the resources of CST which many have mentioned today, does emphasise the meaningfulness of working locally, with and for those involved in the experience of injustice. Yet it also points our attention toward the effectiveness of the level at which we work, and the organisational spheres involved. That prompts us to think in diverse ways about the different kinds of organisations within the diocese who may be involved in any work of mapping what is going on, such as schools and MATs (suggested by Jess) who are engaged with other organisations too, and might contribute to enrich and respond to parish life too.

⁴ M. Shawn Copeland, "Memory, #BlackLivesMatter, and Theologians," *Political Theology* 17:1 (January 2016), 2.