

Rediscovering a long forgotten principle

Mission: Universal Fraternity

A brief interview with Italian ethicist Antonio Maria Baggio

Referring back to a comprehensive article on fraternity published in the January 16, 2019 Italian edition of the Vatican newspaper, *The Roman Observer (L'Osservatore Romano)*, we are publishing excerpts from a recent *Ekklesia* interview with its author, Antonio Maria Baggio. Baggio's article both traces fraternity's roots throughout biblical and secular history and speaks to fraternity's fundamental importance in the Church today. If, on the one hand, universal fraternity is inscribed in the heart of every human person, on the other it draws its greatest strength from the Christian experience of a Triune God.

▲ *Prof. Baggio, in your recently published L'Osservatore Romano article, you discuss the upsurge of international interest around this concept. What do you think are the reasons for this?*

Over the past twenty years, the concept of fraternity has begun to generate increasing interest, especially as relates to its application in the public realm, particularly as a legal and political principle. Schools of thought are being developed that re-read the history of peoples and cultures in order to better highlight the role that fraternity played in the formation of their identities. They are also seeking to understand fraternity's potential role in different geopolitical contexts and through various disciplines.

Up until now, the concept of fraternity has not been considered an integral part of a particular academic field or accepted teaching within politics, law or economics. But, that is changing. Even though it's only the beginning, we're seeing a reversal of previous trends. The concept of fraternity is beginning to facilitate development of the idea of a 'civil economy.' Important results are being obtained by looking at the relationship between fraternity and law. Openness to reflection on this 'forgotten principle' further reinforces the multifaceted action of so many persons who are working to put fraternity into practice in the public sphere.

▲ *How does religious tradition enable us to confront the new problems facing human history today?*

The French Revolution rendered the process of secularization that had been underway for centuries more visible. This has involved the transmission of what were once foundational religious-based principles and community values into the realms of culture, society and politics. Historically, this process sometimes expressed itself in combative antireligious and anticlerical frameworks. But the long-term significance is that of humanity's gradual acquisition of a multitude of gifts received from religion.

To better understand this process, consider the story of Cain and Abel. Before Abel's birth, Cain was 'the' son, the heir, the one who represented the future of all humanity. Abel's arrival didn't question Cain's right of inheritance, but it signified a change at a deeper level: Cain is no longer just Adam and Eve's son. He is now Abel's brother as well. His new identity is now defined by the existence of another, Abel. But Cain is unable to accept this: 'I am not my brother's keeper'. He refuses the *shomar*, the 'guardianship', the calling to care and safeguard another which, for God signifies the essence of what it means to be human. In fact, in the moment when God asks Cain, "where" is your brother, he is in reality

asking him about that inner dwelling within himself: Has you given this brother a place in your heart? Have you gone beyond yourself to be open to him? Have you, yourself, become the person I wanted you to be?

God's question to Cain reveals how God sees the human person. It's the image of one able to respond to the call of his brother or sister. Fraternity is an anthropological structure that defines what it means to be human. It does not matter if a brother or sister is born under my own roof or arrives on my beach in a raft. The other is a reality 'within' me. The way in which I welcome the other does not speak to who they are. Rather it speaks to who I am.

▲ *What elements of fraternity regard both past historical events and the reality we're living today?*
Fraternity is seen most especially in one fundamental principle of human reality: While we're able to choose our friends and spouses, the same is not true for our brothers or sisters. We are not the source of their existence nor do we have power over it. They live side by side with you and I, and have equal human value, dignity and rights. But fraternity is also based on the fundamental principle of diversity: There is no such thing as one brother or one sister exactly identical to another. Equality between brothers and sisters consists in freedom and diversity. Thus, from this perspective, fraternity is an objective part of our existence, a lived, human condition.

But fraternity also demands a more subjective component, too: Do I accept - or refuse to accept - the existence of another human person? Fraternity is the master switch by which we turn on or off opportunities to build a community in our families, in society and politics, and within economic structures. It's the foundational basis for human co-existence. In this sense, fraternity has a third fundamental aspect, a guiding principle related to freedom and equality. In this way, freedom doesn't become a power struggle and equality doesn't degrade into forced uniformity.

So, if we were to propose a basic starting point for dialogue and reflection without trying to give a label to everything, we could say that fraternity is the horizontal relationship between free and equal subjects who recognize that they share, before everything else, a common origin and a belonging to the same greater community. As a consequence, they act in such a way as to acknowledge, respect and support one another's differing identities and work to rekindle freedom and equality in all those places where it is threatened or diminished.

▲ *Fraternity has always played a central role in Christianity. Has Pope Francis's pontificate brought new insights in this regard?*

Fraternity is alive today just as in the past. The recent creation of new centers for scholarly research, the development of university curriculum around the principle of fraternity (like at my own institution, Sophia University Institute), and the birth of organizations focused specifically on fostering fraternity through concrete projects and initiatives, are all robust signs of something new that's developing.

Fraternity arises from the central core of the human person without distinction by culture or religion. But there is need to set it aflame in the human heart, to nourish it and enable it to be understood. This is Christianity's task. It's a task that constantly comes forth in the clear and intelligent thoughts and actions of Pope Francis. In fact, there exists a specific fraternal intelligence that enables one to take on the important tasks of today's world: that of overcoming conflicts and divisions, salvaging all who've been despised and cast aside, and rebuilding the unity of the human family.

If we read Francis' 2014 message for the World Day of Peace we find a strategic vision of fraternity. In an era in which walls are being built and there is a tendency to retreat behind our own borders, Francis' planetary vision, coherently inserted within the tradition of

Christian social teaching, presents universal fraternity as not just a utopia or mere feelings, but as a project capable of giving rise to concrete initiatives. Fraternity is a categorical framework for him, and one that is a deeply held conviction of this Pope. Thus, there is a unique synchrony between development of the principle of fraternity that we're seeing globally and the 'today' of the Church as Francis is expressing it.

In an audience with the Cardinals two days after the pontiff's election on March 15, 2013, the Pope recalled "the intense ecclesial communion" lived during preparatory meetings and the conclave as an experience of fraternal communion, one characterized by openness and mutual understanding. He underlined that it "facilitated docility to the action of the Spirit". He described the Spirit's actions in a fraternal way; in fact, fraternity is an everyday experience of living together in equal dignity, of brothers who accept each other in their diversity: "The Paraclete, who gives different charisms to each of us, unites us in this community of the Church, that worships the Father, the Son, and Him, the Holy Spirit." This means that fraternity, so spontaneously intertwined with the Trinitarian relationships that give rise to it, is not simply some mere feeling. Rather, it's a logic of relationships: it forms the human reality by which we can receive the Spirit and discern all that is good.

On March 19, at the Mass marking the beginning of the Petrine ministry, Francis interpreted the task of the Pope in the light of St. Joseph: Like him, the Pope must "open his arms to protect all of God's people and embrace with tender affection the whole of humanity [...]. The vocation of being a "protector", however, explains Francesco, "is not just something involving us Christians alone; it also has a prior dimension which is simply human, involving everyone." This "protecting" described here is a universal human vocation and the essence of fraternity lived out and a vocation that Cain refused.

Thus, from Francis' perspective, fraternity is rooted in Trinitarian Love. It is an expression of that which is characteristic of a Christian and at the same time an expression of all that is human. Together, they have the capability to form a formidable alliance.

Interview by the editors

Antonio Maria Baggio taught social ethics at the Pontifical Gregorian University (1992 – 2008) where he also directed its Public Ethics masters program. He is presently a professor of political philosophy at the Sophia University Institute in Loppiano, Italy, and director of the Sophia Center for Research in Politics and Human Rights (PHR). Other publications by Antonio Maria Baggio in various languages are available at: www.antoniomariabaggio.it

