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# Five Theologians on The Biggest Takeaways From ‘Fratelli Tutti’

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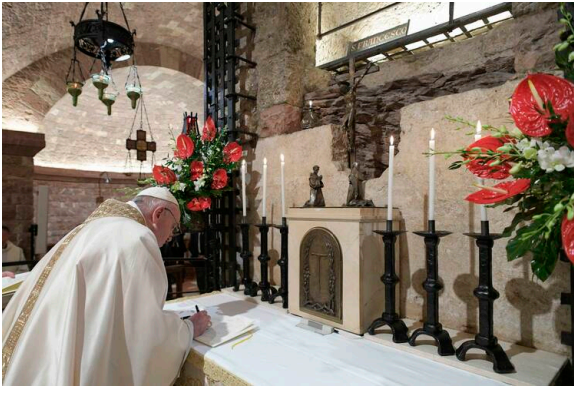
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Pope Francis signs his new encyclical, "Fratelli Tutti," after celebrating Mass at the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi on Oct. 3, 2020. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

*Editor's note: As part of our [larger coverage](#) of "[Fratelli Tutti](#)," the latest encyclical letter from Pope Francis, **America** asked a number of theologians and church experts to contribute a brief response, including their perspectives on its potential impact and its particular areas of import.*

## A Call to Discern the Depths of Our Politics

With the release of every encyclical, there is a rush to assess what is new and noteworthy, to find the most media-worthy and tweetable lines. There are plenty of these in "Fratelli Tutti": forceful critiques of the divisive effects of capitalism and technology, an unambiguous magisterial rejection of the death penalty and what is perhaps the church's most sustained denunciation of nationalism and populism since "Mit Brennender Sorge" in 1937. But focusing on those passages that stand out can lead one to miss the work of the whole.

"Fratelli Tutti" is carefully constructed in a way that reveals a distinctive aspect of Pope Francis' papal ministry. Yes, it powerfully exhorts Christians to pursue the intimacy of social friendship rather than the disposability and indifference of contemporary capitalism or the violent exclusion of populist nationalism. Much deeper than an argument or catechesis, however, the encyclical is a work of spiritual discernment.

The heart of "Fratelli Tutti" is Francis' reflection on the good Samaritan, which he offers in the mode of St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*. Rather than look for "abstract moralizing" or a "social and ethical message," Francis invites us to enter into this Gospel parable. Christ's words to the scholar of the law are readdressed to us: "Which of the persons do you identify with?... Which of these characters do you resemble?" We face a fundamental choice. "Here, all our distinctions, labels and masks fall away: it is the moment of truth. Will we bend down to touch and heal the wounds of others?"

Much deeper than an argument or catechesis, "Fratelli Tutti" is a work of spiritual discernment.

A focus on discernment has marked Francis' papacy from the start. Looking back, it is striking how much he discussed discernment in his interview with Antonio Spadaro, S.J., that early glimpse into his thoughts about the papacy. He has not offered himself as a heroic leader to be followed or a brilliant scholar with the proper answers. Francis has sought instead to foster processes such as synods in which the church could collectively listen, discern and act. (This focus on listening makes the absence of women's voices in "Fratelli Tutti" all the more jarring.)

In this mode of discernment, "Fratelli Tutti" lands forcefully in our politics. Francis' portrayals of unhealthy populism could be lifted from contemporary campaign events. The word "walls" appears 14 times as a symbol of our temptation to shut ourselves off from the needs of others. Francis' reassertion of the inadmissibility of the

death penalty and his call for its abolition ends not with anathemas but in a pastoral voice: “I ask Christians who remain hesitant on this point, and those tempted to yield to violence in any form” to enter into biblical stories that find their fullest expression in Jesus’ order to a disciple to “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”

Here again, Francis does not flatten this into a moral prohibition, but presents it as an action “from Jesus’ heart” which speaks to the present “as an enduring appeal” to which we must each decide how we will respond. In some quarters of the church, social doctrine is relegated to the peripheries of Christian concern; here Francis shows it flows from the heart of the Gospel. In “Fratelli Tutti,” Francis speaks to a polarized church and calls us not simply to correct our politics but to discern the profound spiritual stakes in their depths.

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## Lessons From “Fratelli Tutti” for the Contemporary United States

With carefully observed detail, “Fratelli Tutti” speaks to the chaos, fear and loss that pervade 2020 while sounding a timeless call to become better citizens of our communities, our nations and the globe. Without limiting the future the document envisions, I see three particular challenges to Catholics in the United States.

With “Fratelli Tutti,” Pope Francis calls U.S. Catholics to:

*Break our addiction to retributive violence.* Most U.S. Catholics know the church has long opposed the death penalty. In “Fratelli Tutti,” Francis calls us to reject more forms of retributive violence that are endemic throughout the United States, including life sentences and what he calls “extrajudicial killings.” As a U.S. resident in the year 2020, I heard Francis speak to our reality when he condemns “homicides deliberately committed by certain states and by their agents, often passed off as clashes with criminals or presented as the unintended consequences of the reasonable, necessary and proportionate use of force in applying the law.” What person can read this and not immediately think of police killings of unarmed persons, disproportionately Black, brown or mentally ill, actions which police, their unions and their supporters try to rationalize just as the pope describes? Francis correctly diagnoses these extrajudicial killings as unnecessary to keep people safe and as profound violations of universal human dignity.

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*Accept church teaching on the economy and its purposes.* Francis breaks no new ground here but reiterates at least two traditional church views not widely accepted in the United States. One goes back to the earliest Christians: The right to private property is not absolute but subordinate to the greater truth that the goods of the earth are intended for all. As I tell my students, as long as there is need, the church questions your right to have more than you need—never mind if you earned it. Another church teaching on the economy that many Americans have yet to fully accept is that the market cannot be expected to solve all our problems. Francis calls this a “dogma of neoliberal faith.”

*Value politics for what it can be, rather than what it is.* Pope Francis acknowledges that many people today distrust politics, often for good reasons. Like all of us, politicians fail in universal love: “Things that until a few years ago could not be said by anyone without risking the loss of universal respect can now be said with

impunity, and in the crudest of terms, even by some political figures.” Violent nationalism and xenophobia are on the rise in many countries, showing that we do not yet understand what it means to be a universal human community. And yet Francis sees an active and vital role for politics in the journey toward universal fraternity and social peace.

Francis envisions political life characterized by dialogue in which we appreciate our own standpoints even as we “recognize other people’s right to be themselves and to be different.” He models this with statements of appreciation for those of other or no faith, including observing that “those who claim to be unbelievers” can do well at carrying out God’s will. Francis acknowledges that religion can be misused in politics, including to demonize others, but urges those of different views to move past “false tolerance” on to mutual pursuit of the truth.

I had to look up “polyhedron,” Francis’ image for a society where difference is valued. It is a three-dimensional form with many sides that are different shapes. Unlike a cube, whose sides are all equal squares, a polyhedron draws the eye with its complexity. Its beauty and its very nature as a polyhedron come from the fact that it is defined by difference. May U.S. Catholics follow Francis’ lead in recognizing others’ right to be different, even as we dialogue from that difference toward the truth that we all belong to one another.

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## Just War No More?

In his new encyclical “Fratelli Tutti,” Pope Francis has taken another big step toward distancing the Catholic Church from its traditional support for just war theory. He writes, “It is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a ‘just war’.”

“Fratelli Tutti” is the latest in a series of pronouncements by recent popes expressing skepticism about the continued viability of that tradition. What I once described as “stringent just-war thinking” has over time become more a moral theology of peacemaking, showing a preference for nonviolence and edging toward pacifism.

When it comes to nuclear war, Francis already made clear in a 2017 condemnation that nuclear weapons, even for alleged deterrence purposes, are no longer acceptable. During the United Nations General Assembly last month, Archbishop Richard Paul Gallagher, the Vatican’s foreign minister, went further, repudiating “legacy rights” to nuclear weapons for the nuclear powers who are signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

“Fratelli Tutti” goes about as far as one can go toward critiquing the notion of just war without rejecting it wholesale.

“Fratelli Tutti” goes about as far as one can go toward critiquing the notion of just war without rejecting it wholesale. Perhaps the church’s stand on war today might be compared to its position on the death penalty in the 1980s—the beginning of incremental policy steps and statements that may eventually likewise make the idea of a just war “inadmissible.”

The pope seems to have come to recognize that while in principle a war may be rationally justifiable, as a matter of practice the abuse of the just war tradition and the realities of modern warfare make it impossible to wage a

just war today. The sweep of Francis' skepticism can be seen in his dismissal of "allegedly humanitarian, defensive and precautionary excuses" for making war. It would appear this even includes interventions based on what has become known as the international "responsibility to protect" noncombatant or defenseless communities. ("Precautionary principles" are what international humanitarian lawyers call just war norms.)

The Rev. J. Bryan Hehir is reputed to have said that he believed there was no war St. John Paul II would have regarded as just. John Paul II, however, did call for intervention to prevent genocide in the former Yugoslavia, Central Africa's Great Lakes region and Timor Leste.

Looking at cases like Libya and Syria, there may be reason to repudiate military intervention justified on humanitarian grounds. I would have liked, however, to have seen a closer analysis of those hard cases and more precise judgments on them. Other preventive interventions, as in Ivory Coast, have been successful. And Libya may have been a failure of policy rather than one of principle, though that great policy failure itself may be a reason to question humanitarian intervention by force.

The principal reason for Pope Francis' distancing from just war thinking seems to be its humanitarian consequences, both experienced and potential. He asks his readers to "touch the wounded flesh of the victims," particularly civilians whose killing was considered "collateral damage." He implies that just war analysts are too far removed from the sufferings inflicted by war. "We can no longer think of war as a solution," the pope reasons, "because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits." New technologies, he remarks, "have granted war an uncontrollable destructive power over great numbers of innocent civilians. The truth is that 'never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely.'"

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## Footnoting Fraternity: The Style and Sources of "Fratelli Tutti"

Papal footnotes signal to the reader how an official church text is building on the church's tradition. Footnotes help to illuminate the breadth and the depth of the Catholic tradition, rooting the doctrinal insights on contemporary issues in a centuries-old conversation.

Before Pope Francis, recognized sources were limited almost exclusively to biblical texts, the previous popes and the insights of saints. With "Laudato Si'," Francis widened the conversation partners to include references to non-Christian sources, including a Sufi Muslim mystic, contemporary theologians and teachings from national bishops' conferences.

With "Fratelli Tutti," Pope Francis again reflects a wider conversation. In addition to many references to Scripture, the encyclical cites 292 sources in 288 footnotes. The majority of these citations, 172, come from his own writing. "Laudato Si'" receives the most citations of any single text with 23 references. "Evangelii Gaudium" follows with 22 references. Collectively, his World Day of Peace messages are cited 11 times. Much to the chagrin of his critics perhaps, Francis cites his joint document with Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, on "Human Fraternity," a total of nine times, including a substantial quote at the end ("Fratelli Tutti," No. 285).

With “Fratelli Tutti,” Francis again expands the circle of conversation partners beyond bishops and saints, including Karl Rahner, S.J., Paul Ricoeur and, notably, Rabbi Hillel. But is this circle wide enough?

Pope Benedict gets the most references after Francis with 22 citations. “Caritas in Veritate” is referenced 19 times. Other popes are cited 29 times. Francis again affirms the work of bishops’ conferences and appears to want to have at least one reference to each region of the world. In “Fratelli Tutti,” the pope cites the work of 12 conferences, including the documents on racism and migration produced by the U.S. bishops.

With “Fratelli Tutti,” Francis again expands the circle of conversation partners beyond bishops and saints, including Karl Rahner, S.J., Paul Ricoeur and, notably, Rabbi Hillel (Nos. 59-60). But is this circle wide enough?

While the widening of the conversation to non-papal sources indeed reflects the pope’s style, the omission of women may also be reflective of something deeper.

Before engaging with the work of Blessed Charles de Foucauld, the pope speaks of being inspired in his writing by St. Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu and Mahatma Gandhi (No. 286). This is somewhat strange because nowhere does Francis directly cite the work of King, Tutu or Gandhi. A more direct citation of King would have strengthened the text’s condemnation of racism. Similarly, a more direct engagement with Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence could have added to the section on war.

But the most glaring omission in the footnotes is any reference to the voices of women. The pope could have easily brought in the work of Dorothy Day, whom he cited in his 2015 address to Congress, or the Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee, who was referenced alongside King and Gandhi in the pope’s 2017 World Day of Peace message. Many feminist theologians have long engaged the themes in the document. And the lives of countless women religious, from St. Clare to St. Josephine Bakhita, could have been uplifted as models of social friendship.

While the widening of the conversation to non-papal sources indeed reflects the pope’s style, the omission of women may also be reflective of something deeper. Hopefully, the next encyclical will not repeat this mistake.

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Loving an oppressor does not mean allowing him to keep oppressing us or letting him think that what he does is acceptable.

## Still Waiting for a Harder Look at the Sin of Racism

“Truth is an inseparable companion to justice and mercy” (No. 227). With these words, Pope Francis in his latest encyclical, “Fratelli Tutti,” inadvertently lends support to justice movements in the United States that have emerged in light of the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of police officers.

In fact, several sections in the encyclical may be of particular interest to those in the U.S. Black community. Pope Francis acknowledges the current social unrest and protests here when he states that “ignoring the existence and rights of others will erupt in some form of violence, often when least expected” (No. 219).

Later in the encyclical, he says loving an oppressor does not mean allowing him to keep oppressing us or letting him think that what he does is acceptable (No. 241), a statement that should console many who have engaged

in peaceful protests against systems of racial injustice here in the United States. In his new encyclical, Pope Francis states that instances of racism continue to shame us for they show that our supposed social progress is not as real or definitive as we think (No. 20).

This is not news to Black people, who for years have tried to point out that racism is inextricably woven into the fabric of America's political and cultural life and throughout its social, medical, educational and religious institutions. Black Americans have long testified to the ways racist systems have consistently oppressed and destroyed the lives of Black people for centuries. Inadequate health care, inequities in our criminal justice system, shuttering of schools in the inner cities and higher rates of unemployment are a testament to the impact of systematic racism in our society.

Black people for years have tried to point out that racism is inextricably woven into the fabric of America's political and cultural life and throughout its social, medical, educational and religious institutions.

But acknowledging racism without being specific in naming those racist structures and institutions, as the pope does in "Fratelli Tutti," continues to mute the deadly impact that racism has had on the lives of Black persons in the United States and elsewhere.

Later in the encyclical, Pope Francis quotes the recent U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on racism, "Open Wide Our Hearts," which states that "there are fundamental rights that precede any society because they flow from the dignity granted to each person as created by God" (No. 124). While it is nice to know that Pope Francis is reading the pastoral letters of the U.S. bishops, their 1979 pastoral on racism, "Brother and Sisters to Us," might have been a stronger source for the pope's words on racism and how it creates a rupture to the body of Christ. In that letter, the bishops acknowledged racism "as an evil that endures in our society and the Church."

In "Fratelli Tutti," Pope Francis seems to understand racism as an attitude, whose fluidity can be compared to "a virus that quickly mutates and instead of disappearing goes into hiding and lurks in waiting" (No. 97). This ignores the reality that racism permeates social structures, including the Catholic Church, and that persons of faith must work in solidarity to dismantle these structures.

While the pope's new encyclical does not specifically address white supremacy or anti-Black bias here in the United States, it does open a door for further dialogue on racism and its deadly impacts and may move persons of faith to do the work that must be done to end this evil in our society. I highly recommend for Pope Francis and other persons of faith the following two books—*Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, by Isabel Wilkerson, and *How To Be An Anti-Racist*, by Ibram X. Kendi—that address racial bias and racist structures and offer insight into dismantling this evil.

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