

## RELIGION AS ECUMENISM: THE DREAM OF UNIVERSAL FRATERNITY

The first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948) reads:

«All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason of conscience and must act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood».

Already in the ancient Greek world, reference is made both to a brotherhood founded on the extended blood ties of a nation (Plato), and on a certain “elective affinity” (Xenophon).

«In both cases, brotherhood also draws a borderline: in Plato the commonality given with the common national character generates brotherhood, but at the same time characterizes the stranger, the *bárbaros*, as a non-brother, just as the Xenophontian brotherhood between friends unites yes friends, but it also separates them from non-friends. Union always also generates a certain closeness of the united towards others. Without the matter having already been expressly taken into consideration in Plato or Xenophon, the underlying problem that every *éthos* of fraternity poses in some form becomes clear. If, for example, men united among themselves in a *pólis* constitute a brotherhood, the internal *ethos*, in force in the internal space of the *pólis*, necessarily differs from a different form of behavior, which refers to external non-brothers [...]. The expanded idea of brotherhood almost necessarily creates two different zones of the *ethos*, an *éthos* towards the inside (“between brothers”) and an *éthos* towards the outside»<sup>1</sup>.

Universal fraternity is that vital space in which we take note of an elementary principle of social life, that is «what a human being is worth, what a person is worth, always and in any circumstance»<sup>2</sup>.

«Every human being has the right to live with dignity and to develop fully, and no country can deny this fundamental right. Everyone has it, even if it is inefficient, even if it was born or raised with limitations; in fact, this does not diminish his immense dignity as a human person, which is not based on circumstances but on the value of his being. When this elementary principle is not safeguarded, there is no future for either fraternity or for the survival of humanity»<sup>3</sup>.

Evidently, it is understood below that fraternity is the space-condition for safeguarding the principle of the dignity of the human person which has value in itself and not for what it possesses or produces. This principle cannot be accepted by half and must be recognized in every social, political and economic context. Otherwise, the very word fraternity is emptied of its most authentic meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> J. RATZINGER, *La fraternità cristiana*, Queriniana, Brescia 2005, 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> FRANCESCO, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti* (3-10-2020), n. 106.

<sup>3</sup> *Ivi* 107.

Fraternity is an imperative felt by human conscience as decisive and, at the same time, it is the Christian command that declares fraternity marked by the love of the other, whose lived exemplarity was given to us by Jesus. He did not speak much about fraternity but he concretely became the brother of those he met, breaking down the barriers of division and destroying the walls of separation built by men and often attributed by them to the will of God (*Eph* 2:14). His encounters with foreigners such as the centurion (*Mt* 8:5-13; *Lk* 7:1-10) and the Syrian-Phoenician woman (*Mk* 7:24-30; *Mt* 15:21-28); with rich sinners like Zacchaeus (*Lk* 19:1-10) and Levi (*Mk* 2:13-14); with righteous men like Nathanael (*Jn* 1:45-51); with the prostitutes and public sinners with whom he lodged and with whom he shared the table (cf. *Mk* 2:15-17 and par.; *Mt* 21:31; *Lk* 7:34.36-50; 15: 1), show his will to be the universal brother of all, just and unjust, believers in God or pagans.

In this sense, there is something extraordinary in the announcement of the final judgment made by Jesus in the Gospel according to Matthew (*Mt* 25:31-46), which we should meditate more carefully, as Pope Francis has repeated on several occasions (homilies, reflections, short speeches, etc...). Jesus defines humans who are in need and suffering «my brothers, the least, the smallest», and reveals that every act of relationship with each of them determines the relationship with him in the Kingdom: «All that you have done to one of these brothers of mine, the least, you did it to me» (*Mt* 25:40).

Those brothers of Jesus are not believers, Christians, but they are the victims in history, the needy whom every land and every time knows as the last! The least brothers of which the Gospel speaks to us are the same to which St. Francis refers when he speaks of his younger brothers. They are the same poor subjects of evangelization that Pope Francis asks us to include in our being together as a church, as a people of God on a journey, precisely as a fraternity under construction. It is, in the first place, to the younger brothers, that a splendid saying of Jesus refers not reported in the canonical Gospels: «Have you seen your brother? You have seen God». This is the fraternity lived by Jesus and requested by him of his disciples.

## **1. For a distinction of terms**

At the beginning of my brief report it seems appropriate to clarify the terms in question: “religion”, “ecumenism”, “dream” and “fraternity”. I prefer to start with the second word: “ecumenism”.

a) “Ecumenism” means “land inhabited by all” even if it is a word used in the Christian context to indicate the path of unity among Christians of the various Churches, in particular among the faithful of the three great Christian confessions: Catholics, Orthodox and the evangelicals. Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical Christians are committed as Churches and Communities to peace, justice and the protection of creation, with concrete projects of charity and solidarity. But this is a specific and limited use of the term “ecumenism”.

Here we will use the term “ecumenism” not in a strictly Christian sense, but to evoke the dream and the desire to build and realize together, with the commitment of all, a universal fraternity, an inclusive fraternity, capable of

welcoming peoples and nations, communities and different faiths, in mutual respect and dialogue, overcoming prejudices, fears, intolerances, divisions. This dream will only be possible if we believe that differences are a resource and not a threat to our identity<sup>4</sup>. The experience of the pandemic we are experiencing has made us understand that we are not saved alone and that we are all in the same condition, in the same boat: humanity is a large family of peoples who live the same problems and face the same challenges, in particular the environmental disaster and the current terror of a nuclear war, given the conflict that has arisen in recent months between the Soviet Union and Ukraine, both Christian nations. Even if in the world today there are conflicts raised for reasons of faith, or that exploit religions, it must be clear that, in no religious experience, violence in the name of God is allowed! You cannot kill anyone in the name of God, because all religions are at the service of life!

b) “Religion” (from the Latin *religio*) is a word that, in ancient times, has hinted at two meanings. The first meaning is the “bond with God”, in the sense of “binding”, in reference to the bond of respect that each religious has towards sacred laws. The second meaning is to “reread” the sacred scriptures or even the prayer or propitiatory formula to obtain help and support from the divinity.

In fact, these two definitions of religion do not fully express the faith experience of a believer today. Religion, like art, means seeing God in all things (people, world, otherness). In this sense, religion offers a deeper perception of reality because it touches the symbolic dimension of existence. Through the religious experience, each person seeks a meaning to their existence. Because man, by his nature, is a religious and symbolic being: he carries within himself a desire for fullness, for meaning. Religion proposes the fundamental questions of life: “Who are we?”; “Where do we come from?”; “Why are we here?”; “Where are we going?”; “In whom or in what can we hope?”. Religions, with their rites, doctrines, practices and cults, allow us to rediscover the route of our existence, and to get back into the game, in search of the meaning of life<sup>5</sup>.

The definition of religion offered to us in a famous literary text by the Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran seems appropriate to me. The literary text is *The Prophet*. In this work, Khalil Gibran defines religion as follows:

«Isn't religion perhaps every action and reflection, and also what is neither action nor reflection, but surprise and amazement that always spring from the soul, even when the hands break the stone or stretch the frame? Who can separate his hours before himself and say: “This is for God and this is for me; this is for my mum and this is for my body?”. All your hours are wings that move in the ether from one being to another.

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<sup>4</sup> A famous saying in the Baha'i tradition attributed to the prophet Baha'u'llah states: «Humanity is a family». It is written in the Baha'u'llah *Proclamation*: «We desire only the good of the world and the happiness of the nations; yet they see us as a foment of discord and sedition. May all nations embrace the same faith and may all men become brothers: all ties of affection and union between human offspring are strengthened, diversity of religion ceases and racial antagonism vanishes» (<http://www.bahaimilano.it/bibliotecadigitale/La%20proclamazione%20di%20Bahauallah%20ai%20re%20e%20governanti%20del%20mondo.pdf> [last access 13-5-2022]).

<sup>5</sup> On these aspects, compare the reflections present in E. SCOGNAMIGLIO, *Homo religiosus et symbolicus. Breve introduzione alla storia delle religioni*, LDC, Leumann (Torino) 2012.

Whoever wears his morality as his best suit would do better to leave immediately [...]. Your daily life is your temple and your religion. And every time you enter you take all of you with you [...]. If you want to know God, don't be a puzzle solver. Rather look around and you will see him playing with your children. And look into the immense space. You will see him walking in the cloud, reaching out his arms in the flash of lightning and descending into the rain. You will see him smile in the flowers, then rise and wave his hands in the foliage of the trees»<sup>6</sup>.

One cannot distinguish, in the experience of faith, between a time for the monk and a time for the merchant: religion embraces the entire personal and social existence, offering a very precise vision of the world. The experience of God or of the sacred is a lived experience of faith that guides the believer's ethical and social choices and becomes the imprint of his human relationships. In every religious experience there are two aspects: the first is external (rites, worship, doctrines); the second is interior (the faith that shapes the person and guides his choices). These two aspects are constantly recalled, because there is no split in faith or religious practice. Not only monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) hold these two aspects together, but also Eastern religions and every experience of the sacred. Religion offers a vision of the world (*weltanschauung*) or a profound intuition (a religious way) in which individual believers consider their own existence and any social bond.

Violence and injustice have always challenged religions. Thus symbolizes the story of Cain and Abel. Cain is the self-centered, the self-referential, the one who cares only for his own interests. In those who only look after their own interests, there is always a beginning of the murder of the other. Religions have to deal with a violence that manifests itself in a global and local way at the same time. In fact, on the one hand, the spectacularization of violence is growing and, on the other, there is a daily and local experience of violence. There is a transnational scope of the violence that also appears organized. The fight against violence and the construction of peace are the goal of interreligious dialogue and the dream of universal brotherhood which cannot be reduced to a cultural or merely intellectual fact. The time has come when religions must enthusiastically and boldly spend their forces to transform the world through fraternal dialogue and mutual friendship. By now, the commitment of religions to peace is clear and explicit on the theme of violence: no war is holy. Only peace is holy. This is a staple of all international documents of interreligious communities that multiply efforts for formation in dialogue, acceptance, encounter with others, respect for minorities and religious freedom.

In this perspective, the “spirit of Assisi” also arises for the construction of peace, fraternity and dialogue between religions and peoples. Religions have a power, an inner strength, a great energy to eradicate all forms of violence from the heart of man. Religions can promote and animate interreligious dialogue between men and women of all cultures. Religions have the strength to enthuse dialogue, that is, to place God in dialogue, overcoming any division or contrast. Only by changing hearts and minds will it be possible to change the world.

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<sup>6</sup> K. GIBRAN, *Il Profeta*, in K. GIBRAN, *Tutte le poesie e i racconti*, introduction by T. Pisanti, Newton, Roma 1993, 85.

c) The dream: Freud distinguishes between nocturnal dreams and daytime dreams. Night dreams are the result of our desires, of our dissatisfactions, of what appears unattainable. Instead, daytime, morning dreams are those that we can somehow achieve with our commitment, with personal freedom, with commitment and inner tenacity. The dream of fraternity is a daytime, morning dream, that is, a utopia, a project full of hope that sees us personally committed and not just in a fideistic way. Believing in a fraternity project means implementing it, getting your hands dirty, getting to work. The dream of fraternity is a precious asset for all humanity; and it is in front of us, and we must seek it and build it every day as a utopia, without thinking that the relationship and communion with the other produce, as a consequence, the loss of ourselves and of life, and without even trying to draw from it from it a personal utility. There is a need to create and foster spaces of fraternity to be happy, to tell each other the joy of life and share dreams and hopes among us mere mortals, to sustain ourselves in the trials of life and to remain in communion and in the joy of existence itself that it is made up of relationships and not just tangles.

Paraphrasing Ernst Bloch's Principle of Hope, we can say that the desire for universal brotherhood belongs not to nocturnal dreams, but to diurnal dreams, which occur with open eyes. In night dreams, the fulfillment of desires is "hidden and ancient", while in daytime dreams it is "fabulous and anticipating". Bloch believes there are enough daydreams, we just don't observe them enough<sup>7</sup>.

d) Fraternity is synonymous with "common carnality", "front womb" and "cohabitative plurality", the difference that co-constitutes us as people coming from a "common point" and on the way to "a where" to be deciphered. In a religious sense, as a theological root, this "front womb" is historically found in the faith experience of Abraham, father of a multitude who, raising his eyes to heaven to count the stars (*Gen 15:5*), saw the promise of his descendants and, therefore, an immense human family<sup>8</sup>.

Each of us comes from a maternal womb and, therefore, from a community that constitutes it and in which it forms its own being (identity and thought): thus, fraternity is like our common origin and the homeland towards which we move, becoming, despite all the contradictions and conflicts present within it, a dream to be realized and a prophecy and a challenge to live. Fraternity is more than community: because "communitas" means sharing the goods that one has and making them available to others. Instead, "fraternitas" means promoting the gifts of each person, considering the other as one that belongs to me, making his diversity a resource, a wealth for me, for everyone. In fraternity each individual

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<sup>7</sup> Compare E. BLOCH, *Il principio speranza* [1953]. I. *Sogni a occhi aperti*, introduction of R. Bodei, translation by E. De Angelis, Mimesis, Milano 2019, 10-20; 92-93.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis' reflection on universal fraternity which is theologically founded in God but which has the figure of Abraham as its historical-religious reference is placed in this perspective, as he stated on his recent trip to Iraq (5/8-3-2021). In the interreligious meeting that took place in the plain of Ur (6-3-2021), he affirmed that that of the great patriarch Abraham was an outgoing journey that entailed sacrifices but also a great blessing because he became the father of a family of peoples. Thus, for us too, the outward journey allows us to see brothers in others. «It is up to us to have the courage to raise our eyes and look at the stars, the stars that our father Abraham saw, the stars of promise»: (FRANCESCO, *Discorso* [6-3-2021], n. 2: <http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/it/2021/3/6/iraq-incontro-interreligioso.html> [last access 8-3-2021]).

must feel welcomed, supported, promoted, fulfilled. From the Christian point of view, then, fraternity is the place of forgiveness and reconciliation, where each disciple can fully manifest himself as he is, with his strengths and weaknesses, but open to dialogue and repentance, without any desire for oppression.

In other words, fraternity indicates the process of humanizing the world which, through welcoming the diversity and complexity of physical and social life, tries to create harmony and common living and integration spaces. Where there is fraternity there is welcome, respect, dialogue, synergy, charity, solidarity, humanization. In all religions there is a yearning for fraternity, a desire also socio-political and a spiritual and ethical need for communion with one's neighbor, with others, even if not always or necessarily perceived as brothers and sisters, but as companions of travel, adventure friends. The meaning and need for a larger family that goes beyond simple biological bonds are hidden within us. Our personal nature is always social: we need others to exist, to fully humanize ourselves. Fraternity is not only a theological category but also and above all and above all an anthropological question that touches our human experience and the way in which we are in the world. We cannot live without relationships with each other.

Our existence is like a great story that requires not only a “narrating me”, but also and above all a “you able to listen” and a “we to share” emotions and hopes and our own and others’ experiences. that we can define “reciprocity”. Therefore, to live is to give oneself fully to the other (“proximity”), also safeguarding oneself, but running the risk of explaining oneself completely, with pure generosity, without retaining anything for oneself, against any extreme or binding logic of reciprocity and utilitarianism . This is the time in which «man must also decide once to leap out of himself»<sup>9</sup> and «find in others an increase in being»<sup>10</sup>, thinking and generating, as Pope Francis likes to repeat, an open world, in the awareness that «there is no life where one pretends to belong only to oneself and to live as islands»<sup>11</sup> and that, effectively, we do not communicate with ourselves except to the extent that we communicate with each other<sup>12</sup>. The space of this communication, and the privileged place of encounter with the other, is fraternity!

In the course of human history we have also experienced, among many things, failures, risks, that is, that there are no perfect communities or fraternities: there is always the danger, around the corner, of breaking up relationships and closing in on their own prejudices and being disappointed by unfulfilled expectations or which are slow to be fulfilled. Even the model of Christian fraternity has its limits both in the germination (Jesus and the disciples) and in the witness of the Churches, especially when it is not a space for reconciliation and celebration (a redeemed place), for forgiveness and service in communion, but rather when it is it reduces to being a point of arrival and command - of power and self-affirmation - for only a few. Those who are unable to narrate and be freely themselves in fraternity are good and necessary to change place and community.

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<sup>9</sup> K. RAHNER, *Kleines Kirchenjahr. Ein Gang durch den Festkreis*, Herder, Friburgo 1981, 30 [*L'anno liturgico*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1964, 34].

<sup>10</sup> K. WOJTYŁA, *Amore e responsabilità*, Marietti, Genova 1983, 90.

<sup>11</sup> FRANCESCO, *Angelus* (10-11-2019): *L'Osservatore Romano* of 11-12 November 2019, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. G. MARCEL, *Du refus à l'invocation*, ed. NRF, Paris 1940, 50 [*Dal rifiuto all'invocazione*, Città Nuova, Roma 1976, 62].

Fraternity is and must remain as a space of trust where we can manifest ourselves freely, without the fear of feeling judged. Fraternity is distinguished not by the signs it bears but by the legibility - credibility - and visibility of these signs. There is a process of decentralization of the self that we can all take to open ourselves to the broader sense of community and fraternity and to live in peace.

Free from any sort of new ideology, fraternity belongs by right, in our opinion, to the utopian conscience which, for Bloch, is like a “more powerful telescope”, which pushes its gaze beyond the darkness of the instant immediately lived, towards what is hidden in it. Fraternity is something in the making and is part of hope, in that incessant opening towards the possibilities that mature in the “not-yet-become” latent in historical processes. Like good daytime dreams, the desire for universal fraternity does not simply belong to the abstract utopia, that is, sterile and inconsistent, but to the concrete, feasible, historically mediated utopia that can take root in the history and society of any time and place. Dreaming and imagining a fraternity open to all, welcoming, without barriers and exclusions, allows us to understand that the world is full of good and produces in us a constant joy, a mobilizing energy factor, an active enthusiasm in the fervent expectation of fulfillment.

There is a family and paternity crisis, but there is always in us a desire for fraternity, friendship and community. In the Gospels there is a very original model of fraternity. In fact, the fraternity of Jesus Christ does not necessarily take on a canonical form and essentially consists in recognizing him as the one and true teacher and in welcoming one another towards one another, taking as a model the service rendered to the least, that is love as a gift of oneself for the good of the other. In this perspective, fraternity is the Gospel itself as a form of life for all the baptized who always leave the doors and windows of the heart open despite the evil in the world and the betrayals of relationships and the trials of life.

## **2. The contribution of religions**

The dream of universal fraternity seemed to many, philosophers and sociologists, experts in international politics and world history, in the last century, a chimera, something not achievable. Religions have often been accused of fostering divisions and violence in the name of God. For many critics, man always remains *homo homini lupus*. To what extent are we guardians of the other? How can we forgive in the name of those who are no longer there? Can social harmony be based on the forgiveness of the enemy or on love to the bitter end, unconditional, without the pretense of reciprocity, respect, restorative justice? One cannot forgive in the name of those who are no longer there. The unforgivable cannot be forgiven! The desire for fraternity is shipwrecked every time we are confronted with the indomitable instinct of survival and oppression that is within each human subject. Universal fraternity is a dream not shared by all and remains a project to be realized which, evidently, awaits the commitment of the individual and of the entire human community, at least of those who truly believe in it. There is an anti-religious thought that does not believe in the project

of a single great human family. How can religions contribute to realizing the dream of a universal brotherhood?

There is fraternity when we are in the presence of creativity, freedom and liberation, of communal communication, good reciprocity, recognition and truth, humanization of people and relationships, integrity and integration of these aspects. These are the typical forces, qualities and dynamics of the order of good that any religion can promote<sup>13</sup>.

Fraternity is the dream of wide-ranging self-communication of the good (horizontal and vertical) and is always an inclusive and extroverted space, that is, always facing outwards, according to the dynamics of the good that spreads by its very nature, and is able to reconcile people's hearts, overcoming the evil of the lacerations and actions performed. If the good is the fabric of which our existence is woven, even though it may undergo deformations and lacerations, then fraternity is in the heart of every man, because it belongs to the essence of the good itself.

Religions contribute to creating spaces of fraternity because they carry within themselves the values of peace, love, forgiveness, dialogue, education in respect for life and solidarity. Today we all need to rediscover a spirituality of communion and brotherhood, of forgiveness and acceptance, despite the evil in the world and its aberrant and scandalous forms that so often advance in our time. The great challenge today is to make dialogue and fraternal friendship our lifestyle, even when the good is not reciprocated and there is nowhere to be seen a sort of reciprocity, of the good will to reciprocate for good and to say thank you for what has been given and for what has been received for free! The message is simple: whoever loves and has learned to forgive is a happy, humble, positive person, open to life, who knows how to be amazed at the little things of existence. Those who are reluctant to forgive, because evidently they carry unhealed wounds in their souls, remain frustrated, closed in their pain, and do not live well in this world!

It is not easy to enter into this Christian vision of love. Because forgiveness requires us to let our guard down, to take - albeit paradoxically - the point of view of the other, of the offender. For this reason, forgiveness remains an extreme gesture of gratuitousness, altruism, liberating love - an act not requested and not even due - which by its nature escapes the logic of exchange, of *do ut des*, of the request and desired reciprocity. Those who forgive, in fact, know that they should not expect anything from the other and that they cannot wait for some repair or any type of balm that soothes and heals wounds that are sometimes not completely healed. Forgiveness opens the heart to the dream of universal brotherhood and nourishes it in the good, in the positive.

Pope Francis considers fraternity as one of the fundamental processes for the journey of the Catholic Church and for dialogue with the world and between different communities, as well as for the humanization of society and the affirmation of peace, justice and charity between peoples and communities not only multi-ethnic and interreligious, but within the same global human structure.

From an anthropological-social and psycho-affective perspective, fraternity, even by Pope Francis, is recognized as an «irrepressible yearning» «which

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<sup>13</sup> Compare E. SCOGNAMIGLIO, *Il sogno della fraternità universale. Una lettura biblica, storico-critica e teologico-spirituale*, LEV, Città del Vaticano 2021.



pushes towards communion with others, in which we find not enemies or competitors, but brothers to welcome and embrace», and as an «essential dimension of man» who is «a relational being». And it is the «lively awareness of this relationality» that «leads us to see and treat each person as a true sister and a true brother». Therefore, without it «it becomes impossible to build a just society, a solid and lasting peace»<sup>14</sup>.

Fraternity becomes the premise for overcoming poverty and for extinguishing wars and, even if opposed by corruption and crime, it is an indispensable element for safeguarding and cultivating nature and for affirming peace and justice among peoples as it allows for every human person to discover the transcendent and relational dimension of his own existence. Hence the need to bring the principle of fraternity into the current financial and economic processes as well.

Fraternity thrives on the principle of plurality among its members<sup>15</sup>. For this plurality comes the need for unity and communion between brothers and sisters, that is, between members of the same family or clan or tribe. Often, as the family conflicts recounted by the Bible itself testify, diversity, paradoxically, becomes a reason for strong tensions and imbalances and internal struggles and claims. The story of Cain and Abel, for example, reveals precisely the failure to accept diversity as a resource and the fact that one becomes brothers when one is the guardian of the other. The principle of variety among people is already in God's plan and is part of creation and, in particular, of the coming into the world of human beings. Therefore, plurality must be accepted without demanding reasons or particular explanations. Even the election by God of some members of a family is a reason for contention and jealousy among the brothers themselves. This is what is told with Isaac and Ishmael, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, etc ...

The Bible is full of tales of broken, torn fraternity and divided families, and of their respective attempts at reconciliation and forgiveness, almost as if to say that the bond of blood or kinship does not ensure harmony within the family, indeed, can arouse disputes and bitterness. Abraham and Lot, for example, who are uncle and nephew, even if counted among the brothers, will take different paths for patrimonial discords (subdivision of the land to graze the flock) and to avoid fratricide.

We must start from the awareness that fraternity is a space of tiring relationships because otherness and difference are manifested in it and, therefore, conflicts of identity, roles and actions. It is not easy to guard the other as a brother who manifests himself to me in his otherness, that is, in the figure of pure difference. It is essential, as a second step, to recognize the other as a gift and a

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<sup>14</sup> FRANCESCO, *Messages XLVII World Day of Peace (8-12-2013) Fraternity, the Foundation and Pathway to Peace*: [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco\\_20131208\\_messaggio-xlvi-giornata-mondiale-pace-2014.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20131208_messaggio-xlvi-giornata-mondiale-pace-2014.html) [last access 24-2-2021]. «We should remember that fraternity is generally first learned in the family, thanks above all to the responsible and complementary roles of each of its members, particularly the father and the mother. The family is the wellspring of all fraternity, and as such it is the foundation and the first pathway to peace, since, by its vocation, it is meant to spread its love to the world around it» (*ivi*).

<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis also remembers it at n. 136 of *FT (Fratelli tutti - Brothers All)* when he talks about the relationship of unquestionable mutual necessity between East and West and the importance of paying attention to religious, cultural and historical differences that are an essential component of the formation of personality, culture and civilization.

resource for me and not as a threat: the brother questions me and in him I see the face of God and before God I am responsible for him. At this point, in a strictly religious and not only Christian sphere, the anthropological aspect and the theological aspect, that is the horizontal and vertical dimension, are intertwined, and therefore it must be admitted that fraternity has a divine root and is not made up only of emotional and anthropological ties. which, however, are indispensable and central. It is God who gives us a fraternity in which to meet him as Father (Mother) in brother (in sister), without any claim of dominion or primacy of authority.

It is clear that, at this point, the experience of fraternity, to be built and safeguarded, also requires a journey of faith that passes through the path of forgiveness and reconciliation among us and in all our fraternal relationships, even in those sicker. However, this journey of faith is also and above all existential because the dynamics of fraternity acts on the affective level from the inside out: first we perceive ourselves as children and then as brothers and sisters. The desire to rebuild one's family and the need to keep fraternal bonds firmly require the effort to overcome conflicts and a constant dedication to dialogue and mutual acceptance. The death and failure of many fraternities are due to the loss of the existential character of the fraternity itself and to the forgetfulness that the face of God is present in the face of the younger and more fragile, defenseless and needy brother.

### **3. The contribution of the encyclical *Fratelli tutti***

Chapter eight of the encyclical *Brothers All (Fratelli Tutti)* is dedicated to the contribution that religions can make as a service to the construction of universal fraternity and to the defense of justice in society. The perspective followed by the pope is, at the same time, theological and anthropological, i.e. evangelical, capable of looking at the lived faith of every religious experience that recognizes in every human person a creature called to be a son or daughter of God (number 271). The doctrinal contents of interreligious dialogue are not discussed, but the dialogic experience of each encounter with the other is considered. Because the goal of dialogue is to establish friendship, peace, harmony and to share moral and spiritual values and experiences in a spirit of truth and love. Here the pope directly quotes the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India.

At number 272 the theological foundation of fraternity and also of dialogue between religions is recalled: God is the Father of all. The appeal to fraternity is born, and it is possible to renew it, to the extent that we are aware of this ultimate foundation of human existence which is God. Interesting is the provocation that the pope makes, in number 272, taking up a passage from Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (29-6-2009), about human reason which, alone, is able to grasp equality between men and to establish a civic coexistence among them, but not to found the fraternity. When the transcendent truth of every person who can fully know his own identity is denied, there is no sure principle that guarantees right relationships between men (number 273). Therefore, fraternity is the place where the transcendent dignity of the human person is recognized, who is the visible image of the invisible God, and therefore the subject of rights that

no one can violate. It is as believers of different religions (number 274) that we can recognize ourselves as fellow travelers and truly brothers. The number 275, taking up a passage from the Document on human brotherhood for world peace and common coexistence (Abu Dhabi, 4-2-2019<sup>16</sup>), leverages the importance of rediscovering religious values to overcome individualism and the dominance of materialistic philosophies that deify man and place worldly and material values in the place of supreme and transcendent principles.

In the public debate, where only the powerful and scientists have a voice, there must be a space for reflection that proceeds from the religious values of the great faith traditions. It is acknowledged that the religious fact is not a private or intimate fact, but a public, social and civil one, because religious values and the awakening of spiritual forces can fertilize present-day society and serve the common good (number 276). Recalling *Nostra aetate* 2, at number 277 (dedicated to Christian identity), it is clearly stated that the source of human dignity and fraternity, for us Christians, lies in the Gospel of Jesus Christ from which springs the primacy given to relationships, to the encounter with the sacred mystery of other, to universal communion with the whole of humanity as a vocation for all. The pope recognizes the Christological horizon of universal brotherhood in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Previously, Bergoglio had affirmed the architectural principle of this fraternity which is the fatherhood of God, that is, the theocentric perspective. To the number 279 reference is made to religious freedom as a necessary right also for minorities and fundamental for the journey of fraternity. All Christian denominations are involved in the commitment to serene, orderly and peaceful coexistence and the acceptance of differences and the joy of being brothers. The pope appeals to the prophetic and spiritual contribution of unity among all Christians for the process of globalization, and for the service to be rendered to humanity, which is not yet complete (number 280).

The numbers 281-284 are dedicated to the relationship «religion and violence» and it is reiterated that «a path of peace is possible between religions» (number 281), disavowing any prejudice on violence caused by different faiths. Dialogue between religions takes seriously the figure of the difference of the other and obliges us to focus on the essential: the uniqueness of God and love of neighbor (number 282). Therefore, every prejudice is overcome, and any religious reserve lapses: «violence has no basis in fundamental religious convictions, but in their deformations» (number 282). Worship of God leads to respect for the sacredness of life (number 283). It is the terrorists who, in every part of the world, both in the West and in the East, exploit religion with erroneous interpretations of religious texts. Indeed, the pope recalls, religious convictions regarding the sacred meaning of human life allow us to recognize the fundamental values of common humanity. Therefore, taking up the Document on human brotherhood, terrorism is condemned in all its forms and manifestations. The number 285 contains the Appeal already resumed in the fraternal meeting in Abu Dhabi on February 4, 2019 in which it is declared to adopt the culture of dialogue as a way, common collaboration as conduct, mutual knowledge as method and criterion.

The Appeal is made in the name of God who created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, in the name of the innocent human soul, in the name

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano* del 4/5-2-2019, p. 6.

of the poor, the miserable, the needy and the marginalized that God has commanded to rescue; but also in the name of orphans and widows and refugees and exiles and peoples who have lost their peace and security; also in the name of human brotherhood, brotherhood torn by the policies of integralism and division and by systems of immoderate income and hateful ideological tendencies; in the name also of freedom, justice and mercy, and of all people of good will, an appeal is made to dialogue. The number 286 evokes some courageous witnesses of universal brotherhood starting with St. Francis of Assisi, but also from Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi and many others. Among all, the testimony of Blessed Charles de Foucauld shines who «made a journey of transformation to the point of feeling himself to be the brother of all»: in his total dedication to God he identified with the least, abandoned in the depths of the African desert. After all, Pope Francis seems to tell us, today, more than questions of doctrine and belonging, we become brothers to the extent that we make our own the identity and miserable condition of the other. Here universal fraternity does not mean losing one's own human characteristic, but rather assuming that of the other in a compassionate rather than simply empathic way (number 287). We can be brothers of all if we identify with the least. Here Jesus' warning clearly returns in the Gospel to be last and to remain in the condition of children.

After all, all the dreamers of fraternity seem to tell us that there is a fidelity to God and to the earth that we cannot ignore, that absolutely must not be betrayed. Where the believer is a sign of God's love for the good of the world and neighbor, there is concretely constituted - because it becomes visible - fraternity, that human symbolic and relational, communal, always capable of weaving new and authentic relationships. interpersonal. From the Christian and, therefore, evangelical point of view, we can hold true, without making mistakes, that there is fraternity, because humanity belongs to God, belongs to him and that everything that is fully human is also fully divine. Because in Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world and, therefore, there are no longer two realities (God and the world), but only one reality, and this is the reality of God in the reality of the world that has become manifest in Christ<sup>17</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusive remarks

Fraternity is an open challenge for all, an anthropological question rather than a theological one: there where our human being opens up to encounter, dialogue, acceptance and reciprocity, there the love we have inside can manifest itself in fullness as gift of self, that is, as fullness of being, fullness of life, fullness of joy. At the end of my report I want to recall the poet of the Cedars, Khalil Gibran, whom I quoted at the beginning to evoke the deeper meaning of religion:

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<sup>17</sup> Is the perspective of D. BONHOEFFER, *Sequela*, by M.C. Laurenzi, Queriniana, Brescia 1997, according to which the reality of Christ contains within itself the reality of the world. Indeed, the world does not have its own reality independent of God's revelation in Christ. Compare the updated bibliography edited by E. METAXAS, *Bonhoeffer. La vita del teologo che sfidò Hitler*, Fazi Editore, Roma 2012.

«I love you, brother, whoever you are, whether you bow in your church, or kneel in your temple, or pray in your mosque. You and I are children of one faith, since the different ways of religion are but the fingers of the loving hand of one Supreme Being, a hand extended to all, offering all the wholeness of the spirit, eager to welcome all»<sup>18</sup>.

«Humanity is the spirit of divinity on earth. Divinity walks among peoples talking about love and pointing out the way to life»<sup>19</sup>.

Aware of the complex historical heritage of his land, Lebanon, the poet of the cedars, Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), dreams, even before us, of a universal fraternity, a humanity on the way, for which peoples and nations, faiths and cultures, may mutually support each other, overcoming obstacles and divisions, rancor and violence, caused also and above all by the different religious affiliation of his fellow citizens. Lebanon had been, for millennia, a crossroads of peoples, cultures and religions and the cradle, for very long centuries, of the peaceful coexistence of ethnic groups, faiths and spiritual traditions more than two thousand years old. Drawing on this complex spiritual and cultural tradition, the poet-prophet of the Cedars, as a pilgrim of the Absolute and wayfarer in search of a homeland that is eternally in front of us and which, at the same time is the Origin from which we all come, understood that faith cannot create divisions and cannot be separated from daily life, because every reflection and action, feeling and amazement is an experience of God: «Your daily life is your temple and your religion»<sup>20</sup>.

Religion must lead each believer to the growth of the inner self and to the divinization of their own self, that is, to the awakening of the spirit. It is a question of a rebirth that does not pass through violence or asceticism or moral efforts, or even through syncretism, but through love as a gift of oneself for the other. Every religious experience places us before the presence of the Mystery, of God as Other.

The dream of a humanity that fully rediscovers itself by rediscovering the religious values of its faith and cultivating the deepest dimension of existence - the spiritual part that constitutes us as people - is the only path or path that every society can undertake. for a peaceful coexistence between peoples. The land of Gibran, present-day Lebanon, was - and is - tormented by socio-political, cultural and religious rivalries linked to majority groups and minority ethnic groups: Palestinians, Kurds, Syrians, Israelis and Bedouins, Christians of various Churches ... The clashes and claims also for religious reasons will mark his literary and poetic path, in the hope of being able to create a space for dialogue and fraternal friendship within the religious and political mosaic of that time, even if he lived in the West and emigrated in America. It is the same space for dialogue and fraternal friendship that we hope for today. It is a bit like the dream of Utopia, the story of Thomas More (from 1516), where every citizen can profess his faith and share the same principles of equality and fraternity among

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<sup>18</sup> K. GIBRAN, *La voce del maestro*, in ID., *Tutte le poesie e i racconti*, 697.

<sup>19</sup> K. GIBRAN, *Una lacrima e un sorriso*, in ID., *Tutte le poesie e i racconti*, 382.

<sup>20</sup> K. GIBRAN, *The Prophet*, A. Knopf Publisher, New York 2002, 78.

all the inhabitants of this mysterious island in which the war is detested and all forms of violence are banned along with private property<sup>21</sup>.

How and to what extent the different religions can play a positive and fundamental role in building fraternity in the world we have yet to discover. Who knows, the skeptics would say, if it is a matter of fact to be ascertained or a preconceived axiom which, without verification, we elaborate and develop in the theological field without any possibility of effective confirmation in the history of peoples! The most critical of the dream-utopia of fraternity and the civilization of love and dialogue argue that, even today, one kills in the name of God and that religious violence, consequently, leaves many of us banned from the same exploitation. of faith. The collapse of the twin towers in the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 and the continuous terrorist attacks that have taken place in every part of the world in the last twenty years - in Paris as in Beirut, in Manila as in Madrid, in Bangkok as in Nairobi, etc ... -, confirm that there is still a clash of civilizations and that the decisive component of friction and violence is markedly socio-religious and cultural and political, as well as ideological.

All this makes the work of those who actually believe in peaceful coexistence and dialogue between religions and peoples belonging to different traditions and faiths difficult. Surely, the dream of universal brotherhood is full of hopes and prophecies, and cannot fail because of the violence that exists in the world. Without dreams, no future is built. And utopia itself is a way of being and of being in the world, a lifestyle, more than simply a way of thinking. Daytime dreams, like utopia, help to plan, to realize, making us responsible for the future we have before us, trying to anticipate some of its aspects that give us hope in the manifestation of the dream we carry within, in this case of universal brotherhood.

I conclude by quoting a wisdom saying from the Eastern Arab tradition that invites hope, trust, planning: «Even if the end of the world is coming and you have a seed in your hand, please throw it, plant it, because a new life could be born».

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. T. MORO, *L'Utopia o la migliore forma di repubblica*, by T. Fiore, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari 2007.

