

Seeking Real Dialogue

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This is the third 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 my first article reflecting on Pope Francis' encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, I discussed what he said about the ways we communicate and what governs our interactions². In this article I will discuss the term “dialogue” and specifically what Pope Francis says about it. Dialogue is the topic of chapter 6 of the encyclical.

The theme of *Fratelli Tutti* is “fraternity and social friendship.” The way in which we dialogue is a central component of how we interact with other people. As we engage in dialogue, do we value what others have to say? When we speak, do we speak with love and compassion or with self-righteousness?

Describing “dialogue”, Pope Francis says

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” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 198, emphasis added).

Both sides must be open to speaking *and* allowed to speak what they think. True dialogue requires that we express ourselves well. Listening is necessary. If we want others to listen to what we have to say, we must be willing to listen to what they have to say. Only in honesty and compassion can we come to “know and understand one another.”

It is important to realize that understanding one another is not the same as *agreeing* with one another. In fact, true dialogue includes being willing to say we do not agree and that we have different ideas. Are we able to express the reasoning behind what we think and believe? Are we open to allowing others to make their point?

In dialogue, we seek “common ground.” However, reaching common ground does not mean that we must abandon what we do not agree on. Common ground is essential to providing a foundation upon which we can build future dialogue. Common ground ***does not mean*** we compromise on our values. Our values are based on God’s Truth. Human dialogue does not change God’s Truth. Human dialogue should help lead us to God’s Truth but it does not determine it.

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

² “Our Relationships with One Another” -

<http://nebula.wsimg.com/203e05a0610646231d1c5680fa6edabe?AccessKeyId=F465FCE598BCE1CD661B&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>

Pope Francis offers the following on what dialogue is and is not.

Dialogue is often confused with something quite different: the feverish exchange of opinions on social networks, frequently based on media information that is not always reliable. These exchanges are merely parallel monologues. They may attract some attention by their sharp and aggressive tone. But monologues engage no one, and their content is frequently self-serving and contradictory (*Fratelli Tutti*, 200).

We may think we are dialoguing anytime two or more people are communicating. However, there is no real and *productive* dialogue if the people are not listening to one another. This is true whether the communication is between two individuals or two groups of people. Pope Francis' term "parallel monologues" captures what happens in conversation between two groups that disagree. We see this in the politics of secular government when people of different political parties give long speeches on their position without listening to the other. This can be seen at a more personal level when any two people are talking but neither is listening. In offering "parallel monologues", we might be talking at someone without really talking with them.

This lack of listening can become adversarial as one person cuts the others off or responds with a hostile tone. Conflict takes over where dialogue is needed. Pope Francis of this when he says

It becomes easier to discredit and insult opponents from the outset than to open a respectful dialogue aimed at achieving agreement on a deeper level (*Fratelli Tutti*, 201).

What does the negativity accomplish? The negativity often leads to further division and even less listening. Pope Francis speaks of our motives in what we are trying to accomplish in conversation when he says

Lack of dialogue means that in these individual sectors people are concerned not for the common good, but for the benefits of power or, at best, for ways to impose their own ideas (*Fratelli Tutti*, 202).

There are people who are more interested in getting their way than in what is best for all. In the Lord's Prayer, we pray "thy kingdom come." We are to work towards God's Will of what is good for all. Does anything change for the better when we are motivated only by our own interests?

Pope Francis reminds us that

Authentic social dialogue involves the ability to respect the other's point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns (*Fratelli Tutti*, 203).

Even when we continue to disagree, we need to listen to what the other person has to say. For instance, despite years of discourse, the abortion issue remains a divisive issue. Our faith teaches us that all life is a gift from God. It also teaches us that life begins at conception and continues until natural death. This is the pro-life position as it pertains to abortion (Being pro-life is much more than just abortion, it involves life at every stage). On the other hand, the pro-choice position

does not see the life in the womb as a life with its own rights. They see it as part of the woman's body. They say it is the woman's choice what to do with her body. This is an example of how two sides struggle to dialogue.

I am pro-life. Our faith is pro-life. We must not yield on this. However, this does not mean that the pro-choice people have nothing important to say. For instance, they speak of risk to the mother's health from the pregnancy. They have a valid point. To be pro-life involves caring for all life, including the mother's life. Please do not mistakenly think that this means abortion is acceptable. Issues of a mother's health do not justify abortion. We must care for the mother's health in a way that also cares for the child in her womb. This can be very difficult but it is God's way.

Dialogue must be open, honest, and loving. Pope Francis speaks of the benefits of this.

When individuals or groups are consistent in their thinking, ***defend their values and convictions***, and ***develop their arguments***, this ***surely benefits society***. Yet, this can only occur to the extent that there is genuine dialogue and openness to others (*Fratelli Tutti*, 203, emphasis added).

What does it mean to defend our values? We are not looking for a fight. We are looking for truth. We are standing up for what we believe. This is free speech. Our goal is not to be right. Our goal is to lead all to the truth of Christ. This "surely benefits society."

Pope Francis speaks of how genuine dialogue seeks the truth

Public discussion, if it truly makes room for everyone and does not manipulate or conceal information, is a constant stimulus to a better grasp of the truth, or at least its more effective expression (*Fratelli Tutti*, 203).

Listening to others and seeking to respond to their points with the love and truth of Christ only strengthens our position. Even if we continue to disagree, hopefully we have learned to better understand our own position and to better express it. Genuine dialogue is not easy. It takes commitment. It requires us to better understand what our faith teaches. It requires compassion and mercy.

Speaking of religious dialogue, Pope Francis speaks of our need to commit to the whole truth when he says

It follows that "we believers need to find occasions to speak with one another and to act together for the common good and the promotion of the poor. ***This has nothing to do with watering down or concealing our deepest convictions*** when we encounter others who think differently than ourselves...For the deeper, stronger and richer our own identity is, the more we will be capable of enriching others with our own proper contribution (*Fratelli Tutti*, 282. Emphasis added).

We must remain committed to the truth. We must remain committed to love. We must remain committed to God. Finding common ground is important but it is not enough. It is a starting point in dialogue, not a concluding point. May the Holy Spirit help us in our efforts to achieve genuine dialogue as we seek the Lord in all things.