Ecumenical Bridges between Orthodox and Catholic Sides: Comparison between *Fratelli Tutti* of Pope Francis and *For the Life of the World. Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* Signed by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

SAMUELE BIGNOTTI*

A large part of Christians in the world have been involved in social topics by these two pastoral documents released by the Holy See and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Both documents bear the mark of the two Church Primates, Pope Francis and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew who inspired them and who had already shown interest in themes such as human life, social theology, climate and ecumenism. This essay aims to offer an ecumenical common reading of the two recent documents, Fratelli Tutti and For the Life of the World. Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church, considering the pastoral work of the two signatory Primates as authentic ecumenical bridges within the Christian world.

Keywords: *Christian Unity, Orthodox-Catholic Ecumenism, Pope Francis, Patriarch Bartholomew, the Green Patriarch, Social Theology*

1. Introduction

In March 2020 the Ecumenical Patriarchate published a document *For the life of the world. Toward a social ethos of the Orthodox Church* (from now FLW),¹ “a kind of omnibus of positions on the Church’s position toward the world.”² It was signed by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and His Holy Synod. Later that same year, 3rd October, at the very eve of the feast of Saint Francis, Pope Francis signed, in Assisi, a document having an obvious social characteristic, *Fratelli Tutti* (from now on FT).³ Several theologians

* Samuele Bignotti, Responsible for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Dialogue in the Diocese of Mantua (Italy), Via Cairoli, 20 46100 Mantova (Italy), ecumenismoedialogo@diocesidimantova.it.

¹ See: Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “For the Life of the World. Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church,” https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos?p_p_id=56_INSTANCE_km0Xa4sy69OV&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&p_p_col_id=column-1&p_p_col_count=1&_56_INSTANCE_km0Xa4sy69OV_languageId=en-US, accessed November 23, 2020.

² “Review: *For the Life of the World* (Ecumenical Patriarchate Social Document),” <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/orthodoxyandheterodoxy/2020/03/27/review-for-the-life-of-the-world-ecumenical-patriarchate-social-document/>, accessed January 8, 2021.

³ See: Pope Francis, “Fratelli tutti,” http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, accessed December 5, 2020.

wrote⁴ about both of these documents and a few of them tried to find which of Catholic Social Teachings could be compared to FLW.⁵ The main research question would be: “Could both Orthodox and Catholic learn the same Christian lifestyle by reading these two documents?”⁶

In 2000 the Moscow Patriarchate published a social teaching document, but we can’t consider its content in an ecumenical context,⁷ since it has only local relevance. FLW could be instead considered as a script published for all Orthodox Christians because “the Ecumenical Patriarch symbolizes global Orthodoxy in a way not possible for other Orthodox hierarchs.”⁸

The Catholic Church is interested in the significance of FLW because it represents an “unprecedented collaboration between the Orthodox hierarchs and the Orthodox scholars and theologians.”⁹ The Orthodox Church developed an interesting way to offer its own teaching for the dialogue; in fact, one of the theologians involved in it wrote that this Orthodox social document “provides a roadmap for reconciling contemporary issues with the wisdom and beauty of the Orthodox spiritual tradition.”¹⁰ Aristotle Papanikolaou is absolutely right when he recognizes FLW as a bridge for dialogue between Orthodox and Catholics.¹¹ The most interesting thing is that this document is considered a consequence of the process started in the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in Crete 2016.¹² Starting with the structure and the method, we will consider objectives and recipients in order to get sufficient information for ecumenical parallelisms.

⁴ See (in French) the entire issue of *Istina* dedicated to the document FTW: *Istina* 65, no. 4 (2020).

⁵ See: Charles C. Camosy, “*Orthodox Social Ethos* aims to put Eastern Church spin on social issues,” <https://cruxnow.com/interviews/2020/05/orthodox-social-ethos-aims-to-put-eastern-church-spin-on-social-issues/>, accessed March 21, 2021.

⁶ Talking about the entire Orthodox reality is difficult, so now the focus shall be on jurisdiction belonging to the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

⁷ “In 2000, the Church of Moscow published «The Basis of the Social Concept» an admirable though rudimentary effort to outline the social principles of the Orthodox Church in Russia after an extended period of state suppression. The overall approach of that document was critical of “the world,” regarding it as a threat to be defied and defeated. Such a defensive posture may survive and even thrive under conditions of confessional isolation, but it doesn’t fare as well in a more ecumenical context.” See: John Chryssavgis, “The Orthodox Church & Social Teaching,” <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/orthodox-church-social-teaching>, accessed March 21, 2021.

⁸ Camosy, “*Orthodox Social Ethos*.”

⁹ Chryssavgis, “The Orthodox Church & Social Teaching.”

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ See: Camosy, “*Orthodox Social Ethos*.”

¹² “Meeting in Crete for the first time after almost a millennium, Orthodox patriarchs and hierarchs – along with a handful of consultants, clergy and laity – issued a formal decree

2. Structure and method

FLW was signed by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on 18 January 2020, published on 27 March and is a mature reflection on the request of the Council of Crete in 2016, carried out by the theologians of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and published in the United States.¹³ The analogy with *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council is clear for the similar synodal seat of origin,¹⁴ but for the sake of topicality it is preferable to combine FLW and FT.

The structure of the FLW marks out the various social spheres in which the Church, starting with the Eucharist, offers a light for contemporary man to orient himself in the darkness of these times. After the introduction, which places the reader in the Eucharistic perspective, the following chapters are listed: 1. Introduction, 2. The Church in the Public Sphere, 3. The Course of Human Life, 4. Poverty, Wealth, and Civil Justice, 5. War, Peace, and Violence, 6. Ecumenical Relations and Relations with Other Faiths, 7. Orthodoxy and Human Rights, 8. Science, Technology, the Natural World, 9. Conclusion.

One can find a broad look at those areas of human social life that are questioning mankind in the 21st century, such as: the role of the (Orthodox) Church in society, the tension between war and peace, the digital dimension in which everyone is moving these days, relations with other religions, human rights and bioethics. From this list we can deduce the attempt to indicate a Christian ethos that bears witness to the Gospel in relation to human situations, with honesty and pragmatism¹⁵. What shines through is the Trinitarian anthropological theology of one of the theologians of this team: Kallistos Ware, who wrote: “A person is social or does not be. The authentic human being is not egocentric, but exocentric. I am truly human, truly personal, only if I relate to others, in the image of the Holy Trinity.”¹⁶

as well as an encyclical message on “the role of the Orthodox Church in the contemporary world.” In this sense, the current document complements and completes the work of the extraordinary Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church that convened in June 2016 and may be considered as part of the process of its reception.” Chryssavgis, “The Orthodox Church & Social Teaching.”

¹³ See: Lorenzo Prezzi, “Insegnamento sociale ortodosso: un testo di riferimento,” <http://www.settimananews.it/ecumenismo-dialogo/insegnamento-sociale-ortodosso/>, accessed April 10, 2020.

¹⁴ See: Prezzi, “Insegnamento sociale ortodosso.”

¹⁵ See: “Chiesa ortodossa: pubblicato *Per la vita del mondo*, primo compendio di dottrina sociale del Patriarcato ecumenico di Costantinopoli,” <https://www.insidertrend.it/2020/04/21/altro/religioni-cristianesimo-chiesa-ortodossa-pubblicato-per-la-vita-del-mondo-primo-compendio-di-dottrina-sociale-del-patriarcato-ecumenico-di-costantinopoli/>, accessed January 20, 2021.

¹⁶ Kallistos Ware, *La rivelazione della persona. Dall'individuo alla comunione* (Roma: Lipa, 2017), 38, own translation.

The subtitles of each chapter are added carefully, as if to suggest a specific, Eucharistic approach to the theme each time. Apparently these phrases seem out of place, but the succession of quotations taken from the Byzantine liturgy of St Basil¹⁷ reinforces the Eucharistic perspective: 1. It is time to serve the Lord, 2. Let us commend our whole life unto Christ our God, 3. Sanctify our souls and bodies, and grant that we may worship you in holiness all the days of our lives, 4. Remember, Lord, those who are mindful of the poor, 5. For the peace of the whole world..., 6. Let us pray for the unity of all, 7. You have created us in your image and likeness, 8. Your own of your own we offer to you., 9. Let us—the faithful—rejoice, having this anchor of hope.

The conclusion of FLW states that “the social ethos of the Church is fulfilled not simply through the implementation of ethical prescriptions, but also and most fully in the liturgical expectation of the divine Kingdom” (FLW 80) and there is a clear reference to the liturgy as the first *school* of Christian ethics,¹⁸ a place where one can acquire a communal lifestyle with the whole human race and above all with one who is very often a brother or sister in Baptism. In addition to the liturgy, ample reference is made to biblical and patristic sources, which seem to say that the essential ingredient for Christian ethics is already affirmed in the apostolic era, as can be seen in the Acts of the Apostles.¹⁹ FLW seems to set the apostolic community in today’s world, putting today’s issues before its eyes in order to receive a secure orientation. The clear indications are there, the text does not fail to admit some errors of the past, promote new steps, accuse the guilty and open new horizons. The deductive method leaves no room for misunderstanding; the structure and approach seem typical of a church in dialogue with the world, including other Christian denominations, because

The inevitable reference is not only to the broad social teaching of the Catholic Church dating back to Leo XIII’s *Rerum novarum* (1891) and to the significant elaborations of the Protestant Churches, starting after the First World War and, in particular, with the work of the Ecumenical Council of Churches from the 1970s onwards, but also to the first systematic text of orthodox social doctrine, produced by the Russian Church.²⁰

¹⁷ See the Divine Liturgy of St Basil the Great.

¹⁸ “The liturgy is therefore formative also because it offers us a prophetic voice of judgment on the quality of our Christian life” in: Robert Taft, *Liturgia. Modello e icona di vita* (Lipa: Roma, 2012), 41, own translation.

¹⁹ See: Acts 1-5 and Daniel Marguerat, *La prima storia del cristianesimo. Gli Atti degli apostoli* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2002), 182–84.

²⁰ Prezzi, “Insegnamento sociale ortodosso,” own translation.

Scrolling through the FT index, one can see themes similar to those of FLW, even if the perspective is different: 1. Dark Clouds over a Closed World, 2. A Stranger on the Road, 3. Envisaging and Engendering an Open World, 4. A Heart Open to the Whole World, 5. A Better Kind of Politics, 6. Dialogue and Friendship in Society, 7. Paths of Renewed Encounter, 8. Religions at the Service of Fraternity in Our World.

There is a different perspective, for various reasons. The first reason is due to the team that worked on the draft, in fact it is edited by the Catholic Church with contributions from various episcopal conferences around the world.²¹ The second is of a temporal nature: the months elapsed between the publication of FLW (27 March 2020) and FT (3 October 2020) were characterized by the spread of Covid-Sars19 and each person realized the importance of other people. The third reason is to be found in the previous pronouncements of Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) and *Laudato si'* (2015), with which FT constitutes a trilogy based on brotherhood, especially in profound harmony with the encyclical on the care of creation, in which the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew is cited among the first for his bold promotion of the custody of the planet. The method of Pope Francis and his team seems to gather the voices of men and women from all parts of the earth, through his visits or the messages of local bishops, to reread it in the light of the Word and return it to the whole world as a proclamation of a possible new world. From the above-mentioned titles one can see tones open to new possibilities, like glimpses of hope starting from the biblical icon of the parable of the good Samaritan. The diagnosis of the initial situation and the social references denote a preference for the inductive method, where any reader is offered an interpretative key to reality, which here is represented by the parable of Luke 10:25-37. This passage is the narrative description of Christ's charity, which becomes the model of universal brotherhood and social friendship. (see: FT 94)

In the text of FLW, the Church looks at the world from the perspective of the Kingdom:

It inhabits this life on the threshold between earth and heaven, and bears witness from age to age of things as yet not seen. It dwells among the nations as a sign and image of the permanent and perpetual peace of God's Kingdom, and as a promise of the complete healing of humanity and the restoration of a created order shattered by sin and death. (FLW 80)

²¹ See: the FTW quotations and footnotes.

The pages of FT instead portray Christians as called to be universal brothers and sisters, in the manner of Charles de Foucauld, mentioned in the document:

“Blessed Charles directed his ideal of total surrender to God towards an identification with the poor, abandoned in the depths of the African desert. In that setting, he expressed his desire to feel himself a brother to every human being, and asked a friend to “pray to God that I truly be the brother of all.” He wanted to be, in the end, “the universal brother.” Yet only by identifying with the least did he come at last to be the brother of all. (FT 287)

One may raise the question: if these two perspectives are irreconcilable? The answer is clear: the two perspectives are not irreconcilable; on the contrary, they are convergent.

3. Objectives and addressee

Both documents we are comparing update Christians’ awareness of the Church’s identity in the world and her social commitment as a promoter of integral human development. It is reiterated that the Church, united with Christ, already has by its very nature objectives and addressee: to follow Christ in proclaiming the Kingdom to the poor²² and to correspond to the missionary mandate: “Go therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). One of the common objectives of the two documents is to improve the condition of the world, understood as the environment and the peoples who inhabit it. Pope Francis, for example, reaffirms the source and the trails on which social commitment should be activated:

Every commitment inspired by the Church’s social doctrine is “derived from charity, which according to the teaching of Jesus is the synthesis of the entire Law (cf. Matt. 22:36-40).” This means acknowledging that “love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world”. For this reason, charity finds expression not only in close and intimate relationships but also in “macro-relationships: social, economic and political.” (FT 181)

The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew hopes that Christians will be a living and courageous part of civil society, promoters of justice and mercy for all.

Christians may and often must participate in the political life of the societies in which they live, but must do so always in service

²² See: Dominique Barthelemy, *Il povero scelto come Signore* (Magnano: Qiqajon, 2010), 18–19.

to the justice and mercy of God's Kingdom. Such was the injunction from the earliest Christian period: "We have been taught to pay all proper respect to powers and authorities of God's appointment, so long as it does not compromise us." At times, this may entail participation not by way of perfect obedience, but by way of the higher citizenship of civil disobedience, even rebellion. The Kingdom of God alone is the Christian's first and last loyalty, and all other allegiances are at most provisional, transient, partial, and incidental. (FLW 9)

These two Primates participated in the prayer for peace in Rome on October 20, 2020,²³ representing a bridge made not of stones, but of people, all of them full of mutual esteem to give hope to the world with their witness. From this perspective we see numerous calls for personal and community conversion, so that the Gospel of Christ may be proclaimed to all. FLW addresses Christians, first and foremost Orthodox Christians, with a clear invitation to proclaim their faith with their lives; while FT has been written as a message destined for anyone who has the courage to dream of a better world:

Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all. (FT 8)

4. Ecumenical parallelisms

The perspectives of Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew facing the world from their own ecclesial tradition, find more and more points of encounter and their points of view seem closer than one may appreciate. It can be seen at this point that both FLW and FT devote a great deal of space to ecumenism and do so first of all by looking in the same direction, that is, towards the world today, and from the same perspectives, those of the Gospel of Christ and Christian Tradition from the Church Fathers era to the present day.

Pope Francis expresses the appeal for believers of all religions with the idea of one Father and says:

From our faith experience and from the wisdom accumulated over centuries, but also from lessons learned from our many weaknesses and failures, we, the believers of the different religions, know that our witness to

²³ See: "Prayer for Peace *No one is saved alone. Peace and Fraternity*, Rome 20 October 2020," <https://preghieraperlapace.santegidio.org/pageID/31276/langID/en/SPEAKERS-TEXTS-BIO.html>, accessed February 7, 2021.

God benefits our societies. The effort to seek God with a sincere heart, provided it is never sullied by ideological or self-serving aims, helps us recognize one another as travelling companions, truly brothers and sisters. (FT 274)

He approaches the many companions that each of us can meet in the pluralistic world we live in, formed by people from different cultures and religions. He says that some of these “drink from other sources” (FT 277), while for Christians the only source of universal brotherhood and social friendship is the Gospel. It seems to ask for a common effort from all, while showing where the vocation of Christians to social commitment comes from and uses a very effective musical image:

Yet we Christians are very much aware that “if the music of the Gospel ceases to resonate in our very being, we will lose the joy born of compassion, the tender love born of trust, the capacity for reconciliation that has its source in our knowledge that we have been forgiven and sent forth. If the music of the Gospel ceases to sound in our homes, our public squares, our workplaces, our political and financial life, then we will no longer hear the strains that challenge us to defend the dignity of every man and woman.” (FT 277)

From a similar point of view, FLW also expresses the universal fatherhood of God towards all those who are on this earth (cf. FLW 55) and because of this it is shown that Orthodox Christians are open to dialogue with other religions and Christian denominations, because it expresses the mystery of the Incarnation.

In short, the Church is dedicated to a sustained dialogue with other Christians. Dialogue, in the Orthodox understanding, is essentially and primordially a reflection of the dialogue between God and humanity: it is initiated by God and conducted through the divine Logos (*dia-logos*), our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Pervading all human life, dialogue takes place in all our encounters, personal, social, or political, and must always be extended to those who adhere to religions different from ours. And in all our connections and relationships, the Word of God is mystically present, ever guiding our exchange of words and ideas towards a spiritual union of hearts in him. (FLW 54)

The essence of dialogue becomes the proclamation of faith in Christ, the Word made flesh. On both sides, the theological motive of the Incarnation can be seen several times, and this is the basis of our common faith summarized in the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: “σarkωθέντα ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα” (“Through the power of the Holy Spirit incarnated himself in the womb of the Virgin Mary and became man”). The attitude of dialogue in a divided world is prophetic, and we

Christians are encouraged by these two Primates, Francis and Bartholomew, to improve life from the place where we live. The theological background of the Incarnation brings us closer to each other in a lowering (*kenotic*) relationship of mutual love. The words of Kallistos Ware are so confirmed: “to love one another means to lay down our lives for one another.”²⁴

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, looking in the same direction and from the same perspective is a possible undertaking. Not an easy one, but necessary for Christian witnessing to be made of close looks and prophecy for the world. Everyone will see that hope grows day by day as we get closer. It has been shown how close Christians are, albeit with some differences and inconsistencies. The structure and method of each of these documents have been exposed and it has been explained how admired they are for the courage to approach the issues that are often the occasion for debate. The objectives and recipients reflect the message of the Gospel missionary mandate, of which both Francis and Bartholomew are promoters. In the vastness of these documents has been found ecumenical interweaving that opens new perspectives for dialogue between Rome and Constantinople. Above all, the two documents can promote common initiatives and projects for Catholics and Orthodox addressing the contemporary world.

“Could Orthodox and Catholic learn the same Christian lifestyle by reading these two documents?” The answer is: “Yes, they could.” This transformation starting from human life is called by Orthodox spirituality *theosis*²⁵ and it is the only way of being “in the world but not of the world”²⁶ because God inspired his breath of life in humans who also received the Holy Spirit for the re-creation of the world in Christ.

It is hoped that these authoritative messages will be able to reach those in a pluralistic context. In this perspective pluralism no longer frightens and is inhabited by the prophecy of unity in the Trinity. As Pope John Paul II wrote at the dawn of the new millennium in reference to the great responsibility of Christians to generate a better future from their rediscovered unity, “after centuries of bitter controversies, the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities are more and more taking a fresh look at this ministry of unity.”²⁷ The eyes of the Baptized are renewed in the mystery of Christ and the Church in order to converge ever more closely.

²⁴ Ware, *La rivelazione della persona*, 43.

²⁵ See: Camosy, “*Orthodox Social Ethos*.”

²⁶ See: Chryssavgis, “The Orthodox Church & Social Teaching.”

²⁷ John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, 89.