

Remembering the Past and Building a Better Future

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November 18, 2020

This is the fourth and final article in a series by Fr. Jeff reflecting on Pope Francis' new encyclical, Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship¹. The entire series can be found online at <http://www.renewaloffaith.org/our-relationships-with-others.html>.

In chapter 7 of his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis focuses on forgiveness and memory. The topic of forgiveness is well within the general theme of the encyclical, “fraternity and social friendship.” Relationships with others can be difficult. Unfortunately, at times, we hurt one another and forgiveness is needed. However, forgiving does not equate to forgetting. We remember the past. We remember the times when we have been hurt. We need to forgive if we are going to build a better future.²

We are created to be in relationship with others. Unfortunately, at times we do things that break our relationships. We need to reconcile our past hurts. That includes forgiveness. Forgiveness is necessary for the one who has done wrong. It is necessary for the salvation of their soul. Forgiveness is also necessary for the victim. If we do not forgive, then we are holding onto anger in our hearts. This anger hurts us. We need to be replace the anger with love through forgiveness and reconciliation.

It is unfortunate that there are some people who think reconciliation between parties is not necessary. Pope Francis says

There are those who prefer not to talk of reconciliation, for they think that conflict, violence, and breakdown are part of the normal functioning of a society (*Fratelli Tutti*, 236).

Conflict may seem commonplace today as we hear about violence so frequently in the news. The fact that we hear of conflict and violence often may make them seem “normal” but it is not the way God intends things to be. Even if they seem normal, that does not mean we stop trying to forgive. We are meant for love. We are created for love.

So, why are some people not willing to forgive? Pope Francis offers one explanation.

Others think that promoting forgiveness means yielding ground and influence to others. For this reason, they feel it is better to keep things as they are, maintaining a balance of power between differing groups (*Fratelli Tutti*, 236).

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

²For more on my perspective on what forgiveness is and is not, please see my video presentation, *Why Is It So Hard to Forgive Myself (and others)?* At <http://www.renewaloffaith.org/video---why-is-it-so-hard-to-forgive.html> as well as my blog articles on the topic of forgiveness online at <http://blog.renewaloffaith.org/blog/?cat=491> and/or my blog article, “Forgiveness Can be Hard” at <http://blog.renewaloffaith.org/blog/?p=3681>.

These people see forgiveness as a sign of weakness. They “keep things as they are” to hold onto their power. Forgiveness is *not* a sign of weakness. Instead, we should see forgiveness as a sign of power. However, I do not mean “power” to control others. No, the power that comes with forgiveness is the power of love.

We need to forgive. However, in our approach to forgiveness we must listen to the words of Pope Francis, "In any case, forgetting is never the answer" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 246). If we simply forget what has happened, how are we to learn from it? From this comes the title of this article, “Remembering the Past and Building a Better Future.” If we are to build a better future, we must acknowledge the past. Pope Francis offers the following.

As I think of it, I cannot help but repeat this prayer: "Lord, remember us in your mercy. *Grant us the grace to be ashamed* of what we men have done, to be ashamed of this massive idolatry, of having despised and destroyed our own flesh, which you formed from the earth, to which you gave life with your own breath of life. Never again, Lord, never again!" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 247, emphasis added. Pope Francis is quoting from his address from "Visit to the Yad Vashem Memorial on May 26, 2014, emphasis added).

Really? Are we to ask for grace to be ashamed? Yes, but we must consider what we mean by the word “ashamed”. The word “shame” can mean embarrassment. In “shame”, we might feel we are “no good.” We are fundamentally good because we are created in the image of God. Rather, in asking God for the grace to be ashamed, we are asking for the grace to see our failings and to want to change. If we are not willing to admit this, how is it be possible for us to change for the better? To build a better future, we must openly admit to our past failings. Then, we can ask for forgiveness.

Pope Francis speaks of the importance of “memory”

We cannot allow present and future generations to lose the memory of what happened. It is a memory that ensures and encourages the building of a more fair and fraternal future" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 248. Taken from his from "address at the Peace Memorial, Hiroshima, Japan on November 24, 2019).

Memory is more than just remembering the past as historical events. Memory involves the significance of those events to us. It involves how they *are part of* who we are as individuals and as a people. Exodus 12 speaks of the Passover celebration as a memorial institution to be celebrated by the Jews each year, not just to invoke memories of the first Passover but to actually make present the Passover. Likewise, as Catholics we celebrate the Eucharist knowing that God, in a way only God can, makes present the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.

I am not alone in speaking of our need to remember the past to make a better future. There is an old familiar adage, those who do not know the past are doomed to repeat it. Pope Francis stresses this as he says

We can never move forward without remembering the past; we do not progress without an honest and unclouded memory (*Fratelli Tutti*, 249).

One does not have to think hard to recall some past actions for which there is no justification or excuse. This is true for us in our individual lives and it is true for us as a church.

For one example as a church, there is the clergy abuse scandal. There is no excuse for the sins committed by individual clergy against innocent children and adults. There is also no good excuse for the cover-up that followed. It is not enough but please allow me to say I am sorry to the victims and their loved ones. Yet, as Pope Francis says

In the face of an action that can never be tolerated, justified or excused, we can still forgive (*Fratelli Tutti*, 250).

It is hard to forgive. The hurt caused to the victims of sexual abuse is enormous. We need to change our practices. In 2002, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops established new guidelines, commonly called the “Charter” or “Charter and Norms” to change the way our church deals with abuse allegations. There is still work to be done as evidenced from continuing reports in the news about sexual abuse scandals. We must remain vigilant. We cannot change such situations without remembering the travesty of the past. However, remembering that there is still work to be done does not mean letting the past control us. We must ask God to help us move forward.

You might recall something that was done to you in the past that has been very hard to forgive. Is there someone in your past that you have a hard time forgiving? Is there something in your past for which you need to be forgiven for? You do not have to forget but forgiving is good for you. It is letting go of the past. Our past shapes who we are today but it does not have to control who we are in the future.

We must let go of the hate and anger that dwells within us. I end with these words of Pope Francis.

Those who truly forgive do not forget. Instead, they choose not to yield to the same destructive force that caused them so much suffering. They break the vicious circle...Revenge never truly satisfies victims...Revenge resolves nothing (*Fratelli Tutti*, 251).