

The best of quotations have a built-in problem. Years and use turn them stale. They lose their flavor;

- “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”
- “a stitch in time saves nine”
- “this Bud’s for you”

So, too, for today’s Gospel. It’s old hat. Flat beer. Jesus is challenged to choose the greatest among the 613 commandments in the Torah. He names two

- “Love God above all else?” (Dt 6)
- “Love your neighbor as you love yourself?” (Lv 19)

We’ve heard it all too often. It has lost its bite. If we could only give it TV life. God forbid! These commandments cover two dimensions of the Biblical understanding of love. But I spy a third dimension that’s even more basic—God’s love of us. This is what I intend to share with you.

For this, let us steal into the Last Supper. Focus your audiovisual on Jesus and the Apostles: “A **new** commandment I give you: Love one another as I have loved you.”

Not just “love one another.” Not simply “love one another as you love yourselves.” No. “Love one another **as I have** loved you.”

Our love for one another must mirror Jesus’ love for us. What’s **new** about this love is that God’s love is so splendidly spontaneous!

God has loved us first, and so we respond by loving God in return. St Francis lived and taught this reciprocal love as Gospel living. He showed us how to love the Father by being in harmony with all creation. How to love the Son by imitating His life. And how to love the Spirit by inviting the Spirit to be Advocate of the Order.

As society becomes more and more diverse, as technology continues to make once unimaginable advances, the ethical and moral questions, the political and religious debates we face become more and more complicated, difficult and challenging. The New Commandment “**to love as God loves**”—without limit, without condition, without counting the cost, completely and selflessly—is the starting point for dealing with moral and ethical, and cultural and political issues of our day.

To respond to a confused and troubled world, struggling to articulate a vision for its future, Pope Francis presents a Gospel-centered narrative which is both practical and ambitious.

Catholic Social Teaching again takes its rightful place. Should be no surprise at a time of such upheaval. You recall only 5 years ago, in what seems like a different world, *Laudato Si* prophetically placed the ecological crisis center stage for the Church and the world. Such an enormous teaching document that mapped out more than enough formation agendas.

Pope Francis is surely right to think that a confused world urgently needs some Catholic common sense. And that is what he provides us in his latest encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, universal fraternity put into dialogue with the Gospel. It points in the direction of the brotherhood and sisterhood of every human being. The Holy Father believes that the Gospel can give soul to the idea

- that we are bound to respect one another's inherent dignity,
- to work for a society in which everyone is included, and
- where cultural differences are sources of enrichment rather than resentments.

The Scriptural heart of the Encyclical is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This is what universal love looks like. And to be practitioners of universal love, it's more than just being nice. Pope Francis gives the example of two Christian lives: St Francis of Assisi and Charles de Foucauld—radical men of God whose mission included outreach to the Muslim world.

The Holy Father's strategy enables us to begin by learning to love our own roots, our own culture. This is not nationalism that turns it into an exclusive identity. The Holy Father says that other cultures are not enemies from which to protect ourselves, but differing reflections of the richness of human life.

Pope Francis stresses the importance of meeting others, of creating a culture of encounter, to really get to know one another. Covid-19 should not diminish our desire to connect with one another. Computers and smartphones and video-communications are at the ready. I see his letter as an expansion of Catholic Social Teaching, a re-iteration of the essentials of the Gospel, to get back to the basics.

The proof of the need for such a call has already provoked online venting of spleens for the positions it holds. Let's hope that the encyclical will help some of the Church's commentators to stand back and take a breath, and ask themselves how a life devoted to universal love and reconciliation could ever become a reality.

*Fratelli tutti*—Universal fraternity—is an encyclical for our times, for a pandemic wrapped inside a economic crisis encased in an impending ecological catastrophe. The roadmap is direct and practical, and seriously challenging:

- “let us renounce the pettiness and resentment of useless infighting and constant confrontation;
- “let us stop feeling sorry for ourselves and acknowledge our crimes, our apathy, our lies;
- Reparation and reconciliation will give us new life and set all free from fear. (#78)

What is the source of such vision and encouragement at a time when hope seems impossible? Whence the confidence in ordinary human goodness to send us back to our families, to our neighborhoods and towns to work humbly for the common good? The answer the Pope gives is, of course, St Francis:

*“In the world of that time, bristling with watchtowers and defensive walls, cities were a theater of brutal wars between powerful families, even as poverty was spreading throughout*

*the countryside. Yet there Francis was able to welcome true peace into his heart and free himself of the desire to wield power over others. He became one of the poor, and sought to live in harmony with all.” (34)*

“Love one another **as I have** loved you.” What’s new about this love is that God’s love is so splendidly spontaneous.