

Source of Inspiration and Dialogue

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Director of the Study Center for Ecumenism in Italy and professor at the Institute of Ecumenical Studies in Venice, Riccardo Burigana, looks beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church. Since its publication, the encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, has elicited great interest in all the Christian Churches and among religious leaders in ways that go far beyond polite, official statements. This article speaks deals with some of the most significant responses.



The interest from outside the Catholic world in the months after the publication of the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, can, in my opinion, be attributed to two elements. The first is due to the very content of the encyclical itself, and secondly to the fact that it is signed by Pope Francis.

In terms of content, it is evident that *Fratelli tutti* proposes a reflection on the Church in the world, from the starting point of fraternity. Although it looks at the Catholic Church, it is addressed to all Christians who are called to confront crises and challenges together, with a rethinking of the heritage of living traditions. In the ecumenical field, what the encyclical says regarding interreligious dialogue have elicited particular interest. It reinforces the idea that Christians must continue along the path of building bridges with other religions and not just with the Islamic world in particular. This undertaking has been made all the more urgent with the pandemic and is clearly shown in the joint document of the Ecumenical Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Serving a Wounded*

World in Interreligious Solidarity: A Christian Call to Reflection and Action during COVID-19 and Beyond², to offer just one example.

The widespread ecumenical reception of *Fratelli tutti* is also dependent on the deep meeting of minds established between Pope Francis and a number of global ecumenical leaders and Christian Churches, especially among those who have had the opportunity to meet Francis and experience his ecumenical, welcoming style which is characterized by dialogue and kindness.

Ioan Sauca, Acting Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC)

The encyclical constitutes a privileged source to strengthen the ecumenical journey, as the Romanian Orthodox Reverend Ioan Sauca, acting secretary of the Ecumenical Council of Churches has commented. Sauca, who has been personally involved in this ecumenical journey for decades, defined *Fratelli tutti* as "a call to build the visible unity of the Church so as to become a prophetic sign and a foretaste of the reconciliation of this world with God and the unity of humanity and of all creation."³ The encyclical is a significant **step forward** in defining the role of the Church in society, in which Christians must strive to bring

together the local with the global, in the light of the fraternity that must help them create a new climate in which Christian values can interact with a view toward shaping a welcoming society, inspired by love. For Sauca, the encyclical's ecumenical significance helps to better understand the interreligious value of Christian witness to *fraternity*. This becomes evident when one considers together both the pontiff's words and gestures promoting Church unity and the Ecumenical Council of Churches' recent efforts towards creating an ecumenical witness which is increasingly rooted in everyday Christian life and for the reform of the Church and society in the name of Christian values of fraternity and communion.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

In a lengthy Vatican news interview on the occasion of his October visit to Rome,⁴ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew expressed his personal appreciation for *Fratelli tutti*, to the point of saying that " We completely agree with His Holiness' invitation and challenge to abandon indifference or even the cynicism that governs our ecological, political, economic and social life in general, including our self-centered form of unity, and to dream of our world as a united human family." For the patriarch, *Fratelli tutti* "is not simply a compendium or summary of previous Encyclicals or other texts of Pope Francis, but the crowning and happy conclusion of all social doctrine"; for this reason, indifference and cynicism must be denounced, reaffirming the dimension " to dream of our world as a united human family in which we are all brothers and sisters without exception." Bartholomew hopes the encyclical "will prove to be a source of inspiration and fruitful dialogue through the taking of decisive initiatives and cross-cutting actions on an inter-Christian, inter-religious and pan-human level." Referring to the experience of the first Christian communities in particular, the Patriarch expressed that "brothers and sisters are not only members of the Church, but all peoples . . . It is not an abstract feeling of sympathy towards humanity, which usually ignores the neighbor. The dimension of personal communion and fraternity distinguishes Christian love and fraternity from abstract humanism."

Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby

The Anglican, the Right Reverend Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury expressed similar ideas.⁵ For Welby, *Fratelli tutti* "offers a systematic, ambitious and brave vision for a better future world". He sees it as a universal invitation to live values of welcoming, communion, and openness to new ideas that "weave together the individual and the social, rejecting the extremes of both and stressing their interdependence." For Christians, it is an unequivocal, shared call to bear witness and thus to strengthen the ecumenical journey through a shared responsibility to live the dimension of *fraternity* and foster a re-envisioning of modern society. For the Archbishop of Canterbury, *Fratelli tutti* delineates those urgent problems to which Christians must give clear answers, such as the rethinking of economic developments. By living out their ecumenical witness, Christians must also draw from a plurality of sources. From Francis of Assisi to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the experiences of those cited in the encyclical need to be read. They speak to the common heritage of our Christian martyrs, and to which ecumenical dialogue has given much thought in recent decades. They are a privileged source of understanding of what already unites us.

Methodist pastor, Claudio Ribeiro (Brazil)

Latin American Methodist Pastor, Claudio Ribeiro, has also spoken about the encyclical by sharing his thoughts with the Council of Christian Churches of Brazil. In recent months, in combatting the pandemic, the Council has denounced, on the one hand, government policies that tend to minimize its dimensions, and working, on the other hand, for widespread health care, especially for those living on the margins of society. For Ribeiro, *Fratelli tutti* can be compared to *Laudato si'* in the opening of ecumenical perspectives for shared actions in society. The encyclical presents "a broad vision of dialogue and justice in the world and encompasses economics, politics, communications and religion, reinforcing ecumenical developments, as they have come to be defined during the twentieth century with the participation of Christians from different traditions."⁶ With the publication of *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis wanted to reaffirm the social dimension of the ecumenical journey, providing a roadmap by which Christians can build a society in which the evangelical dimension of *fraternity* is at its heart.

¹ I am grateful for the invitation to share more of my reflections regarding the ecumenical response to *Fratelli tutti*. This is an expansion of an article written for "L'Osservatore Romano" (*An Invitation to Unity*, November 17, 2020) and presented during the inaugural lecture, *The Flavor of the Gospel. Pope Francis' encyclical "Fratelli tutti" for the Church of the 21st century*, for the 2020-2021 academic year of the Higher Institute of Religious Sciences, of the Interdiocesan Theological Studies, and the Diocesan School of Theology of Treviso (Treviso, November 11, 2020).

² Cf. *Ekklesia* 3 (2020) n. 9, p. 61.

³ Cf. <https://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/2020-11/quo-266/un-invito-all-unita.html> (accessed 2-12-2021).

⁴ Cf. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2020-10/patriarch-bartholomew-fratelli-tutti-pope-francis.html> (accessed 2-12-2021).

⁵ Cf. <https://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/2020-11/quo-266/un-invito-all-unita.html> (accessed 2-12-2021).

⁶ *Ibid.*