



In a Time of COVID-19, Migrants and Refugees and the New Generation Responding

Cardinal Michael Czerny S.J.

Sophia University, Tokyo
27 November 2020

With joy and gratitude we remember the Holy Father's visit to Sophia University on 26 November a year ago. Today I have been asked to speak about the challenges migrants and refugees are facing during this time of COVID-19, and how can the new generation respond? To these questions, my reply comes from the teachings of our Holy Father Francis, who has served as an extraordinary moral exemplar and leader during this time of COVID. Locked down like many, the Holy Father was neither isolated nor silent. Instead, he transmitted one remarkable message after another. Two of the most striking were his *Urbi et orbi* messages, in which he solemnly addressed and blessed the city (*urbi*) of Rome, of which he is Bishop, and the entire world (*orbi*). (The two messages occurred on 27 March, an occasion without precedent, at the extraordinary prayer of adoration in St Peter's Square; and on 12 April, Easter Sunday, the traditional day for this message.) Later, in his regular Wednesday general audiences of August and September, he offered nine brief and important treatises on the moral contours of a post-COVID world. As well, he offered a number of homilies, texts, and letters from lockdown. Finally, his recent Encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (FT) asks -- as you do -- what lessons need to be learned from the pandemic, how to develop stronger bonds of fraternity and social friendship both within societies and between nations.

In my remarks to you, addressing the theme of migrants and refugees and the role of young people, let us first review the many teachings offered by the Holy Father during the past nine months. Then we can move on to discuss the wisdom of *Fratelli tutti*. Finally, I very much look forward to your comments, questions and suggestions.

Pope Francis's COVID discourses

Beginning in late March, the Holy Father recognized that we all feel adrift in turbulent times. “We find ourselves afraid and lost,” he says. “Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat ... are all of us.”¹

Nevertheless, on this one boat, we are not all on the same deck or in the same class. Pope Francis recognizes that the “least among us” are suffering most from the pandemic. Yet, paradoxically, those usually overlooked are proving indispensable. To them he offers his fatherly affection and compassion: “May the Lord of life ... grant comfort and hope to those still suffering, especially the elderly and those who are alone. May he never withdraw his consolation and help from those who are especially vulnerable, such as persons who work in nursing homes, or live in barracks and prisons”.²

The family album goes on: “doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, priests, religious men and women” and “fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers ... showing our children, in small everyday gestures, how to face up to and navigate a crisis by adjusting their routines, lifting their gaze and fostering prayer”.³

Think now of how the COVID crisis affects migrants, refugees, displaced peoples, and victims of human trafficking. It has shone an unusual light on these populations. Even ‘normal’ times are not normal for them. They are accustomed to enduring months and typically years of uncertainty, acute anxiety, precarious nutrition and lodging, poor health, legal limbo, and either unemployment or the risk of exploitation and abuse if they do find paid work.

With the pandemic, even the precarious work disappears. They cannot go back to their former country because borders are closed. They have to stay, but now with even less means to survive on. As governments scurry to improvise solutions and protect their own citizens, the forgotten ones become doubly—and sometimes even deliberately—forgotten.

Think, for example, of the basic and essential services—such as healthcare, agriculture and food-processing, maintenance, security, distribution and deliveries, etc.—which have kept society running during the darkest days. Many who provide them, putting their own health at risk, are migrants, refugees, and seasonal workers. Think of those crowded in camps and other

¹ Urbi et orbi, Adoration in St Peter's. “Why are you afraid?”.

² Urbi et orbi, Easter Sunday, “Like a new flame”.

³ Urbi et orbi, Adoration in St Peter's. “Why are you afraid?”

detention facilities, where COVID can spread like wildfire. Think of those living on the streets, unable to take the most basic health precautions. Think of those, for example in slums, who lack the means to “distance socially” in a safe manner.

Think of farm labourers. How often do we pause to think about how food arrives at our dinner table? If we did, we would have to face the uncomfortable fact that these workers do back-breaking labour in the heat of the sun, often for low pay, often bearing inhumane work conditions. And many are migrants, desperate to make money for their families back home—so desperate that they will take up this undesirable and largely hidden form of work.

As we think about the plight of these vulnerable populations, Pope Francis offers a number of vital lessons:

- We must put the common good above self-centeredness;
- We must reject the ruinous ideologies of indifference, invisibility and individualism;
- We must not ignore and we must not forget;
- We must not foster divisions;
- We must not be hypocrites;
- We must reject an economic model based on greed, zeal for profit, and instant gratification;
- We must put people first, rejecting purely technocratic solutions.

The pandemic appeared in a particular context—one of widespread injustice, inequality, and assaults on our common home. This context aggravates the pandemic. It should impels us to try and make things better. We need to find a cure both for the “small but terrible virus” of COVID-19, and for the “larger virus” of social injustice, inequality of opportunity, marginalization, and the lack of protection for the weakest.⁴ While COVID is a disaster, Pope Francis warns: “The risk is that we may then be struck by an even worse virus, that of selfish indifference. A virus spread by the thought that life is better if it is better for me, and that everything will be fine if it is fine for me. It begins there and ends up selecting one person over another, discarding the poor, and sacrificing those left behind on the altar of progress.”⁵

The prescription offered by Pope Francis unleashes the “antibodies of justice, charity, and solidarity”.⁶ How might we develop such healthy antibodies? Pope Francis spent two months discussing the antidotes, the building-blocks of a post-COVID world. During nine Wednesday General Audiences in August and September, the Holy Father applied the principles of Catholic

⁴ General Audience, 19 August 2020.

⁵ “Egoism: an Even Worse Virus,” Extract from the *Homily, II Sunday of Easter (or Feast of Divine Mercy)*, Church of Santo Spirito in Sassia, 19 April 2020.

⁶ “A Plan to Rise Up Again.” The original text written in Spanish was published by « Vida Nueva » on 17 April 2020. This English translation has been carried out by LEV staff.

social teaching to the current pandemic-induced challenges. He enumerated the main principles for us: the dignity of the person, the common good, the preferential option for the poor, the universal destination of goods, the principles of solidarity, of subsidiarity, and of care for our common home.⁷

To sum up: the pope reminds us that, like no other event in living memory, the COVID-19 crisis evokes both our vulnerability and our interdependence. This is not necessarily bad. In fact, our vulnerabilities and interdependencies unite us. From a crisis like this one, the Pope has often emphasised, we are not the same afterwards as before; we exit from it either better or worse. And we will not exit from it better if we fall back into the temptation of individualism, whether personal or collective, often expressed in the form of political nationalisms and narrow economic interests.

As young people, I know you strive for a better world. I know you want to reject an economy of exclusion, an ideology of individualism, a culture that discards people, the degradation of our common home driven by a false notion of progress. I know you want to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic full of vitality and solidarity and other superb antibodies.

The answer to this very modern crisis can, I believe, be found in some ancient and timeless teachings from the Christian tradition. Nowhere is this clearer than with the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, to which I now turn.

The Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*

On 3 October 2020, Pope Francis issued a new encyclical called *Fratelli tutti*—inviting all people of good will to dialogue.⁸ As a papal encyclical, it is the Holy Father’s most authoritative significant intervention during this time of pandemic. In this encyclical, Pope Francis is calling for fraternity and social friendship between all peoples and nations. He is calling for “fraternal openness that allows us to acknowledge, appreciate and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, regardless of where he or she was born or lives.”⁹ Instead of overheated individual and public self-centredness, he is calling for an attitude of love and openness to prevail over the narrow ideologies of nationalism and individualism which add up to “cool, comfortable and globalized indifference.”¹⁰

This has clear implications for the vulnerable populations of concern named in the title of this talk—migrants, refugees, displaced peoples, victims of human trafficking. We are called to love

⁷ Cf. General Audience, 5 August 2020.

⁸ FT 6.

⁹ FT 1.

¹⁰ FT 30.

our neighbour, says Pope Francis, but “complex challenges arise when our neighbour happens to be an immigrant.”¹¹

Ideally, people should not be forced to migrate in the first place. They have the right to hope for a dignified life and integral development in their own homelands. This requires enormous investment in sustainable and indeed integral development and combating environmental degradation and climate change. Here the international community falls far short; much work remains to be done. Poverty and hunger remain rampant; hunger is a particular scandal—as Pope Francis says, “world politics needs to make the effective elimination of hunger one of its foremost and imperative goals.”¹² At the same time, our common home is crying out from the pain we inflict on the environment, both natural and social. As *Fratelli tutti* notes, migrants are often fleeing war, persecution, and natural catastrophes—often connected to environmental and social disasters. What’s more, “every war leaves our world worse than it was before. War is a failure of politics and of humanity, a shameful capitulation, a stinging defeat before the forces of evil.”¹³ In the face of these calamities and evils, migrants and refugees are “seeking opportunities for themselves and their families. They dream of a better future and they want to create the conditions for achieving it.”¹⁴ Is this not what you want? Do they not deserve as much?

Yet there are so many obstacles placed in their paths. Nationalist and populist regimes seek to keep migrants out, hunkering down behind defensive walls. Too often, we witness a xenophobic mentality whereby migrants “are not seen as entitled like others to participate in the life of society, and it is forgotten that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person.”¹⁵ This mentality, Pope Francis stresses, is simply not compatible with Christianity, “since it sets certain political preferences above deep convictions of our faith: the inalienable dignity of each human person regardless of origin, race or religion, and the supreme law of fraternal love.”¹⁶

At the same time, poorer countries receive insufficient aid to allow them to invest in the sustainable and integral development of their own people. Most shamefully of all, human traffickers—often linked to drug and arms prey on migrants, creating “violence, trafficking, psychological and physical abuse and untold sufferings.”¹⁷ What’s more, “millions of people today – children, women and men of all ages – are deprived of freedom and forced to live in conditions akin to slavery.”¹⁸ This can lead to many egregious scandals, including prostitution,

¹¹ FT 129.

¹² FT 189.

¹³ FT 261.

¹⁴ FT 37.

¹⁵ FT 39.

¹⁶ FT 39.

¹⁷ FT 38.

¹⁸ FT 24.

forced abortions, the marketing of human organs and tissues, the sexual exploitation of boys and girls.¹⁹

All of this has two implications, says Pope Francis. First, there is “the right not to emigrate, that is, to remain in one’s homeland.”²⁰ This entails the responsibility to help develop the poorer homelands. Until this happens, secondly, “we are obliged to respect the right of all individuals to find a place that meets their basic needs and those of their families, and where they can find personal fulfilment.”²¹ And the appropriate moral response to migrants and refugees can be summed up in four active verbs: to welcome, to protect, to promote, and to integrate.

There are many concrete ways to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate those who have fled from humanitarian crises and become our new neighbours. *Fratelli tutti* lists some of them: “increasing and simplifying the granting of visas; adopting programmes of individual and community sponsorship; opening humanitarian corridors for the most vulnerable refugees; providing suitable and dignified housing; guaranteeing personal security and access to basic services; ensuring adequate consular assistance and the right to retain personal identity documents; equitable access to the justice system; the possibility of opening bank accounts and the guarantee of the minimum needed to survive; freedom of movement and the possibility of employment; protecting minors and ensuring their regular access to education; providing for programmes of temporary guardianship or shelter; guaranteeing religious freedom; promoting integration into society; supporting the reuniting of families; and preparing local communities for the process of integration.”²²

Even with all this, however, *Fratelli tutti* is clear that individual states acting alone cannot implement adequate solutions. What is needed is a concerted effort at the global level—“a common effort to develop a form of global governance with regard to movements of migration.”²³ Short-term emergency responses are necessary but not enough. Longer-term planning and cooperation are needed to both assist migrants as they seek to integrate and to promote the sustainable development of their countries of origin.

Going even deeper, Pope Francis argues that an encounter between different cultures brought about by migration can lead to mutual enrichment—“reciprocal gifts,” as he puts it.²⁴ “Indeed,” he says, “when we open our hearts to those who are different, this enables them, while continuing to be themselves, to develop in new ways”—especially important given that “the different cultures that have flourished over the centuries need to be preserved, lest our world be

¹⁹ FT 24, 188.

²⁰ FT 38.

²¹ FT 129.

²² FT 130.

²³ FT 132.

²⁴ FT 133.

impoverished.”²⁵ As concrete examples, he references the cultural enrichment brought about by Latino migration to the United States and by Italian migration to his homeland of Argentina. He also stresses that through encounter, East and West can learn from each other, thus contributing to a less materialistic, more equitable, and more peaceful world. All in all, he notes, “mutual assistance between countries proves enriching for each,”²⁶ and this enrichment needs to be magnified in an age of globalization.

This relates to the importance of openness to others through gratuitousness, which Pope Francis defines as “the ability to do some things simply because they are good in themselves, without concern for personal gain or recompense.”²⁷ In the words of St Ignatius Loyola, “To give and not to count the cost.” This principle of freely giving, the Holy Father says, “makes it possible for us to welcome the stranger, even though this brings us no immediate tangible benefit.”²⁸ When gratuitousness is lacking, immigrants are seen as “usurpers who have nothing to offer.”²⁹ In this sense, “narrow forms of nationalism are an extreme expression of an inability to grasp the meaning of this gratuitousness. They err in thinking that they can develop on their own, heedless of the ruin of others, that by closing their doors to others they will be better protected.”³⁰ Yet this is ultimately self-defeating. As *Fratelli tutti* argues, only a culture that freely and generously welcomes others has a future.

Fratelli tutti also talks about the role of young people in creating this culture of fraternity, solidarity, and gratuitousness. First, he says, young people should appreciate rootedness and history. Think of it this way: if a plant has weak roots, it won’t survive. The same is true for a culture without a sense of history and common narrative. If we insist on starting from zero, says Pope Francis, we are left merely with “limitless consumption and expressions of empty individualism.”³¹ It is up to the young people to reject this hollow vision and instead embrace the human and spiritual riches that come from past generations. One way of depriving young people this connection to their roots is by discarding the elderly. Think of all the needless deaths of old people as a result of the coronavirus or environmental disasters—this is part of a “throwaway world,” says Pope Francis. “All of us have a responsibility for the wounded, those of our own people and all the peoples of the earth,” the Holy Father says. “Let us care for the needs of every man and woman, young and old, with the same fraternal spirit of care and closeness that marked the Good Samaritan.”³²

²⁵ FT 134.

²⁶ FT 137.

²⁷ FT 139.

²⁸ FT 139.

²⁹ FT 141.

³⁰ FT 141.

³¹ FT 13.

³² FT 79.

To achieve this, *Fratelli tutti* calls for social dialogue for a new culture, and this must encompass dialogue between generations. As the encyclical notes, “A country flourishes when constructive dialogue occurs between its many rich cultural components: popular culture, university culture, youth culture, artistic culture, technological culture, economic culture, family culture and media culture.”³³

In this vein, *Fratelli tutti* stresses the supreme importance of the value of solidarity. This in turn calls for a commitment to education and formation, which must encompass the role of families and teachers, since “The values of freedom, mutual respect and solidarity can be handed on from a tender age.”³⁴ Education cannot simply be technical, training me; it must also be moral, communal, forming us.

Young people are also called upon to lead in openness to migrants and refugees, to those who are different from us. “For this reason,” says Pope Francis, “I especially urge young people not to play into the hands of those who would set them against other young people, newly arrived in their countries, and who would encourage them to view the latter as a threat, and not possessed of the same inalienable dignity as every other human being.”³⁵

Conclusion

Let me conclude by quoting the Holy Father one more time. “The pandemic has put us all in crisis,” he says. “But let us remember that after a crisis a person is not the same. We come out of it better, or we come out of it worse. This is our option.”³⁶

What Pope Francis teaches, especially in *Fratelli tutti*, gives us a moral roadmap to emerge stronger, less fearful, and more human. It is in the hands of young people to forge this future, including by extending a welcoming hand to migrants, refugees, and all vulnerable and marginalized people. Are you up to the challenge?

³³ FT 199.

³⁴ FT 114.

³⁵ FT 133.

³⁶ General Audience, 19 August 2020.