



Read the appeal in other languages

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Rescuing Fraternity - Together

A call to faith and reflection

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These pages are a call for conversation. They are not simply an analysis that is to be accepted or rejected. To be more precise, our description of the ecclesial and cultural circumstances that give rise to our call is itself the diagnostic tool that shows why we are making our appeal and why this appeal cannot be put off. This is not a handbook of “blueprints.” It is a collection of issues we think need to be reflected on and considered. In particular, our call to “Rescue fraternity - Together” has grown out of the encouragement offered by Pope Francis' Encyclical “Fratelli tutti.” What we want to do is capture the deep meaning of this encyclical—which is addressed to a church that is urged to open up, and to a world that is tempted to close itself off. We want to create an atmosphere of “intellectual fraternity” that reinvigorates the noble sense of “intellectual service” that culture professionals—theological and not—owe to the community. This service is essential in today’s global conditions where humanism—both religious and civil—has been struck in the heart by an insidious virus that has taken our breath away. (And are not these professionals “experts” in humanity, perhaps even “the” experts?)

In the present circumstances, we feel that the days of intellectual flirtation with an irresponsible relativism that desacralizes the humana communitas are over, morally speaking, as are the days of mindless repetition of sacred formulas that perpetuate an absence of affections and of those ties that

revivify for all, in God's name, the Gospel hope for humanity's common destiny.

Our call, issued in God's good time and in creation's own time, needs the intellectual honesty of criticism, including self-criticism, in the same way that it requires a witnessing covenant based on a personal commitment to honoring the dignity of human life for the benefit of the other. This honesty and this covenant—which we have learned from the Gospel of Jesus—in the end make credible the conviction that God is near and human fraternity is real. Generalized thinking about this commitment and its practice—which religious and non-religious thought make visible in their most noble aspirations—must give rise to a new concern for the world and a new openness to history. They must also become once again a point of honor for the alliance of the intelligence that sustains activity and the hope that inspires peoples. In this spirit of intellectual and witnessing fraternity, much can be usefully discussed; and nothing will be thoughtlessly abandoned. Calls to a spirit of fraternity cannot be reduced to an empathic and sentimental vision of the unity of our species; nor relegated to a mythical, utopistic and romantic quest for boundless wellbeing. The rehabilitation of fraternity is a serious challenge for our times. It must be studied more deeply than ever before—by Christianity and the other religions, by politics and power, by philosophy and science.

The theme of our call is this: within intellectual fraternity everything is gain. Outside it, all can be lost. What is common to humanity is how we respond to the persons most humble and neglected. That will be the subject of the Last Judgment—for everybody. (Mt 5:31-46).

1. The kairos of faith today

In his encyclical *Fratelli tutti* Pope Francis has gathered and condensed the greathearted themes that inspire his ministry at the tiller guiding the Barque of Peter, the craft that carries Jesus. It matters little if Peter, like us, is fearful in the storm. In the well-known Gospel story (Mt 8:23-27, Mk 4:35-41, Lk 8:22-25), all the disciples were afraid in the storm and

begged the Lord to rouse Himself and save them (“Lord, save us! We are perishing!”). Jesus used their fear of dying to bring home to them, gently, the weakness of their faith. It didn’t stop Him, however, from doing what they asked. The disciples’ plea was clumsy, and in Mark even a little confrontational: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Our own prayers are always a somewhat ambiguous as well. The power of our fear shows the weakness of our faith. The Lord makes us see that weakness, but still He welcomes the good in it as we turn to him for a hearing.

All of us must ask ourselves whether we have the guileless sincerity reflected in the disciples’ prayer. Let’s not hide our fear of being unable to rule the wind and waves. We must also ask ourselves whether our very fear leads us to attempt to quell the storm ourselves, pretending that we have powers beyond our nature. Whether during the storm we are tempted to play the part of Jesus, taking His place at the head of the community, instead of calling on Him on behalf of all and opening ourselves to deserved reproach for our weakness.

In our day, the faithful see and live the storm. They feel the dangerous pitching and rolling of the boat that carries the disciples chosen by Jesus to guide the community. The faithful wonder whether these disciples really have that faith in Jesus as the only Savior that they so proudly proclaim. Whether they have supplanted Him and are treating their witnessing vocation like an inherited privilege that exempts them from publicly admitting their inadequacy. It is grace that makes them what they are, not their ability, nor their past career performance (1 Cor 15:10). It is not enough to cultivate a virtuous personal humility. Public acknowledgment of inadequacy is a further essential element of the confession of faith. The correct expression of the disciples’ witness is always the same: “Christ is the only savior. I am not the Messiah” (see Jn 1:20). The two parts of this proclamation are inseparable, and the time has come to recognize to the second its essential function. The Lord is the eternal Son made man and has a name of his own. His name is Jesus; and if anyone points to another and says to you, “Look, here is the Messiah!” or “There he is!” do not believe it (Mt 24:23).

The body of the Son made man has surely been given to us so that all may in time become one living body with Him in God’s sight (LG, 9). But this incorporation is not—and will never be—a substitution. The truth of

the first part of the proclamation is vouchsafed by the second. Only on these terms can we confess, with wonderment and feeling, the truth of our intimate bond with the Lord. It is given to us, however, for the benefit of the *humana communitas*. It is never the private property of the *communitas fidelium*.

In today's *kairos* of the Church there are many troubling signs that this shining truth is being hidden. And these signs are made visible by the frightening revelations of disgraced commitments and betrayed vocations.

The off-putting fussiness of hair-splitting and stuffy polemics that turn the practice of theology into tribal warfare (“I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Kephas,” 1 Cor 1:12), is today even surpassed by obvious failure to see through the fakery and perversions that characterize the exercise of pastoral responsibility. The excessive ineptitude of the ecclesiastical structures is now widely known. The conflicts and immorality that affect the ecclesiastical world are now seen as revelatory of the weakness of the system, not simply as occasional failings. No doubt this does no justice to great numbers of sincere and simple believers, and it wrongs the dedicated service of a great many men and women. But it must be admitted that the seriousness of the phenomenon is beyond the stage of “palliative care.” There is no way to free the institution from needing to retreat courageously from the pathological direction in which the clerical model of Christian life and ecclesial governance is headed—keeping in mind, of course, that this clericalism is a reflection of ecclesiological oversimplification and spiritual worldliness that can affect the laity no less than priests (see Francis, Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God, August 20, 2018).

The societal credibility of the Church as a valid reflection of anthropological religiosity has waned. Its place is to be taken by the witnessing openness of an unexpected welcoming divine grace that the incarnation of the Son makes available to effect the redemption of all and the realization of their humanity (see Phil 2:5-8).

This new *kairos* in the history of faith is the time when the work of the Kingdom of God resounds throughout the secular world—not only in the community of believers, but in the whole extent of city of man. The Church's task is to make the Kingdom accessible, not to usurp it (*Fratelli tutti*, 54-55). This is the history-making vocation of Christianity today.

In this perspective, the longing for a more accommodating world, and bitterness at a world that is too hostile, must both be set aside. There is no world naturally prepared for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Nor is there a world that can resist that coming, its work and its signs, its proclamation and its witness. The fulfillment of the Kingdom of God transcends the history of our introduction to it and of His grace. That Kingdom is never of this world (Jn 14:12). Yet—and this is the miracle of mercy that dwells in God’s innards—in this world, the Kingdom of God is always flourishing, as it is in every world where humankind dwells (Jn 3:16-17).

The goal of our plea to theological and pastoral intelligence to provide a new kind of service that is consistent with the kerygmatic Magisterial impetus expressed in the Pope's encyclical. It is not to arrive at an exegesis of his text, but more explicitly to reveal the power of his action—where the strength of his message is focused. First, we wish to share with theologians, pastors, disciples, and the whole believing people an awareness of the crisis that today's circumstances have forced upon us and the resolve to the metanoia that faith demands of theology. Lastly, however, we convinced ourselves to dare as well a call to all men and women of goodwill—starting with intellectuals, even ones with no religious affiliation or critical of it—about the urgent need for an intellectual fraternity that accepts new closeness with those who dwell in this beautiful and difficult time.

2. Global signs of crisis

The new world that we must learn to live in, and to open to the grace of the redemptive incarnation of the Son, has made itself known in the new millennium through powerful signs of weakness in the system that undergirds today’s global techno-economic development model.

We are naturally aware of the fact that this system, with its unquestioned merits and undenied contradictions, is decisively a projection of the culture and politics of Western European modernity. In turn, that modernity includes the historical effects of European-Church Christianity. That makes it necessary to remember that the traces of a “humanistic” crisis

that is observed within, and from within, the various “human” communities and in the world, cannot all be interpreted in the same way and from the same perspective using the traditional tools of European thinking.

Similarly, we must also be aware of the fact that other religious traditions do not present ways of thinking and of being present in culture and society that are consistent with the codes and forms of presentation that characterize Christianity and its spread throughout the world. It is thus necessary to adopt an attitude of humble and respectful listening to the religious and humanistic traditions of others. Nevertheless, it must also be acknowledged that the spread and assimilation of a scientific, technical, economic and political culture, which today appears crucial to the development of organized societies and human communities, is the result of the spread of European-sourced socio-cultural tools and devices. This observation, obvious and generally accepted, must certainly become a theme for careful and critical reflection today. This is true because the very quality of ethical-humanistic progress that until recently was automatically associated with the expansion of European and Western technical-economic tools is being called into question.

Clear evidence of this tension, which is gaining ground among peoples belonging to diverse cultural traditions, can now be found in our own culture as well. As a result, we can now agree that the emerging issues in the global tension between secularization and religion, humanistic ethics and material development, are likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, global and unifying themes of the “humanistic question” of our time.

Disruptive events, of unexpected proportions and strongly symbolic impact, have proclaimed far and wide the systemic vulnerability of human societies, even those that are seemingly richer and safer, more well-ordered and more dynamic. The onset of a misguided religiosity of sacrifice (fundamentalist terrorism), the deception of financial-market generation of wealth (particularly speculation on sovereign debt obligations), the growing desperation of peoples left to their own devices (mass migrations), and the under-realized weakness of techno-management (pandemic-induced paralysis)—these are symptomatic events that presage disillusionment as we enter a new age.

Against the backdrop of the personalistic and communitarian humanism that accompanied modern promises of economic and technological growth, today's ebb and flow of global pressures leading to individualism and tribalism, with concomitant ethnic divisions and anti-democratic

behavior, leaves us brutally wounded. The growth of have and have-not inequality, together with societal neglect, multiplies the negative effects of a techno-economic globalization that is strikingly far-removed from any corresponding development of ethical-humanistic solidarity. Culturally, this effect emerges from the shadow lands of western modernity. The politics and laws of the secular city are clearly at a loss in dealing with the unbridgeable gap between the freedom of individual affections and the constraints of the common good. Their increasing separation is taking place faster than any attempt at satisfactory reconciliation. The globalization of technical and economic power, with all its undeniable advantages, is in no way capable of defusing this conflict. In any case, this does not seem to be globalization's dominant concern. On the contrary, it continues to clothe the adoption of its formidable mechanisms of subjugation and selection with the rhetoric of its exciting visions of satisfaction and inclusion.

The presumed neutrality of the techno-economic system covers up its anti-humanistic violence and protects it from being compared to the West's imperialistic and colonial past, a past that it cleverly disavows and declares will never be repeated. Still, its dark and divisive soul continues to work its baneful effects on the environment and on an impoverished society worldwide. (Francis, *Laudato si'*).

The narrative that speaks of the global effects of liberating huge masses from a future of degradation and extinction, as a concomitant of technical-economic progress, is not false. But the production of the same effects by other means and on a larger scale is equally undeniable. Failure to honestly acknowledge this contradiction, together with massive techno-economic ideological bias, is the black hole of an individualistic culture of freedom and progress brazenly tied to a materialism that is committed to stuff and consumption. Its promise of individual freedom, however, remains extraordinarily attractive to the masses: even to the point of coming to terms with old models of authoritarian and autarchic governance and taking on their defense. Its workability continues to rely on a narrative confirming the virtually distributive and inclusive power of financial capitalism, which justifies its elitist concentration of wealth in the hands of a few as the necessary premise for increased wellbeing of the many. Media promotion of wish attainment as the chief goal of existence has put the whole world in thrall. After all, who wouldn't like to live the way we do? Supermarkets are always

open, entertainment is always available, connectivity makes us present everywhere, speed multiplies opportunities, sexual services are freely available, and residential neighborhoods are bubbles of comfortable, protected, and exclusive settlement available to global citizen in every metropolis on the planet.

In reality, however, the anguish of meaningless existence, which is now generationally pervasive in the western hemisphere, whose inhabitants were enlisted to support its comfortable careless ways, is blending at some deep level with the frustration of a deprived existence lived out by generations long aware that they are being excluded to leave room for an ever-smaller privileged elite. The critical mass produced by this hidden and nihilistic encounter of generations gradually destabilizes every institution for human coexistence and intellectual creativity.

Indeed, the political response within this system, which was a reaction to late-twentieth century opposition to authoritarian paternalism, absorbed and relaunched libertarian individualism expressed in terms of an overarching right to satisfaction, no longer has any idea of being accountable for people who are “free and equal.” Nor of anything that might save future generations from the techno-economic destruction of ethical and political humanism. More than the loss of a father, abandonment of the child is now the dominant feature of modern freedom.

Proclaimed is all-out strife among sons and daughters—the perverse face of fraternity among the “free and equal” which is disoriented and betrayed by power that lacks authority. In the end, attempting to eliminate individualism by taking it to its extreme is no longer even a disgraceful zero-sum game. It’s more like a clearing account that always has a negative balance. The failure of totalitarian experiments that turn individuals into a “mass” that must believe, obey, and fight for the party, is now “ancient” history (but always ready to return by other means). The failure of neo-liberal experiments that turn individuals into a “mass” that must reckon, decide, and fight for him or herself, is just now coming to the fore (and showing itself to be totally unprepared for the task).

Human coexistence shaped by the values of self-interest and indifference to an ethic of sharing, renders itself, paradoxically, unchangeable, even through revolutionary activism of individuals. Political transformation of a molecular society of individuals, “free and equal” even in their indifference

to each other, is now out of the reach of even someone who presents him or herself as “the anointed.”

The trusted algorithms of the *lex mercatoria* replace the political authority of the *humana communitas*. The freedom that is granted virtually to each person, that is, the freedom to be a risk-taker and representative for him or herself, in fact gives rise to the progressive evaporation of the community institutions that should protect that freedom. This reality shines a light on the naivety of the formula “my freedom ends where the other's begins,” whose disturbing shadows are magically erased by too-clever neo-liberal thinking. This principle, in a context of indiscriminate legitimization of expansive and competitive self-realization, encourages me to imagine my freedom increasing at the cost, by definition, of the freedom of others. This thinking means that, sooner or later, laws will follow.

The individual always receives ever less from the community; the community always receives ever less from the individual. The separateness of possessions impoverishes both. All the more so because this separateness is encouraged by the tenacious survival of a false and contradictory command we receive daily from socially dominant thinking.

On the one hand, political pressure points us toward the goal of complete individual free choice, which makes us masters, in our own lives, over life and death, good and evil. On the other, science forces us to accept our total dependence on organic and technological devices for our higher functions. In all likelihood, we will not be able to withstand the mentally destabilizing effects of this twofold dependence much longer. Their widespread psycho-pathological effects are already evident. Meanwhile, devaluation of love for our neighbor and indifference to fraternity among peoples are spreading like a virus and taking over vast territories—both geographical and intellectual—that define us, and institutions that give humanity to our initiation into life (marriage and the family, language and the community, school and care, work and art, law, and politics).

In this sense, fraternity remains modern freedom's promise not kept (Francis, *Humana Communitas*, February 11, 2019). The salvation of the community, arguably, becomes a crucial priority today for the task of ransoming the humanness unique in every individual. In other words, fraternity/proximity within humanity is the most important anthropological issue of our times (Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 8.53).

3. Theo-logy, common good

Today's theology seems mostly committed to evangelizing itself and its own tradition, expending almost all its efforts on updating language and/or on assigning its own new values to its lexical heritage, whose cultural irrelevancy it is aware of—but still only vaguely.

In the context of its generous commitment to the hermeneutics of the handing on of the faith, *ad intra* and—in its intention—also *ad extra*, one could say that theology uses most of its resources in explaining what Christianity is not, despite what it may appear to be. As if evidence of the faith that makes this mystery of God—the Church itself!—accessible to all the men and women of our time always needs to be sought elsewhere than in the usual places where Christianity is discussed and practiced, visibly and understandably. This cultural labor of a believing intelligence, so heavily focused on an effort to reconcile authentic witness with the way Christianity is perceived, ends up becoming too heavy a burden on the flexibility of the community's pastoral activities. And it takes away momentum from the intelligent creativity of thinking that is inspired by faith.

Within the framework of its completely ecclesiastical focus, theological debate, apparently so broad in its reflections, writings, in-depth studies, and projects, does not plow any furrow in contemporary thinking for Gospel seeds to be sown, nor does it leave any trace of its passage through the vast regions of human experience and understanding. Such a disproportion between the enormous development of a self-referential attitude and the insignificance of its cultural creativity, even raises a moral problem concerning the investment of the talents entrusted by the Lord to the generosity of our own investments. And thought is certainly not the least of these talents.

Defusing self-referentiality can be helped by a serious conversion to the hermeneutic interpretation of the human condition that was adopted by Jesus through his typical practice of dialogue with the sacred, which lies at the root of all human experiences (birth and death, resentment and forgiveness, poverty and wealth, power, and sickness).

Jesus “talks of God” always and purposefully in this “common space” of humanity. Human proximity always means deciphering the sacred.

Human perversion itself is always a misunderstanding of the sacred. Today we are perfectly capable of recognizing that the fascinating and terrible pervasiveness of the sacred, from the point of view of cultural anthropology, lies precisely in the fact that it refers—in all religions, in all cultures, in all civilizations—to exceptionless mandates and prohibitions that must be respected at all costs if we are to be saved. Religion and its exercise *nostrae salutis causa* is the form of this approach known to us. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that the mystery of the debt we owe to the sacred remains active even when divorced from traditional religious cultic interpretations and from its existential and social, cultural, and organizational contexts. Today's secular society itself, which experiences great difficulty in dealing with the sacred, must be called to task on this issue, so that it can generate more sophisticated and more responsible thinking about this debasement of the sacred. What is so much a matter of life and death for the secular city that the sacrifice of individual lives is justified? Who and what are we willing to protect at all costs? Who and what are we willing to sacrifice without guilt? Theology, on the strength of its own specific and unique familiarity with, and expertise in, discernment of the sacred, made credible by radical religious critique of religion itself as revealed in Jesus, can leaven our thinking about the pervasive depths of the sacred – religious and irreligious – for the benefit of the whole human culture.

Ecclesial theology must adopt with all a style of creative and open thinking, not one communicated in cant for initiates. It seems obvious that this will entail significant change within Church organizations. In academic environments certainly, but also in local communities. The focus—and the process—of this basic transformation can be summarized in the classic description of revelation itself.

Revelation in the Gospels follows a single pattern. Jesus, the Disciples, the Crowd of ordinary people (and the opponents, represented by different religious and/or civic figures). Modern ecclesiology has focused on the close relationship between Jesus and the Disciples, putting off evangelization of the Multitudes till later. Till the moment when that evangelization became almost contemporaneous with an expansion of the number of disciples and acceptance of a hierarchical structure by believers who had been baptized. This coalescing and minimization of the earlier “ecclesial” vision of evangelization is being repeated in today’s crisis of “pastorality” as it affects the building up of the Church as well as

its mission. The Disciples called by Jesus are essential to authoritative witnessing of authentic revelation, but they are not the only model of the Faith. Without the Multitude of God-knows-whos Jesus has no Church, but it is not by chance that the Samaritan and the Canaanite woman, Zacchaeus, and the Centurion, moving examples of the faith awakened and recognized by Jesus, seem to play a small part in theology and ecclesial practice. The “little people’s” dimension of revelation and of the Gospel relationship begun within the overall structure that witnesses God made manifest in Jesus, must instead be acknowledged and recognized as the “original picture” that delineates the evidence and testimony of the Church in the human condition we all share. This has nothing to do with class nor is it mere demagoguery. The “People of God” is not a demographic classification or a confessional identifier. The “People of God” is the real confirmation that grace is meant for everyone (LG, 9, cf. Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 156-162). The People of God sets out on its path beginning with the men and women who heard the Beatitudes. This People keeps company with the fallen and the pariahs because it hopes for the salvation that is open to all. Its openness is grace, justified by the love of God that brings birth, and new birth, even along the border between Earth and the void. That is how to reach and capture the humanity that the revelation of God's grace, *nostrae salutis causa*, is meant for. The place of faith—and of thinking about it—is described like this: through this People the gift of faith to all humankind, and to every human being, is made intelligible, persuasive, and salvific. Everything else—ministry, charism, institutions—is at the service of faith. Something either “serves” this goal, or it has “no purpose” (1 Pt 5:3; 2 Cor 1:24). Not even if one speaks with the tongues of angels or moves mountains, not even if one works miracles in the name of Jesus or invokes that name, “Lord, Lord!” without surcease (see 1 Cor 13:1-3; Mt 7:21-22).

Today's *kairos* uses theology first of all to rehabilitate the gift of the word so that peoples' humanity can speak and be heard directly. Science has no reason to do away with the necessity of the affirmation that the human being gives to him or herself. Restoring dignity in word and authoritativeness in witness as the proudest boast of our common humanity—and as tools to hand in the everyday life of peoples—is the first conquest we expect from a humanistic policy and a critical culture that are worthy of the trust we repose in them.

Such a policy does not exist just now. Its subject is evanescent and the thinking about it is weak. There are not lacking, however, the intellectual forces that would be willing to support the premises and motivations of new policies that respect spiritual values. There are many, and their number is growing, intellectuals who experience a burst of pride over their ancient humanist mission. Encouraging this alliance requires only the overcoming of an age-old mistrust—imposed by inertia in of the systems one belongs to, rather than by a justified and proven commitment—in support of a common cause. The common cause today is the salvation of the human meaning of existing in the world: the meaning of coming into the world and of leaving it, the meaning of the mark that each individual human being leaves forever on the history of the world. “The only philosophy that can be practiced responsibly in the face of despair would be the attempt to contemplate all things in the manner in which they would present themselves in the light of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that which is shed on the world by redemption: all else is limited to being a continuous modification of things and an example of technique.” (Theodore W. Adorno).

So, yes, the cause of the salvation of the human dimension—and with it, of men and women who come into the world—appears more and more to be the shared kairos of this time of individual depression and community agony.

In the face of the commandment of the Creator that is universal and always in force, that obligates everyone, having the Faith does not justify giving privileges to the faithful, nor does it require the alienation of others. It is a commandment that entrusts to men and women—including those living now!—the task of giving beauty to the world and hope to history, even in the most difficult times. This, however, will not happen in the world and in history without the unheard-of revelation of redemption through the never-to-be-broken compact that God enters into with humankind in the humanity of his Son the crucified and risen from the dead. There is no other evidence to support the certainty that Gospel faith delivers to the world. Our cause, lost otherwise, is the cause God's tenderness defends.

The power that ransoms us, a concept otherwise irrational, is the power of God's love. There is no other way of life, nor understanding of the faith, that can light the path for our hope.

The period reopened to inspiration from a Church made up of those who had seen the “following” and built up with the real-time presence of “God-knows-whos” spans *Ecclesiam suam* and *Fratelli tutti*. Theology must build a bridge to make that span cross able, but it must be the first to cross and clear away any obstacles. A loving intellect at the service of the Church that is, and without which no charism has any value, is a debt of honor owed by the believing theologian.

The ecclesial concept of “fraternity,” by its radical extension in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* to the Gospel-revealed “nearness” of God, presents an aspect of its fuller meaning that is relatively unexamined. Christian fraternity is purified and perfected in the dynamism—never exhausted—linking thought and contemplation, word and action, and bringing to light God's closeness to everyone. Religious, ministering, sacramental or liturgical fraternity that is not characterized by fraternity's reach will get lost, will become corrupt from within. Its “Communion” will find another foundation to build on and another other to give it meaning. At that point evangelization has already failed, despite the appearances of a wider Christianization. This loss of proper balance necessarily impacts the moments of liturgical extasy, which should otherwise lead to enchantment with God's action in the world and in history. A sadly self-referential understanding of ecclesial communion increases the typically depressing context of much of our liturgy. The hidden presence of God's hour in this world, and the Lord's mystery-shrouded parousia, are fulfilled or fail together.

An appeal to the Disciples

In the far-sighted theological and watershed perspective of St. Paul VI's encyclical “*Ecclesiam suam*,” what holds the Church together must be understood in its entirety as a progression of concentric orbits that even now but also forever embrace different worlds, from the closest to God's Kingdom to the most distant.

This prophetic vision of ecclesiology, whose systematic implications have still not gained widespread theological and pastoral acceptance, is nevertheless an appropriate starting point for the ecclesial mission that the Encyclical “*Fratelli tutti*” develops fully. In this vision, the Church is a witness to the unifying power of the grace that redeems the world—not the instrument of a separate worldliness of the faith that divides the

world in two. No authentic communion can exist among disciples that is not founded on intercessory prayer for the entire human community, here and now. The Son did not come “to condemn the world but to save the world” (Jn 12:47). And Christ died for us, the ungodly, before we were converted. That is, he saved us “while we were still sinners” (Rom 5:8).

The primacy of this testimonial evidence of the *forma ecclesiae*, rooted in the universality of Christ’s grace, must once again become evident to everyone, and firmly accepted by the faithful.

The European experiment of a Christian society—which in its own way has indeed attempted to avoid the radical dualism of two totally opposed and separate worlds with respect to salvation and human destiny—is now disappearing forever.

The Church is just now emerging, laboriously but generously, from the ever-recurring misunderstanding of the last temptation rejected by Jesus, which has continued for centuries to exert an attraction. Religion is to be separate from the political governance of the secular city. Ecclesiastical control of civil society, inevitably tempted to make common cause with worldly powers, takes too much freedom away from the Gospel and offers the Devil too many possibilities. Now it is necessary to finalize that process by separating ourselves from even any cultural notion of ecclesiastical control over human sciences. This twofold limitation should in no way be construed as a distancing and a retirement of the community of believers from its commitment to fully sharing in the human condition. It is rather the reverse. The manifestation of God must itself be thought of as a “common good,” to be put on offer to enrich the human community, and not as the “private property” that funds the ecclesial community’s perquisites of office. The objective is not the exercise of super-power, or the hegemony over a single way of thinking that is more or less justified by faith. The objective is a return, in our common history, to a hope for our shared world’s redemption—starting precisely from the impossible possibility of hope for those who are already poor and deprived, cast aside and lost, apparently without recourse to anyone. The Church bears witness that God calls them first of all, and then everyone else. The building of a parallel Christian world, as an alternative to the human world that is shared, represents a past in the history of witness, which does not illuminate the future that is opened to it by God. The native Catholics of Christian Europe continue to view their own Christianity as a model to which the whole of global Catholicism must synchronize itself

and conform, whether because of a newly found continuity with authentic tradition (rehabilitating its counter-reformation image), or because of a new reformed Christianity which would be born from it (rediscovering its primitive purity). In both cases, the underlying image relies on the legitimation of a return to the past. This archaeological attitude, even prescindng from of the merits, if any, of its arguments, takes intellect and heart away from the task of inhabiting God's new kairos, which in the past was simply not there. An institutionally non-religious human world is an interlocutor without precedent in history. It is here that the beauty and challenge of the kairos that God asks us to inhabit evangelically and creatively lies.

Finally, our call is an impassioned plea to professional theology—and to every believer—to offer a privileged spot and common space to the commitment to deconstruct the twofold dualism that currently holds sway, separating the ecclesial community from the secular community, and separating the created world from the saved world.

The first part of the dualism that needs to be deconstructed is what makes the church–world relationship plausible, as if they were really two worlds which can—and must—be inhabited alternately, in order to negotiate relationship and understandings at a later time. We believers represent a way of inhabiting everyone's world, but we are not a completely other world. We are totally passionate about the world's destiny, forged by the working covenant of peoples and at the same time called upon to inhabit it as an initiation into the new life that must come from God. Indeed, we also inhabit the Church in this way, not as a spiritual aristocracy of the elect, which is then reconciled with the spiritual worldliness that sustains it, but as a welcoming tent that shelters the rainbow of the covenant between God and human creatures, beginning with those most exposed to the vulnerability of life. There is a terrible power of evil in the world, but the world suffers no divine curse. At this time, the ecclesiastical habitat seems strongly bent on the idea of a shelter world where the workings of grace miraculously manifest themselves. In reality, the workings of grace occur, thank God, every day and all over the world. This is what we are told by faith in the unpredictable advent and universal closeness of the Kingdom of God.

The heart of this event is God's creature-centered commandment, which entrusts the world and history to man, woman, and generation, to thought

and work, to art and technology, to the economy of the hospitable city and to passion for shared justice. The primary evidence of ecclesial fraternity must restore the word of God to this vitality, and this vitality to the word of God.

The authoritativeness of the covenant of man and woman, which is called upon to govern the world in the daily expectation of God's gifts, is today too weakened by presumptuous science and a cant-laden theology. The primary task of the intellectual, believers and non-believers, is to restore the authority of human witness to the common life of peoples. Faith learns humanity from humanity itself. It was not by chance that the Son of God stayed for an improbably long time in the bosom of the human family, growing there in age, wisdom and grace, learning from us how the events of life take hold of our hearts and pierce our souls. And when He began to speak of and do "the things of the Father," the "people" were unmistakably aware of how deep was His familiarity with them. They remained as well struck by the sensitivity with which the originality of God's good news made a way for itself in their world. In this touching exchange faith-based thought and human thought grow together. In our modern ecclesial tradition, governance provided exclusively by priests, a single model for religious, and handbook catechesis have bloated the *forma fidei*, distancing it from the immediacy of ordinary life. Now it is collapsing under its own its own weight.

The isolation of the ecclesiastical system is for the most part blamed alternately on the weakening of sacred tradition or on being surrounded by secular progress. In reality, it is what happens to a Church that is ever more self-centered; and, just like anyone who looks to save his or her own life, the Gospel tells us that Church will lose it (Mt 16:25).

This concentration has ended up sucking the oxygen out of creative joy and out of the startling improvisation produced by Gospel ferment that playfully upsets the secular routines of reason and religion and shakes the sad passions of that affective autism of the egos who are colonizing our planet. The expansion of the network of baptismal fraternity, that is a secure basis for every witnessing closeness, is a crucial strategic move. From the point of view of Christian example, it will be necessary to make explicit the full thinking behind the distinction between the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood of believers (which is substantive and not just of degree). The priesthood of believers is, in fact, is not simply

an inferior degree or an external addition to the ordained ministry. It is a substantial and integral element of witnessing faith and is sealed by the sacrament of Baptism. It is not a weak and secondary version of the priestly mediation established by ministerial consecration. Theologically, the abandonment of the clerical model of Christianity to restore a specific authoritativeness and bounded configuration to the ordained ministry begins here—without forgetting that the new paradigm for the fraternal and witnessing ecclesiality of the baptized, in the service of which ministries and charisms are to be reconfigured, will have to be carefully determined and authorized in a synodal context that embraces the entire community, and is not merely encouraged and recommended.

On the other hand, pastorally speaking a renewed liking for the concept of community as a family and as a fraternal network, quickly leaving behind a military model based on a chain of command and focusing joyfully the covenant between man and woman as creatures can begin right away.

All the more so if we take into account the great number of priests, and men and women religious who are generously trying to honor their ministerial duty and their respective charismatic vocations despite the current inadequacy of theological, canonical, and formative resources that ought to be able to free up their evangelical energies and maintain their transparent joy.

The second element of the dualism that, once and for all, must be reconstructed for the benefit of a new paradigm for life and ecclesial mission, is that which separates—and even creates opposition in—the world of creation (reflected in nature) and that of redemption (outside of nature). This parallelism no longer fulfils the ontological and political function for which it was developed. In the light of the predestination of all things in Christ and the passion of the Son for the complete liberation of God's creatures from evil, the supreme freedom of God who gives life, who saves it, embraces it within his own, is perfectly safe. And the freedom of God's creatures, which grants them the honor and the burden of making the world of the living habitable, while waiting for its redemption, is protected by the grace that encourages us to hope for redemption with all our might. This change of tone is crucial for the current *kairos*. And all Catholic dogma lies within this concentration, without losing even one iota.

If we succeed in converting the all of Christian language to the richness of the grandiose and concrete theology of creation that is part of revelation (from Genesis to the Apocalypse) and forms the nucleus of the Gospel of

the Kingdom of God sealed by Jesus crucified and risen from the dead, then the Christian language will become spontaneously close to and able to communicate with the language—the languages—that the inhabitants of the earth use to think and speak about life and God.

Faith will learn to dwell within the languages of the secular world, without prejudice to its proclamation of God's closeness. And the ecclesial closeness of faith will also welcome the Canaanite woman, the woman at the well, Zacchaeus, and the Centurion. Without worrying about how far away they are.

A Word to the Wise

“So, we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20).

We humbly and firmly ask the intellectuals of our time to purify the dominant culture of any facile concession to the conformist spirits of relativism and demoralization. People are already sufficiently worn down by the arrogance of technocratic economics and indifference to our common humanity. The idolatry of money has become a sophisticated and elusive ideology, capable of a thousand rational justifications and endowed with extraordinary means to assert itself. We implore you, first, not to offer the complicity of reason and thought, of science and law to the injustice of money. We must prevent money from dividing what God unites—human beings, in the first place and before everything else. We implore you to give back to peoples the congenial idea that we have a common origin and common destiny. The time has come to give back to human knowledge the honor of its integrity and the burden of its accountability.

Knowing the truth never exempts us from a passion for justice. We cannot accept much longer the canard that knowledge allows science to be exempt from responsible sensitivity to our common humanity.

The extreme self-referentiality of modern individuals who seek self-fulfillment in separation from the other, has contaminated all forms of community. They themselves are falling prey to a spirit of unfair competition in contests for the enjoyment of things made available by nature and culture.

The old ghosts are returning—or at least are regaining unexpected strength—racism, xenophobia, amoral familism, elitist exclusivity, demagogic manipulation. Mistrust towards the community and demoralization of the individual support each other in the vicious circle made present by a vision of humanity that loses any reason to cooperate and accumulates reasons to distrust. And yet, as soon as they are questioned beyond clichés and pre-determined answers, millions of individuals express their spontaneous aspiration to a political and legal environment that protects the free and joyful reciprocity of human beings from all religions and cultures. Just as they express their hope for an economy and a technology that are available to care for our vulnerabilities and generous in supporting the struggles we face. These millions are the ones in whom we recognize—in every corner of the earth and under every sky—men and women who, every day, strive to fulfil their commitments, to keep their word, to bring up their children with dignity, to be of assistance to the communities to which they belong and to be hospitable to the stranger. Human life worthy of the name continues to exist thanks to their perseverance.

Culture is not generous toward these millions. It often goes so far as to make fun of their naivety, their fruitfulness, their willingness to help others.

It makes them feel old-fashioned. It does not encourage admiration for the beauty of their commitment. It finds their reserve anomalous and are surprised by their generosity. It does not show enthusiasm for a vision of the human condition in which everyone can proudly claim to be part of it precisely because they rediscover the joy of fighting together against the discouragements of life and of being passionate about life's achievements. When we promise our fellow human beings wellbeing and justice in exchange for power and wealth, our lips should tremble at the thought of an oath so arrogantly taken and lightly dishonored. The power of the "free and equal" is no guarantee of the rights of the poor or the fraternity of peoples.

In this regard, we propose to reverse this way of thinking in our times. Do not despise the Name of God, to whom the prayers of sincere believers are addressed for all the men and women of the planet, and to whom these same believers make themselves available to intercede for all the poor and abandoned. Criticize us when you must—and even when you should not—but guard respectfully the mystery—even though unfathomable to you—of the Name of God.

No one lacks an escape route, or hope, as long as this Name is kept safe for all. We are all more naked and more wicked when the Crucified One is mocked, when the Risen One is derided. The Christian faith dares to proclaim and to witness a God who is meant for human beings, irrevocably, eternally, without second thoughts, willing to honor His word by bringing them home safe from every perdition. God's honor—the rightness of loving that generates life and the promise of life—is brought into play once and for all and forever with this commitment. His glory, through His free and sovereign tenderness, is our ransom. We plead, Do not mock the holy name of God. Be reconciled to it. Defend with us—even against ourselves—the mystery of this love and of faith in His righteousness that no one else can create. Religiosity itself, unsheltered from the stupefying and terrifying impact of this revelation, can time after time lose sight of its tenderness and strength. In the dizzying paradox of love and justice whose name is God, religion itself can be the victim if those two are torn apart. Tenderness can lose its strength, sacrificing it to the numbing mystique of a beautiful soul, but one without love of justice and without knowledge of pain. Likewise, strength can be challenged by walls that are erected and conflicts that are ignited in the name of God. We must be alert together for the effects of sacrality's impact on the human mind. The Gospel seals this responsibility with a seal of gold. Religiosity itself must accept being challenged, and the golden seal is the love of neighbor, which the Gospel definitively raises to the same height as the commandment to love God—the only One who can and must be loved “with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our minds.” He alone is the blessed and salvific mystery of love that must indwell all things, the mystery of all the tenderness and all the power that stands at the origin of our life and brings us together in the promise of its destiny.

The “neighbor” of the Gospel is neither near nor far away. The neighbor of the Gospel is any “God-knows-who” that is human and in trouble. Gospel closeness measures—without being able to define it—strength of good intentions and of beautiful souls. And it tests the seriousness of the ways in which the community—and each person in it—is tested on its real love of justice for the benefit of anyone who is on the “outskirts” of love to the point of feeling for practical purposes “outside” of any human community. Not because they wanted to leave, but because the community has drawn in on itself, rather than welcoming others.

We too, thinkers within or outside the faith, engaged like Don Quixote in an obsessive joust between faith and reason, where we take turns playing the role of windmills—have we not culpably overlooked the real victims of our academicism that is so pointlessly polemical? Generations have lost faith in the disinterested intellectual mediation of improved individual and community relationships. Did they, however, draw from them any joyful passion from the quest for wisdom that concerns us all? Before being a history of governments and administrations, empires and wars, technologies and achievements, human history is the story of alliances of life and fraternity on our journeys. Will it not be a cause for rejoicing if the Christian community begins again to look at human history from the point of view of the blessing that God represents for the humanity we all share—without exclusions and without privileges? The tenderness and strength of the Gospel's openness to sharing and to the destination of life's blessings—in the risen Son and in the Creator Spirit—is the foundation and substance of faith-witness. Either before and after the abyss someone loves us, or there is nothing. For anyone.

The Church is today urged, by her own highest magisterium, to reconsider, with a single more humble and less prejudiced gaze, what dreams and visions she has really nurtured, what pleas and intercessions she has really supported, what honor and dignity she has concretely been able to introduce into the drama of the human condition.

Finally, the humana communitas must live worthily on the Earth and do all it can to not dwell on it in vain—that is, not at all, or as if it not at all. Rescue fraternity to remain human. Without the contribution of the human reasons of meaning, which are always being sought after through trial and error, Christian thinking about faith cannot truly dwell on the Earth with the intellectual honesty that its witness to the incarnation of God demands.

Theology must in its turn accept to confront critically through trial and error the perversions of the sacred so that they do not have faith as an accomplice. We owe future generation this alliance between thinking that is sensitive to humanity and salvific decipherment of the sacred. After seeing several centuries spent imposing on consciences the need for generalized and partisan estrangement, we are convinced that the time has come to experience the freedom of empathic associations, springing from new policies of the spirit. Willing to scorn sublimely all religious and secular structures that, in fratricidal wars of religion and against religion,

have thrived far too long, at our expense and that of our children. All of us, not even one less, are brothers and sisters.

In a spirit of sincere friendship, thank you for your attention.

Afterword by Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia
President, Pontifical Academy for Life

With the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis has offered both the Church and the world a horizon along which to array the near future of our time, that has been made even more dramatic by the pandemic.

The relentless spread of radical individualism, together with a loss of affection for our shared humanity, has placed the ethical and affective, communitarian and spiritual, qualities of humanism on dangerous ground.

This degradation has taken by surprise the very heirs of modernity, who had considered the separation of secular civilization from the religious witness of transcendence a decisive factor in promoting civic humanism.

“Fraternity” which, in the Letter *Humana Communitas* (The Human Community) that he wrote to the Pontifical Academy for Life, Pope Francis described as the unkept promise of modernity, is making a comeback with all its power at this time in history, which we all perceive as a “pivotal” moment, that is, one that is crucial for both the present and the future. The world—the secular city—has long since ceased to be taught by God about the humanism of the person and the community. The lack of fraternity—which the pandemic seems to have deepened—is destined to be filled by an opposing complicity. Individual indifference to common affections (not only to common good and common interests!) generates monsters—political, economic, legal—which threaten even the good aspects of freedom and equality (and the sophisticated nature of anonymous sets of rules ends up by rewarding the wily who take advantage of it!).

The pages above—the result of the joint efforts work of a group of theologians and philosophers belonging to the Pontifical Academy for Life—are intended as a response to this time of change, which is also perceived as an opportunity for faith to regain the initiative, and not as something to be passively endured or to be resentful about while waiting for better times. Passivity and resentment veil the eyes of faith and prevent us from seeing God's timing in the history we share with the men and women of our age.

We are experiencing an epochal change, as Pope Francis often says, and no longer simply a time of transition. European Christianity no longer seems to act as a driving force on this continent. We know that the constituent elements of Christian truth have been handed down to us thanks to the testimony of the Scriptures and the apostolic tradition, as an ever-living leaven and ferment of fidelity to the Word of God that we must preserve intact through the ages. This heritage of faith is nevertheless the seed which, ever anew, is sown in the field of the world, so that the Kingdom of God can be perpetuated throughout all human history. We must therefore joyfully prepare ourselves to discern the kairos that the coming of the Lord gives us, enthusiastically taking up the plough that will make a furrow for sowing. Without looking back. And I would venture to say that Pope Francis is ahead of us in this and is asking us whether we are willing to do our part—not his. The Lord grants us the Spirit, necessary for thought and consequent action.

The history of individuals and peoples, with all their hopes and difficulties, is the place—there is no other—where we can speak the words of and practice the evangelical witness entrusted to the Christian community, in all its different ecclesial institutions. The difficulties of the present time should certainly not be underestimated. On the contrary, they must be analyzed carefully and with a sense of responsibility. And yet, the creative responsibility that this time demands, from the point of view of faith, must be taken on without reserve, with all the intelligence and passion that faith inspires in us.

Faith always dwells in the world but is never of the world. The words of Jesus make it clear that there is no world that is naturally suited to the historical achievement of the Kingdom of God, but there is also no world that is impervious to the work of the Kingdom. The Pontifical Academy for Life is an institution of the Holy See dedicated to providing intellectual support—from a witness and pastoral care perspective as well—to professionals directly involved in the ethics of taking care of human life in all its ages and conditions, fully aware of the vulnerability, fragility, and wounds that mortify and threaten its duration. The harshness of this test is not only related to the weakness of our mortal condition, but also to the arrogance of our deliberate indifference and abuse of power. With this in mind, the Academy was set up with the task of establishing a network made up of the most distinguished experts, both in the field of science and

technology and in the fields of philosophy and theology, to give guidance to and support the bioethical discernment of the knowledge and practices involved in taking care of human life. This discernment was focused on giving special attention to the extreme dimensions of human existence, marked by the highest vulnerability and virtually complete dependence on the actions of others—individuals and communities. Hence, as a natural development, the scientific work and reflections of the Academy's member scientists have focused specifically focus on all the stages in which human vulnerability is present.

In the current scenario, the Academy has felt the need to further broaden the scope of its action. On the one hand, because the extraordinary resources afforded by science and technology are paving the way for considering living organisms—including human beings—as material available for the ambitious development of life forms that are genetically selected and technically equipped in ways that cannot compare with the human beings we have known up until today. On the other, because the ethical sensitivity related to taking care of life, traditionally based on respecting the natural limits of human beings, is now girding itself for an unprecedented type of challenge, which questions these very limits. And not only with regard to birth and death, but also good and evil, what is right or wrong, the injunction and freedom that concern life as such.

In recent years, the Academy has promptly addressed the horizons of the “global bioethics” issue raised by these developments, in line with its own tradition, but also with the commitment to anticipate carefully and responsibly the terms of the current evolution. The “bioethical” issue now overlaps directly and completely with the “anthropological” issue, precisely because of the terms in which it is raised in our new era.

With this in mind, the Academy has decided to specifically strengthen this approach, philosophical and theological in essence, in its advisory role at the service of the Church and the human community. A specific document, inspired by the deep bonds existing between bioethics and anthropology, is being drawn up by a team of specialists in the fields of moral philosophy and theology. The document I am presenting here, drawn up as part of a collaboration among experts in fundamental theology and theological anthropology, convened on behalf of the Academy's Board, is part of this process of expansion and deepening. Faced with the urgency of the new challenges that lie before us, it is no longer possible to refrain from acting

and wearisomely repeat the usual formulas. On the contrary, there is an urgent need for theology and science to engage creatively in a debate on the new scenarios that technological development and anthropological changes place before our very eyes.

Authoritative magisterium, particularly in the teachings of Pope Francis, continually and explicitly calls for this involvement. Ecclesial institutions are called upon to play their part in promoting a deeper and more continuous dialogue between the intelligence of faith and the human dimension. In this renewal, theology and pastoral care converge, as two sides of the same coin. The recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* urges us to imagine the new perspective of this dialogue as the effective and necessary expression of an intellectual fraternity at the service of the entire human community. Theology's urge to rediscover the inter- and multi-disciplinary approach goes in this direction (*Veritatis gaudium*). The Pontifical Academy for Life humbly, but aware of the urgency of the moment, offers the above pages as food for thought to promote a broader reflection. This is a brief text intended to initiate a reflection starting from the profound message and prophetic vision inherent in the very act of promulgating the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. This will be followed shortly by the publication of essays on the individual key points of the perspective opened by the encyclical.

Our hope is that this proposal will encourage a new spirit of zeal and transparency, capable of involving the broadest theological community and the intellectual and scientific one as well, sensitive to the current themes of humanism and the genuine identification of religious experience in the present context. The fragmentation of intellectual work, even within the field of theology, especially when it encourages the stalemate of low-profile disputes, must be decisively cast aside. The joy of a scientific community animated by a spirit fraternal community, promoting the common good of shared life, is the right place to become passionate about and debate the best way to honor the task of guiding our common human reflection. A reflection that for too long has been worn out by the sad spirit of planetary individualism and the resigned dejection affecting a human community that wishes to return to life. Starting with the one that was bestowed with the honor and the burden of bearing witness to the love that restores us to hope and faith.

#Vincenzo Paglia

President of the Pontifical Academy for Life