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**Creating a Social Covenant:
Fratelli Tutti as a Roadmap for Overcoming Structural Violence in Northern Ireland**

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When the bubonic and pneumonic plagues reached Europe in the 14th Century, alongside significantly increasing mortality rates, they changed the nature of the social order. These ‘plagues affected all aspects of economic life: trade, the distribution of urban prosperity, the social and economic structure of the rural world.’ (Keen, 1973, p. 174) In particular, the serf class were no longer bonded and could trade their labour freely. For a society that was based upon a strictly hierarchical and feudal social structure, this was a momentous transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic offers a comparable opportunity. In a similar way to the medieval plagues, COVID-19 has highlighted the glaring inequalities and injustices in society which are preventing human flourishing. In the United Kingdom, the result has been a growing conscientisation amongst those who would have previously termed themselves as ‘apolitical’. As the outcry over the recent free school meals scandal in the United Kingdom has shown, this is fuelled by a new understanding of the degradation and victimisation of the poor¹ within society which is now even being reported in the right-wing media.² Additionally, due to the economic conditions caused by years of austerity and worsened by the economic impact of the pandemic, many middle-class people are now using food banks and relying on the safety net of the welfare state in a way that they would never have previously dreamed possible. (Trussell Trust, 2020) The relationship between government of the United Kingdom and its citizens is under strain as the social contract in place between them has effectively broken down. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in Northern Ireland, a region which suffered 30 years of violence, and is now governed by weak and unstable institutions, the policies of which are based upon clientelism (Stewart, 2018).

Francis is a pontiff who ‘reads the signs of the times’ with great skill. And, in *Fratelli Tutti* (FT), after acknowledging and outlining the problems facing the world, (FT, paras 9-55) he provides the reader with hope. He does so by furnishing the signposts needed to contextualise the teachings of this document to specific situations which, after all, is the purpose of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). This pandemic has, according to Francis, provided an opportunity to revolutionise the economic and social structures of society, creating frameworks founded upon social friendship and fraternity. ‘Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality’ (FT, para 7). Instead, a new society must be created:

a society based on service to others, rather than the desire to dominate; a society based on sharing what one has with others, other than the selfish scramble by each for as much wealth as possible; a society in which the value of being together as human beings is ultimately more important than any lesser group, whether family, nation, race or culture (FT, para 229).

The method, skills and tools required to achieve such results are specific to each context, and it is now contingent upon Catholics to undertake a process of discernment in order to create a society based upon the criteria set out in the gospels and CST. This article will therefore provide a contextualisation of *Fratelli Tutti* through the lens of contemporary Northern Ireland, offering some suggestions on how this encyclical can be used to reset society in the wake of COVID-19³ and enable people to ‘live in a way that is pleasing to God’ (FT, para 74). However, before

such a process of contextualisation and discernment can begin, the ‘problems that a society is experiencing need to be clearly identified, so that the existence of different ways of understanding and resolving them can be appreciated’ (FT, para 228).

An Encounter with Reality: The World as it is in Northern Ireland

When the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998, it brought the potential for a lasting and stable peace. As an accord, it contained the key elements necessary to move Northern Ireland from a state of negative peace (in which the potential for violence remained) to a positive peace in which the contextually specific conditions necessary for a complete cessation of violence had been achieved. Political structures meant to stabilise the region were joined for the first time in the history of the Peace Process by measures designed to support the human flourishing of both individuals and groups. Human rights such as ‘the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity’ (Human Rights, 2019) were thus granted similar importance to the political structures. In addition to successful steps in police reform and paramilitary decommissioning, a strong emphasis was placed on reconciliation between antagonistic communities as a means of transforming society. As a consequence, inter-personal and inter-group relationship building based upon the contact hypothesis became paradigmatic in the region (Power, 2011).

Despite this, a number of elements have combined to prevent a positive peace from emerging. The political institutions remain weak and unaccountable with ‘concerns ... raised about the viability of the Good Friday Agreement’ (Gormley-Heenan, 2019, p. 49). Politics have become more polarised: moderate parties, such as the SDLP and UUP, have been eclipsed by the ‘hardline’ Sinn Féin and the DUP. Brexit has highlighted and reactivated latent divisions regarding the border within both working and middle-class communities (Hayward, 2018). Residual violence remains, especially within communities experiencing social, economic and political exclusion (Preiss, 2020). Domestic violence, seen as a gateway to terrorism (Pain, 2014), is increasing, with the recent lockdown exacerbating already high numbers of incidents (O’Neill, 2020). Finally, the conflict drivers, such as inequality, discrimination, problems with access to goods and services provided by the state (e.g. housing) endure, and whilst such grievances remain unresolved, the potential for renewed social conflict persists.

It is clear from a conflation of events, weak institutions, and structural inequality, that the time has come for a new, more resilient social covenant between state and citizen to be developed in Northern Ireland. In order to achieve this aim, peacebuilding needs to move beyond the community relations paradigm because ‘the business of peacemaking in places left behind after conflict is about assembling the structures, economic opportunities and pathways that give communities a meaningful stake in social and economic mobility across the poorest places’ (Murtagh, 2019, p. 221). And as the conflict showed us, it is those left behind who are most prone to violence. Whilst there is no such thing as the ‘perfect society’, the peace so lauded in Northern Ireland is far from perfect:

Though the GFA [Good Friday Agreement] was feeble to start with, the shocking story of its compromise is also one of the stories of the retrenchment of a repressive state and society. The new sectarian state is certainly built upon a shared understanding that the state’s (dwindling) largesse can now be dispensed ‘equally’ across the two communities such that community leaders, political parties from both sides of the sectarian divide, will be the adjudicators of the claims to funding (Stewart, 2018, p. 70).

The Good Friday Agreement, which was based upon the D'Hondt Method, represented a compromise by creating political structures that would allow violence to cease. But, as Francis tells us in *Let Us Dream*, 'a compromise does not *resolve* a contradiction or a conflict. In other words, it is a temporary solution, a holding pattern, that allows a situation to mature to the point where it can be resolved by a path of discernment at the right time, seeking God's will' (Francis, 2020a, p. 21-22). Thus, a permanent solution has yet to be found in the region. *Fratelli Tutti* offers ideas which can be contextualised for Northern Ireland in order to offer the 'social peace' (FT, para 176) born of a truly fraternal society.

The Art of Encounter: A Different Kind of Dialogue

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered us a choice: 'We can reorganise the way we live together in order better to choose what matters. We can work together to achieve it. We can learn what takes us forward, and what sets us back. We can choose' (Francis, 2020a, p. 47). It is clear therefore that 'people of good will' need to come together to rethink the structure of Northern Irish society and offer a new vision which will allow 'social peace' to be established. *Fratelli Tutti* tells us that this will be based upon fraternity and social solidarity. The answers offered by the encyclical require patience and a willingness to do things differently; to create a paradigm in which the common good replaces ideological posturing. One of the most important things offered by Francis in FT is the hope that comes from having a method of creating a new society formed from a vision conceived by those who have experienced the degradation of conflict and poverty. For Northern Ireland this means the formation of a new social covenant in which those who find themselves at the margins of society are given political, social and economic agency. The most important teachings of FT for the region are therefore to be found in Chapter Six: Dialogue and Friendship in Society, and paras 228-235 of Chapter Seven: Paths of Renewed Encounter. These show us that a new vision of society can be created through a form of dialogue in which compromise is replaced with consensus, termed by Francis as a 'culture of encounter'.

Such a culture of encounter, like nonviolence, is a way of life rather than a one-off action. It is a commitment to work *with* the marginalised rather than *for* them; to allow them to be agents of their own destinies. Francis defines it thus:

To speak of a "culture of encounter" means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone. This becomes an aspiration and a style of life. The subject of this culture is the people, not simply one part of society that would pacify the rest with the help of professional and media resources (FT, para 216).

On the surface, it would seem as though the people of Northern Ireland are well resourced in terms of creating such a culture, with ample funding available for 'community relations work'. However, as alluded to earlier, much of this funding is distributed in order to consolidate power blocs rather than to challenge the sectarianism that is still latent within society. Furthermore, cross-class encounters are rare, resulting in the development of 'echo chambers.' The choice to live 'the art of encounter', which directly challenges the accepted narrative of peace, is then the first step in creating a new social covenant through the demonstration of a commitment to change.

Once such a decision to work towards the creation of a new social covenant has been made, the second step involves finding ways of reaching agreement that do not descend into polarisation (Francis, 2020a, p.77) and which 'build a people that can accept differences.' (FT, para 217). In Northern Ireland, there are areas and issues, such as political sovereignty, where agreement will never be reached. But this should be seen as an opportunity rather than a problem: 'Let us

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not forget that “differences are creative; they create tension and in the resolution of tension lies humanity’s progress” (FT, para 203). Opposing ideas should be discussed in a spirit of honesty and openness through which ‘we grow in our ability to grasp the significance of what others say and do, even if we cannot accept it as our own conviction. In this way, it becomes possible to be frank and open about our beliefs, while continuing to discuss, to seek points of contact, and above all, to work and struggle together’ (FT, para 203). However, such a process needs to move beyond the community-relations paradigm towards a commitment to social change and the development of a blueprint for a new social covenant. Whilst the community-relations paradigm is an important first step in any post-conflict society ‘because participants [come] genuinely to know and understand members of the other community, rather than persisting with the negative judgements that have pervaded Northern Irish society and have helped to escalate tensions within local communities’, (Power, 2007, p. 204) participants need to move beyond this to determine how they can work together to effect change and move from a state of negative to positive peace.

The foundation of this new social covenant is consensus and truth. (FT, paras 211-214) This can only be achieved through the contribution of a variety of perspectives; something never hard to find in Northern Ireland. But despite this acceptance of difference, a ‘conviction that it is possible to arrive at certain fundamental truths [should] always be upheld’ (FT, para 211). It is from this conviction that the blueprint for a new social covenant will grow. The resulting covenant will contain a set of social ethics upon which public policy will be based. I have previously written in detail about the mechanics of this process (Power, 2020), but in FT, Francis teaches that the art of encounter should be rooted in three elements: subsidiarity;⁴ solidarity;⁵ and human dignity.⁶ It is only when these three elements combine that the art of encounter can truly create social peace.

Conclusion

Fratelli Tutti is an encyclical about peace, but it is not the encyclical transforming Catholicism into a faith which solely teaches nonviolence as the way to peace hoped for by some. Rather it provides something much deeper which acknowledges the messiness of the Twenty-First Century and the truth that despite globalisation, CST needs to be contextualised locally, nationally, and globally taking into account the lived experience of those on the margins. Francis wants us to move beyond protest. In FT he is asking us to do the hard work that comes after the protest has ended and the placards have been thrown away. This is the transformation from a negative peace, in which the physical violence has stopped, into a positive peace, which occurs when a society has taken the time to examine its faults and tries to correct them. Through such a process a social covenant based upon the common good becomes the cornerstone of all public policy decision making processes. In this essay, I have sought to demonstrate how this would occur in Northern Ireland. The democratic deficit in the region and the COVID-19 pandemic have helped people to realise that society needs to be remade. In terms of Northern Ireland, Francis’ teachings indicate that this change can be achieved through dialogue. However, the nature of dialogue in the region has to undergo a transformation. Communities now need to enact the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity and voice their visions for policy making. These visions, based upon lived experience, can be born from the creative tensions that disagreement brings, and unless they are expressed, nothing can change.

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¹ Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019) show the impact of austerity on benefit claimants and workers in the 'gig economy' respectively.

² See for example Sales, D. (2021, Jan 14,). Fresh free school meals row as No10 insists poor families WILL get food over February half-term after union warned ministers planned to end help. Daily Mail Retrieved from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9146703/Priti-Patel-calls-action-against-food-firm-Chartwells-appalling-free-school-meals.html>

³ A similar publication contextualising FT for Britain is forthcoming: Maria Power. (2021). *Fratelli Tutti in a British Context*. London: William Temple Foundation.

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⁴ Those at the margins of society have a right to influence the development of policy that affects their lives.

⁵ This is the love of neighbour epitomised by the Good Samaritan, FT. Chapter Two: A Stranger on the Road.

⁶ 'No one is useless and no one is expendable.' FT. §215.