

Our Relationships with One Another

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In his new encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*¹, Pope Francis reflects on how we interact with one another, beginning with a particular focus on how modern digital media influences our relationships.

In this article, I would like to focus on the beginning of his encyclical, concerning how we communicate as a whole world and what governs the way we interact.

High-speed communication and ease of travel have changed the way we interact. We are no longer isolated in small geographic regions with limited interactions beyond our local region. Here, Pope Francis says

"As society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbours, but does not make us brothers". We are more alone than ever in an increasingly massified world that promotes individual interests and weakens the communitarian dimension of life (*Fratelli Tutti*, 12. the first part of the quote is taken from Pope Benedict's encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, 19).

One might think that the greatly increased interaction between people would lead to a more close knit worldwide community. However, while communication happens much faster, it is often more shallow. Do we really know the people we are communicating with? How much substance is there to our communication? How much of the communication is work-related without regard to the individual lives of the people doing the communication?

We might first ask what is our purpose in communicating. Are we genuinely concerned about the individuals and their needs or are do we use the communication for our own gain? Pope Francis offers one negative use of communication as he says

The best way to dominate and gain control over people is to spread despair and discouragement, even under the guise of defending certain values. Today, in many countries, hyperbole, extremism and polarization have become political tools (*Fratelli Tutti*, 15).

Do we use modern communication to spread fear or manipulate people into doing what we want? Do we spread fear while claiming we have the solutions so people will "trust" us, thus surrendering their freedom to our will out of fear? Here Pope Francis comments on political life.

Political life no longer has to do with healthy debates about long-term plans to improve people's lives and to advance the common good, but only with slick marketing techniques primarily aimed at discrediting others (*Fratelli Tutti*, 15).

¹*Fratelli Tutti* is available from HijezGlobal Press, Cottbus, Germany (copyright 2020) or online at http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

We see this in political campaigning here in the United States. From the soundbites on television, it seems that politicians running for office spend more time speaking negatively about their opponent than talking about what they stand for, *why* they think so, and *what* they will do about it. Pope Francis includes a whole chapter on dialogue in *Fratelli Tutti*. I will discuss “dialogue” in a later article. For now, please allow me to say that we must use current means of communication to seek the truth, Truth that is rooted in Jesus Christ. (“*If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*” John 8:32)

Returning to the question of the purpose of our communication, instead of focusing solely on our own needs (individualism), should not our goal be for the common good? Does our communication with others show that we seek to keep Jesus’ second commandment, to love our neighbor? Here, Pope Francis says,

Today, as in the past, slavery is rooted in a notion of **the** human person that allows him or her to be treated as an object (*Fratelli Tutti*, 24).

If we treat other people as objects, as means for our own gain, we are guilty of sin. If we want to have our own needs fulfilled and to be free to choose, we need to make sure we treat others the same way, “*Do to others whatever you would have them do to you*” (Matthew 7:12).

We must treat people with love and the dignity given to them by God throughout their *whole* life, from conception to natural death. We should not see the labor workforce simply as means to do our work *for us*. We must see them as people. Likewise, we should not treat others as objects of lust, seeking only physical pleasure. We must see the whole individual, the beauty they have on the outside *and* the inside.

Pope Francis speaks of "Digital campaigns of hatred and destruction" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 42). People use digital media to spread their hatred and tear down the rights of others. Digital media itself is neither good or bad. It is our intent in the way we use it that is good or bad. Do we use digital reality to distort true reality, manipulating information to get what we want? We do not have to. It is our choice. Digital media can be used for good. It can be used to proclaim the gospel. We need to use all forms of communication to speak of the goodness of what God has created, acknowledge our sinfulness and proclaiming that Jesus Christ died for our sins so that we can be rescued and welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven.

How do you use digital media? Do you use it for work or personal relationships? Are they real relationships? Here, Pope Francis says

Digital media can also expose people to the risk of addiction, isolation and a gradual loss of contact with concrete reality, blocking the development of authentic interpersonal relationships...yet they do not really build community (*Fratelli Tutti*, 42, this entire quote is originally from *Christus Vivit*, 88).

We think we can be in community through social media. However, social media lacks a personal connection. We must ask ourselves, do we know the real person or do we create our own image of them in our mind from our limited experience. Is this image based on how the person portrays themselves? If so, we must ask ourselves is this truly who they are? Does the image we build of them express who they truly are?

Ask yourself how you generally communicate with your friends. Do you communicate face to face? Do you talk on the phone or by using one of the various video formats available online? or video chatting? Or is your relationship with your friends based on short text messages that do not really enter into a deep relationship? There is nothing wrong with texting but we miss the joy of the other person when texting is the basis for our whole relationship.

As Pope Francis says, "Digital connectivity is not enough to build bridges. It is not capable of uniting humanity" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 42). No matter what your social media accounts tell you, you do not have hundreds of friends.

Pope Francis goes on to say, "Social aggression has found unparalleled room for expansion through computers and mobile devices" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 44). We say things on social media platforms that we would never say to someone's face. Why is one willing to say on social media what one would never say in person? We hide behind the fact that we are speaking to people we may never see.

Pope Francis cautions us, "The way many platforms work often ends up favouring encounter between persons who think alike, shielding them from debate" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 45).

When engaging in social media discussion, do we seek unbiased facts or do we only look at things we already agree with, without regard to facts or truth? We might ask ourselves how this also impacts our relationship with God. Do we listen to God, allowing him to tell us the truth or do we expect that God agrees with us?

As I conclude this article, I offer two more quotes from the encyclical. First, using quotes from Karol Wojtyla (later Pope John Paul II) and Fr. Karl Rahner, Pope Francis says

"The lover 'goes outside' the self to find a fuller existence in another". For this reason, "man always has to take up the challenge of moving beyond himself." (*Fratelli Tutti*, 88).

and

I cannot know myself apart from a broader network of relationships (*Fratelli Tutti*, 89).

We should not isolate ourselves from physical interaction with others. We are created to be communal beings. We are created to love. We need to be in relationship with one another. As the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are in union with one another, we need to seek with be one with all God's people. We only truly find ourselves through our relationships with others, including God.