

# **Siblings All, Sign of the Times**

## *The Social Teaching of Pope Francis*

Cardinal Michael Czerny  
and Christian Barone

Foreword by Pope Francis

Translated by Julian Paparella

ORBIS  BOOKS  
Maryknoll, New York 10545

## INTRODUCTION

Our intention with this book is to introduce the 2021 Encyclical Letter of Pope Francis, significantly entitled *Fratelli Tutti*, which we translate as “Siblings All.” In doing so, we first profile the work and teaching of the Argentinian pope—brought to Rome from the peripheries “almost from the ends of the earth”<sup>1</sup>—to highlight his continuity with the affirmations of the Second Vatican Council.

We will try to highlight the features that distinguish the “social” Magisterium of Pope Francis without claiming to be exhaustive or wanting to be apologetic.

Two preliminary observations may be useful in order to contextualize what we intend to develop in the course of this reflection.

The first premise is drawn from the text of *Dei Verbum*, in which the Council Fathers affirm that God has spoken to humanity with “deeds and words [*gestis verbisque*]” (*DV 2*). In describing the economy of Revelation, they wanted to emphasize the circularity (*perichoresis*) and the intimate connection between what God says and what God does.

It is important to note that they chose to give precedence to deeds, so as to emphasize that in the divine action it is the events of salvation history that “manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words” (*DV 2*).

We can apply this hermeneutic criterion to the pontificate of Pope Francis. In order to understand his Magisterium, it is not enough to refer to the speeches or documents promulgated in

---

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *First Greeting of the Holy Father Pope Francis* (March 13, 2013).

the course of his papacy, but it is necessary to look at his actions. We need only think, for example, of the visit of Francis to the migrants who arrived on decrepit fishing boats or rubber dinghies in Lampedusa; of the meeting with women freed from the prostitution racket with the help of the *Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII*; of the stop in Thailand to be close to the children who are victims of sex tourism; of the numerous apostolic trips in which he has been a “pilgrim” in various parts of the world; and also of the many gestures of hope expressed during and since the COVID-19 pandemic and all its upheaval.<sup>2</sup>

It is the concrete signs and actions that he has offered since the beginning of his Petrine ministry that illuminate the words that he has addressed during these years to Catholics, to Christians of other confessions, to the faithful of other religions, to believers and not, and to all people of good will.

The second premise is more general and concerns the way in which the Church has implemented the documents of the Councils that it has celebrated down through the centuries. History teaches us that not everything decreed by a Council is implemented in ecclesial practice in the same way and at the same time. We can easily see this by looking, for example, at the Constitutions promulgated by Vatican II; the liturgical reform, outlined by *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, was more readily accepted than the ecclesial renewal proposed by *Lumen Gentium*.

Over the past fifty years, the Church has seen a theological-pastoral “custom” take root that—de facto—has represented a truly selective interpretation of the Council. This shows us how, at least up until now, Vatican II has only been implemented in part and that much work still remains to be done.<sup>3</sup>

We can understand some of the fundamental choices of the Magisterium of Francis and his insistence on certain points of

---

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, “Why Are You Afraid? Have You No Faith?” *Statio Orbis*, March 27, 2020, *Our Sunday Visitor*, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. G. Lorizio, “Magistero scomodo: Vaticano II e papa Francesco,” in *Dialoghi 2* (2019): 9–14.

the Council as an attempt to follow up and find a way of implementing some of what remains unfinished: to implement those things that the Council documents indicate but which have not yet been fully integrated into the Church's living experience.

Among these, we can situate Francis's numerous reminders of the need for greater collegiality among bishops, a more significant role on the part of national episcopal conferences, and a renewal of the role played by the papacy. Also to be included are his continual references to various issues, such as the importance of women, the role of the laity, the preferential option for the poor, the dangers of clericalism, and the damage caused by the economy of exclusion.

The point here is not just to refer generally to some of the cornerstones of conciliar teaching, which Francis is obviously committed to promoting. We must also ask questions that aim to probe deeper into the link between the "Church that 'goes forth,'" which he has strongly desired, and the theological horizon traced by Vatican II. What elements enable us to see continuity in the teaching of the Church? What are the "interrupted pathways" of the Council that Francis wants the Church to rediscover in order to regain momentum today? In which direction is Francis trying to guide the future of the Church?

In order to answer these questions, it may be helpful to highlight four aspects of Francis's Magisterium that are not only deeply rooted in the transformation initiated by Vatican II, but that serve as an authentic way of interpreting the conciliar event itself.

***Pastoral life as intrinsic to, not derivative of,  
doctrinal elaboration***

Francis has made his own the most original intuition of John XXIII, which convinced him of the need to convene a council: prioritizing the good of souls and the need to respond to the necessities of the present time. Contrary to those who saw this pastoral life as something that followed doctrinal formulation,

as if it were a practical application of principles formulated by deduction, John understood pastoral life as a constitutive and intrinsic dimension of doctrine.<sup>4</sup>

This same conviction is manifested in Pope Francis, who on several occasions has highlighted the need to overcome the “divorce” between theology and pastoral life, between faith and life.<sup>5</sup> Rather than being a “teacher” who reiterates the well-established principles of doctrine, Francis has chosen to present himself as a “pastor or shepherd” who accompanies his flock and guides it towards a more authentic fidelity to the Gospel. For this reason, since the first months of his pontificate, he has encouraged the Church to emerge from its withdrawal into itself and to stop speaking in a self-referential manner, because only by “going out and risking” does one gain concrete experience of what one is called to proclaim.<sup>6</sup>

This is why the mystery of the encounter with the Lord, true God and true man, is at the heart of the Magisterium of Francis. Recovering the kerygmatic nature of faith (*EG* 164) protects it

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. G. Ruggieri, “Appunti per una teologia in Papa Roncalli,” in *Papa Giovanni*, ed. G. Alberigo, Roma-Bari 1987, 245–271; cf. T. Citrini, “A proposito dell’indole pastorale del Magistero,” in *Teologia* XV (1990) 130–149; cf. G. Alberigo, “Critères herméneutiques pour une histoire de Vatican II,” in *À la veille du concile Vatican II. Vota et réactions en Europe et dans le catholicisme oriental*, ed. M. Lamberigts and C. Soeten, Leuven 1992, 12–23.

<sup>5</sup> As the Holy Father himself noted: “One of the main contributions of the Second Vatican Council was precisely seeking a way to overcome this divorce between theology and pastoral care, between faith and life. I dare say that the Council has revolutionized to some extent the status of theology—the believer’s way of doing and thinking. I cannot forget the words of John XXIII who said in his opening address at the Council: “The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another” (video message of Pope Francis to participants in an International Theological Congress held at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina, Buenos Aires, September 1–3, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. G. Costa, “La gioia del Vangelo: il segreto di papa Francesco,” in *Aggiornamenti sociali* 65 (2014): 5–11.

from any theoretical meandering, bringing it back to the truth of that relationship with Christ that springs from the initial proclamation of the Gospel. Faith is not an ideology, but that concrete bond that we establish with the Lord and that impels us forward to meet others.<sup>7</sup> The establishment of this personal relationship within the Church gives rise to the desire to change one's life and the choice to bear joyful witness to Christ's love for the world.<sup>8</sup>

In this sense, both *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si'* develop what Pope Paul VI had already expressed in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Stressing the importance of the joy of proclaiming the Gospel—recognizing in it a theological-pastoral criterion that guides ecclesial choices as well as the content of every evangelizing action—means reconnecting the Church to the foundational experience of Easter.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The Church as the “People of God” on the way to salvation***

The evocative image of the Church as the “People of God,” taken from Scripture and renewed by *Lumen Gentium*, recurs frequently in the teaching of the post-conciliar popes. Francis, however, employs it in his own way. For him, “People of God” means recognizing in the encounter between the Gospel and cultures a further criterion for verifying the life of faith of the entire Catholic Church. The Church must allow itself to be challenged by the realities of the present and the challenges

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. C. M. Martini, “Il seme, il lievito, piccolo gregge,” in *La Civiltà cattolica* 1 (1999): 3–14.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A. Spadaro, “*Evangelii Gaudium*. Radici, struttura e significato della prima Esortazione apostolica di papa Francesco,” in *La Civiltà Cattolica* 164 (2013): 417–433.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. G. Benzi, “Il dinamismo dell’evangelizzazione: parola di Dio, annuncio, testimonianza,” in M. Tagliaferri, *Teologia dell’evangelizzazione: Fondamenti e modelli a confronto*, EDB, Bologna 2014, 61–77.

that it faces, developing a response of contextualized faith that leads it to continually renew itself and express its faithfulness to Christ as time unfolds, generation after generation.<sup>10</sup>

If this were not the case, if the Church were to lose its consciousness of always being on the move, as a reality in the making, it would run the risk of absolutizing a given historical period and crystallizing itself in a particular form of the Church (*forma ecclesiae*).

Only a Church that recognizes itself as unique People of God can mature in its vocation to universality and be for everyone “the house of the Father, with doors always wide open” and “Mother with an open heart” (*EG* 46–47; *FT* 276).

For Francis it is necessary to rediscover “the spiritual savor of being a people” (*EG* 268–274), which means growing in the mature certainty and confessing with right intention that God wants the happiness of all human beings, that “no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord” (*EG* 3). In this perspective, we can perceive the challenges that the pope indicates for the Church in today’s world, set out in detail in *Evangelii Gaudium*, as well as the first chapter of *Fratelli Tutti*: individualism, growth without integral development, the economy of exclusion, the prevalence of particular interests, inequality that generates violence, anthropological reductionism, and the lack of a shared understanding aimed at everyone being siblings everywhere, in universal solidarity and social friendship.

The close link between the proclamation of the Gospel and social commitment, between faith and justice, between joy and solidarity, shows how the essence of Christianity is summed up in charity. We can proclaim God’s greatest truths to the world, but without that love that draws close and gives itself to the “injured” neighbor, in the image of the Good Samaritan, faith stops short at a merely theoretical level. Charity, on the other

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. G. E. Rusconi, *La teologia narrativa di papa Francesco*, Laterza, Bari-Roma 2019, 89–90.

hand, is the antidote to any gnostic drifting, because it is never abstract.<sup>11</sup>

The attitude toward the poor, therefore, is a further discerning and decisive criterion for testing the unity of the People of God. It is not just a question of “helping the poor,” but of recognizing that the poor are the measure of our conformity to Christ. For this reason, the poor evangelize us, they challenge us, and they call us back to the radicality of the demands of the Gospel.

The category of People of God in the Magisterium of Francis has prompted a further development of conciliar ecclesiology that is known as *inculturation of the faith*.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, overcoming the strict identification of the Catholic Church with Western culture, as stated in *Gaudium et Spes*,<sup>13</sup> has made it possible to rethink the form of the Church (*forma ecclesiae*) as unity in difference, in the manner of trinitarian persons. At the same time, it is true that the direction taken by the post-conciliar Church has shown a certain resistance to implementing this principle.

For Francis, God’s Revelation reverberates with every people, just as light refracts on the surface of a polyhedron (*EG* 235): every cultural identity is “flesh” in which the Word of God reveals the face of the Father.<sup>14</sup> The *Final Document of the Pan-Amazonian Synod (FDA)* states without hesitation that it is necessary to reject “any colonialist-style evangelization”

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. G. Guccini, *Papa Francesco e la mondanità spirituale: una parola per consacrati e laici*, EDB, Bologna 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. C. Scannone, “L’inculturazione nell’*Evangelii Gaudium*: chiavi di lettura,” in *Evangelii Gaudium: il testo ci interroga. Chiavi di lettura, testimonianze e prospettive*, ed. H. M. Yáñez, GBP, Roma 2014, 159–170.

<sup>13</sup> We can cite the following affirmation of *GS* 42: “Since in virtue of her mission and nature she is bound to no particular form of human culture, nor to any political, economic or social system, the Church by her very universality can be a very close bond between diverse human communities and nations, provided these trust her and truly acknowledge her right to true freedom in fulfilling her mission.”

<sup>14</sup> Cf. S. Noceti, *Chiesa, casa comune. Dal sinodo per l’Amazzonia una parola profetica*, EDB, Bologna 2020.



and that to proclaim the good news is to recognize that “seeds of the Word are already present in cultures” (*FDA* 55). Francis likewise explains that unity is not uniformity, but a “pluriform harmony” that assumes differences and values partiality, because “the whole is greater than the part, but it is also greater than the sum of its parts” (*FT* 78).

### *The care of our “common home”*

Although the issue of safeguarding creation is not new to the Magisterium of the Church, thanks to both John Paul II and Benedict XVI, it is Pope Francis who stands out for his focus on the environment. Vatican II, looking at environmental issues, had already denounced how contemporary humanity relates to nature not as a wise steward, but thoughtlessly taking advantage to the point of impoverishing its resources and changing its equilibrium (*GS* 3). In this sense, the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity—which are two fundamental cornerstones of the social teaching of the Church<sup>15</sup>—should be seen as basic to a Gospel understanding of respect for creation.

However, with Francis’s Encyclical *Laudato Si’*, we find ourselves before a novelty in the panorama of magisterial documents. Up until Francis, the environment had been dealt with as one theme among many in the teachings of the Church. Instead, Francis chose to dedicate a broad and complex text entirely to the environment, recognizing the inescapable, pressing relevance of the problem.<sup>16</sup> This is not a “green” encyclical but a magisterial teaching with an all-encompassing social emphasis: the fate of creation is inextricably and reciprocally linked to that of all humanity.

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. LEV, Vatican City State, 2004, nn. 160, 187.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Abiterai la terra. Commento all’Enciclica “Laudato Si’” con il testo integrale di papa Francesco*, ed. G. Notarstefano, A.V.E., Roma 2015.

Francis's explicit denunciation of the "throwaway" mentality that generates a "culture of waste" and leads to the destruction of nature and the exploitation of more vulnerable persons and populations is intended to enable an ecological conscience to emerge that recovers a sense of limits, based on recognizing the value of the human person.

This document not only raises the alarm, but it also asks what can be done to "help us escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us" (*LS* 163). Francis points out the need for worldwide *governance*, for an agreement that expresses common goals and establishes pathways to be followed together for the good of all.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the proposal of our all being siblings and of social friendship articulated by *Fratelli Tutti*, which goes beyond the limits imposed by particular ideologies and economic interests, is in continuity with and explicitly expresses what has already been outlined in *Laudato Si'*.

### *Dialogue as path, collaboration as method*

Following the guidelines set out by Vatican II in the Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* and the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, Pope Francis has given a new impetus to the ecumenical movement and to interreligious dialogue.<sup>18</sup> From his point of view, when identity is strong, it does not fear encounter and dialogue; nor does it perceive the other as an enemy or a threat. On the other

---

<sup>17</sup> The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, in a Note in 2011, issued at the occasion of the G20 meeting in Cannes, had already put forward a proposal to set up a global authority that would operate in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity to help the most disadvantaged countries by guaranteeing an economic and financial policy that meets ethical and sustainable criteria. Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Note on the "Reform of the International Financial System with a View toward a General Public Authority"* (October 24, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. W. Kasper, "Papa Francesco e le sfide dell'ecumenismo," in *Il Cristianesimo al tempo di Francesco*, ed. A. Riccardi, Laterza, Bari-Roma 2019, 15–36.

hand, avoiding confrontation expresses great fragility and deep insecurity. Those who have solid cultural and religious roots do not see the possibility of dialogue with those who are different as an impoverishment or a reduction, but rather take it as an opportunity to grow and mature in their own sense of belonging. These are the premises that Pope Francis lays out as the foundation of *Fratelli Tutti*, in which he invites us to recognize that religions “contribute significantly to building fraternity and defending justice in society” (*FT* 271).

When it comes to interreligious and ecumenical dialogue, it is Francis’s gestures that precede and direct his words.

On the very day of his election, his choice to apply the seemingly modest title of Bishop of Rome to himself attracted the attention of non-Catholic Christians, particularly from the Orthodox Churches. Equally significant was the participation of Bartholomew, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, in the inaugural liturgy of his Petrine ministry. This was truly an epochal event, since this invitation was without precedent in the history of the modern and contemporary Church. We can likewise think of the many visits, often informal and unplanned, that Francis has made during his travels: with the representatives of the Waldensian Church in Turin, to whom he expressed regret for the persecutions suffered in Italy; with the Pentecostal Christians in Caserta, with whose pastor he had developed cordial and friendly relations since before his election as pope; the meeting in Abu Dhabi with the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb in 2019; and the visit in Iraq to the Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Al-Husaymi Al-Sistani in 2021. For the pope, it is not just a matter of getting to know others better, but of recognizing what the Spirit has sown in them as a gift for us too (*EG* 246).

The Magisterium of Pope Francis stands out for his wisdom and courage in focusing on the contextual aspect of the truth. He places a new emphasis on the “signs of the times” and underscores the “importance of reality” in the proclamation of the Gospel. This allows the Church to move toward rethinking its Magisterial posture, so that it may be more respectful of

the diverse identities that make it up and more attentive to the sensibility expressed by other religions. It is not a question of limiting the usual claim of universality on the part of the Magisterium, but of understanding it in a different way.

Compared to his two immediate predecessors, Pope Francis shows a greater historical awareness of the progress of certain secular processes. By not merely denouncing the transformation of society that has taken place, he is able to propose a vision of the Church and Catholicism that is more consistent with historical reality. Giving up on tilting at the windmills of modernity is indispensable if the Church is to show renewed fidelity to the Gospel in today's world and to have an impact on the great social issues.

Looking to the future of the Church and humanity more than to the past gives the Magisterium of Francis a dynamic strength that can alarm and disorient. By constantly drawing attention to the poor, to migrants, and to the suffering of all kinds, Francis has often been misunderstood and accused of letting the social dimension prevail over the transcendent dimension of the faith. In reality, his appeals seem to be driven by a profound spiritual and eschatological tension. He is firmly convinced that "at the end of our life we will be judged on love, that is, on our concrete commitment to love and serve Jesus in our littlest and neediest brothers and sisters."<sup>19</sup> To recognize Christ in the face of the poor is to await the face-to-face encounter with our Risen Lord.

### *A note on translations and the text*

A note on some of the terms in this book: first, *siblings*. We use this instead of the cumbersome phrase *brothers and sisters*. "Siblings all" is the proper equivalent of the encyclical title *Fratelli Tutti*, which has its origins in St. Francis of Assisi.

---

<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis, *Angelus on the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe* (November 26, 2017).

*Fratelli* and related words continue to be understood widely in Latinate languages to denote both genders.

Accordingly, in this text *brothers and sisters* and *fraternity* are used only when a translation is being quoted. Otherwise, when referring to the all-important idea, reality and ideal, we use “all siblings” or sometimes, as in the book’s title, echoing the Encyclical’s title, “siblings all.”

In Italian, *pastorale* is a noun (as well as adjective) designating all the Church’s ministry or services. Since *pastoral* in English is only an adjective, we shall use “pastoral life” to indicate this most important dimension and reality.

In Italian, *storia* means both (past) history and (contemporary) events or lived reality. Since this latter meaning is not necessarily understood in the English words *story* or *narrative*, we shall use “contemporary history” to indicate the events, changes, and trends of the current times.

Finally, the Appendices serve as additional or supplementary reflections on the two parts of this book. They can also be read as an indirect but meaningful introduction to Part I on the teachings of Vatican II and to Part II on *Fratelli Tutti*.