

The contribution of charisms to the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*

Communion with all humanity

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It is not uncommon to think that some of the unique initiatives Pope Francis has come up with arise from the close attention he pays to current events. Some might be tempted to say that it is almost as if he was trying to win an audience by engaging in topics more alien to the faith than to the ecclesial tradition. But the reality is different. In the wake of the recent encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, we asked three sons of Francis of Assisi, each of whom belongs to a different Franciscan congregation, to help us understand the profound link between their charismatic heritage and the proposals of Pope Francis.



The Ministry of Pope Francis and Charisms

Before offering our contribution as Franciscans to the reading of the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, we consider it opportune to highlight some traits of the pontificate of Pope Francis that is increasingly characterized by a strong and original "charismatic" colouring. Francis is first and foremost the "son" of a charism. With a formation and a life steeped in the charism of Ignatius of Loyola, he became the first Jesuit pope in history. Secondly, he is the first pope in history to choose the name "Francis" for his Petrine ministry. It was a choice which surprised many and with it, as a Jesuit, showed that he intended to be inspired by a further, new charism. Thirdly, in these eight years of ministry, he has repeatedly valued and drawn on other charismatic expressions, "old and new", aroused by the Spirit in the Church. Many people have also been surprised by the introductions, clearly Franciscan in origin, of two of the three encyclical letters he has so far given to the Church. And we can add that, in their content and development, Francis allowed himself to be inspired by other charisms or by "charismatic" personalities even from outside of the Church¹.

The "charismatic" development of a magisterium

His eight-year pontificate continues to express itself through a magisterium rich in challenges, proposals and pastoral choices aimed at an evangelical reform of the Church rooted in the Gospel. This is what inspires Pope Francis and from which - he writes - "for Christian thought and for the action of the Church the primacy given to relationship, to the encounter with the mystery of the other, to universal communion with the whole of humanity as the vocation of all, springs forth"².

Francis continues to express this magisterium with his own life and words. A life lived in poverty of spirit, sober and enriched by practical actions in favour of the poor, by the

surprising choices he makes for those whom he invites to work with him, by bold encounters with wounded or marginalized people, always looking beyond the confines of the Church and in dialogue with all. So, it is a magisterium that is always expressed and confirmed by a constant, strong and courageous proclamation of the Word.

His is a papacy that operates by fully exercising the "hierarchical charism", the "Petrine ministry" that the Church has entrusted to him and, at the same time, in enhancing every other "charismatic gift" present in the Church. "Hierarchical gifts and charismatic gifts" that *Lumen Gentium* (no. 4) places in communion and interaction with each other. "Hierarchical gifts and charismatic gifts" that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in the letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, recognizes as "coessential" and defines as "gifts of God, of the Holy Spirit, of Christ, given to contribute, in different ways, to the building up of the Church"³.

A careful and interesting analysis of the "charismatic" pontificate of Pope Francis was proposed by Jesuit Antonio Spadaro in an article that appeared in *La Civiltà Cattolica* in September 2020. He says very clearly in the opening passage: "Pope Francis is a Jesuit, and his idea of reforming the Church corresponds to the Ignatian vision." He continues, reporting the pontiff's thought: "The Church is an institution, but what makes the Church an 'institution' is the Holy Spirit who causes disorder with charisms, but in that disorder creates harmony." And Pope Francis, following the Spirit, moves with a great deal of freedom, using St Ignatius' method of proceeding which is called 'discernment': the discernment of God's will in life and in history"⁴.

Some reflections on the charism entrusted by God to Francis of Assisi

*The encounter
with the lepers,
the encounter
with the crucifix
in
San Damiano
and renouncing
his earthly father*

Eight hundred years ago, a new charism appeared in the Church: the "Franciscan charism". Over the centuries, there have been many interpretations and updates. Much has been said and much has been written. But perhaps now, especially following the choice of the bishop of Rome to call himself "Francis", it is worth returning to it and reflecting further. What is the "charism" that God entrusted to the young son of Pietro di Bernardone at the beginning of the 1200s? In our opinion it seems that there are three events that characterize the Franciscan charism. The encounter with the lepers, the encounter with the Crucifix in the little church of San Damiano and the renunciation of his earthly father before the bishop of

Assisi.

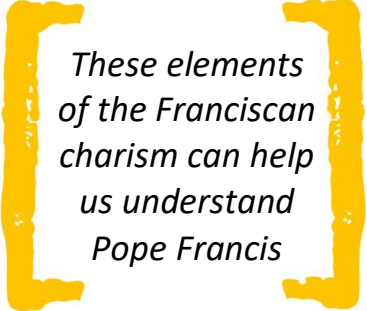
In the *Testamento* St Francis puts the encounter with the lepers at the origin of his call. He writes: "When I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers and the Lord himself led me among them and I showed them mercy. As I turned away from them, what seemed bitter to me was changed to sweetness of mind and body. And afterwards, I stayed a little while and departed my earlier life"⁵.

The second encounter, the one with the Crucifix, has not been handed down to us by the saint himself but by his biographer, St Bonaventure. He writes: "Once [Francis] went out into the countryside to meditate. While passing near the church of San Damiano, which was in ruins because it was so old, he was moved by the Spirit and entered it to pray. Prostrating himself before the image of the Crucifix [...] he heard a voice from the cross which said to him three times: "Francis, go, repair my house which, as you see, is all in ruins"⁶.

At the same time a confirmation of this "mandate" occurred through the "dream" of Pope Innocent III. In his dream he saw the Lateran Basilica about to collapse but a humble and poor friar intervened to support it and save it from ruin⁷.

The third episode is when Francis undressed in front of the Bishop of Assisi and exclaimed: "From now on I will be able to say freely: "'Our Father who art in heaven', not 'father Pietro di Bernardone'"⁸, finding in God the Father the source of fatherhood and brotherhood. "Brothers all", because they are children of the same Father.

In our opinion, then, these episodes can summarize the Franciscan charism and confirm the mission that God entrusted to the Saint of Assisi. To become a neighbour, that is, a "brother" to those rejected by the society of his time and of all times. The call to place oneself at the service of the Church by "repairing" it, by "reforming" it, while remaining within the Church. And the feeling of being a brother to all. This was a charism well rooted in the Gospel and supported by a radical choice of "the highest poverty".



*These elements
of the Franciscan
charism can help
us understand
Pope Francis*

Perhaps these elements of the Franciscan charism can also help us in reading and understanding the heart of the pontificate of Pope Francis.

For an understanding of the Franciscan introduction of the encyclical

The opening lines of the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* should be put into context. It is an expression taken from a writing of the Saint of Assisi. It is a short text: the sixth Admonition, which is good to read in full and it says: "Let us look with attention, all brothers, at the Good Shepherd, who, in order to save his sheep, endured the passion of the cross. The Lord's sheep followed him in tribulation and persecution, in shame and hunger, in infirmity and temptation and other such things and because of this they received eternal life from the Lord. Therefore, it shames us, servants of God, that the saints have done the works and we expect to receive glory and honour by merely recounting them."⁹

The text, therefore, does not develop the theme of fraternity, as one would expect, but presupposes it. A human fraternity that is based on a heavenly "paternity". Francis, addressing everyone with the epithet "all brothers" and with this Admonition means to present Christ according to the evangelical image of the "good shepherd" who lays down his life for his sheep. It is in Christ and through Christ, who died and rose again, that men and women have become brothers and sisters, "all brothers and sisters": brothers and sisters of Jesus and brothers and sisters to one another because they are children of the same Father, the heavenly Father. He invites everyone not to boast of this title but to live it, putting it into practice.

The term "brother" according to the Franciscan charism

From the beginning of his adventure, St Francis presented himself to others with the title of "Brother Francis" and used this term to define those who had joined him and wanted to follow him. In his Testament he writes: "The Lord asked me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way..." and later he adds: "When the Lord gave me Brothers, no one told me what I had to do, but the Most High himself revealed to me that I had to live according to the form of the Holy Gospel"¹⁰, a term that finds its full meaning in the Gospel. St. Francis will never call his first companions by the name of "socii" [*friend, comrade, ally*], but always "fratres" [*brothers*]. He repeated this term in his writings 264 times. Truly "Brothers all"!

In the "Canticle of brother Sun" creatures for Francis are: "brothers and sisters"

In the writings he left us, the Saint never uses the abstract term of "fraternity" or "brotherhood", but always uses and presents everyone as "brothers and sisters". He will use this expression, not only to his "companions", but also of the "lepers" whom he embraces, to the "thieves of Montecasale" whom he welcomes and invites to lunch, to the "sultan of Egypt" with whom he dialogues; and he will define as brother the "wolf" in Gubbio whom he approaches without fear.

With the expression he uses in the "Canticle of Brother Sun" he extends the idea of 'brother' to all creatures: all of them are for

Francis: "brothers" and "sisters": "Brother sun, brother wind, brother fire, etc.". "*Sora luna, sora acqua, sora nostra matre terra - and even - sora nostra morte corporale*"!

In short, in a context riven by conflict such as medieval society, Francis proposes a new paradigm of relationships, based on the Gospel value, on the principle of "fraternity", 600 years before the French Revolution.

A "Franciscan" encyclical that avails itself of the contribution of other charisms

The encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, especially in its opening passages, presents itself as "Franciscan", but with it Pope Francis opens himself decisively to the contribution of other charisms aroused by the Spirit even outside the Catholic Church. He himself confirms this when, towards the conclusion, he writes: "In this space of reflection on universal brotherhood, I have felt motivated especially by St. Francis of Assisi, and also by other brothers who are not Catholic: Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi and many others." And then he adds: "I want to conclude by recalling another person of profound faith, who, starting from his intense experience of God, made a journey of transformation to the point of feeling himself a brother to all. I am referring to Blessed Charles de Foucauld"¹¹.

As in his other writings, Pope Francis, and in particular, in this encyclical, does not intend to illustrate or develop a "doctrine," but proposes a "path," a journey to be undertaken to which he invites all men and women of good will. To resume or initiate a "process" that in the history of the Catholic Church, of other Churches, of other religions and of humanity, many have already proposed and implemented in their lives and in their times.

Let us make our own the invitation Francis poses at the conclusion of the encyclical. Referring to the example of Charles de Foucauld, he writes: "He wanted to be, ultimately, 'the universal brother.' But only by identifying himself with the least did he come to be a brother to all. May God inspire this ideal in each of us. Amen."¹²

¹ In particular, for *Laudato si'*, to the Prayer Message for the Safeguarding of Creation of the Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I (1.9.2012). For *Fratelli tutti*, it is Pope Francis himself who states, "I felt stimulated in a special way by the Great Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, with whom I met in Abu Dhabi to recall that God created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and called them to live together as brothers among themselves" (n. 5).

² Cf. *Fratelli tutti*, 277.

³ Cf. *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, 6-8.

⁴ For further study we refer to the reading of the entire article: A. Spadaro, *Il governo di Francesco. È ancora attiva la spinta propulsiva del pontificato?* in "La Civiltà Cattolica" 171 (2020/III) Issue 4085, pp. 350-364.

⁵ Testament, 1 (FF 110).

⁶ St Bonaventure, *Legenda Minor*, ch. I, V (FF 1334).

⁷ The episode is confirmed by various written testimonies (*2Cel*, XI, 17; *Lm* 3, 10; *Lm* 2, IV; *3Comp* 51, etc.) and by countless iconographic representations, two of which, from the thirteenth century, were painted by the Master of St Francis and by Giotto in the Papal Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi.

⁸ *2Cel* 12 (FF 597).

⁹ FF 155.

¹⁰ *Testament*, 1.14 (FF 110.116).

¹¹ *Fratelli tutti*, 286.

¹² *Ibid.*, 287