

The Demand for Universal Love in the Globalised World and Its Current Challenges for Social Work Based on the Initiatives of the Social Encyclical of Pope Francis *Fratelli tutti* (2020)

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Abstract

The article reflects the call for universal love in our globalised world and the resulting challenges for social work, drawing on Pope Francis' social encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (2020), and relevant scholarly literature. This theoretically grounded article examines and documents universal fraternity and social friendship as contemporary demand for universal love, which Pope Francis presents as essential for the future perspectives of our globalised world. His perspectives also offer a deeper understanding of social reality and the core mission of social work. The text affirms the relevance of Pope Francis' concept and the specific role of social work in its implementation. The article offers concrete suggestions relevant to the quality of social work, particularly regarding applicable motivations and approaches.

Keywords

Love, universal fraternity, social friendship, globalisation, Pope Francis, social encyclicals, social work.

Introduction

In today's interconnected global world, marked by ongoing geopolitical tension (war in Ukraine and the Middle East, rising tensions between China and Taiwan, waves of migration, natural disasters, persistent consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, terrorism, etc.), the field of social work faces specific challenges. These challenges highlight the urgent need for foundational motivations and approaches. The growing physical and psychological burden on social workers – driven by the pressing need to address diverse life stories of clients within complex social, political, cultural and religious contexts – makes it increasingly clear that the scope and mission of social work today cannot be understood without reference to the global interconnectedness of our time. A narrow, culture-bound or region-bound perspectives is no longer sufficient. A global outlook is necessary to understand the root causes and specific consequences of today's challenges for individuals, societies, social workers, and the practice of social work itself. In this

context, reflecting on the spiritual foundations of human life and society is not only justified but essential. It provides insight into the fundamental motivations and purpose of contemporary social work practice. This dimension is explored in scholarly discussions on the relevance of religion and spirituality in social work. This study aims to contribute to that discussion by reflecting on the ideas presented in Pope Francis's social encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (2020), which articulates the premises of a globally oriented perspective. The encyclical proposes the concepts of fraternity and social friendship, rooted in the biblical tradition of monotheism and the belief in one personal God the Father. In this sense, the Pope presents a reflection on the interrelation between monotheism and humanism, and their practical implications.

Religion and Spirituality: Biblical Monotheism and Humanism

The concepts of religion and spirituality have become increasingly prominent in the field of social work in recent years. They reflect the urgent questions we face today – both within and beyond social work – about the meaning and significance of everyday realities. Religion and spirituality inherently engage with such questions. They invite exploration and reflection, and they seek relevant answers with concrete implications for life. In the case of religion, these questions are addressed primarily on the institutional level – within churches and religious communities. Spirituality, by contrast, tends to reflect a more personal understanding and experience of these existential issues. It also includes individual life attitudes and ways of living that may be rooted in religious beliefs. Thus, the concepts of religion and spirituality are not completely overlapping in their content and meaning, but neither are they exclusive. We are talking about religious as well as non-religious (secular) spirituality. The former can take different forms and shapes within a given religion. In Catholic Christianity, there is also a specific monastic spirituality linked to the gift of vocation and consecration. On a general level, within a given religious community, however, the degree to which spirituality is developed may vary widely among individuals. Secular spirituality, as the name suggests, involves life practices, values, and attitudes that generally do not include an explicit religious dimension, such as a relationship with God. What matters for social work is that a social worker's and client's understanding and personal experience of religion or spirituality can significantly influence the quality of social work. These dimensions can support or hinder the achievement of the core goal of social work: the reintegration of the client into society and the restoration of client's social interaction.¹

Pope Francis' suggestions formulated in his *Fratelli tutti* encyclical represent the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. They are grounded in this religious and spiritual dimension of man, as understood within the context of social work. In particular, they are rooted in biblical monotheism. The Pope expresses hope that the ideas in the encyclical will resonate with all people who care about human fraternity, which he presents as a fundamental anthropological call.

This intention is evident in the origins and purpose of the encyclical, as articulated by Pope Francis himself. He seeks to present a new vision of universal fraternal love and social friendship, one that is open to everyone and demands a concrete response in everyday practice. As he writes: '*Although I wrote it from the perspective of my Christian convictions, I sought to present*

1 Cf. Böckle 2020; Möllenbeck/Schulter 2017; Canda 2015; Vojtíšek, Dušek, Motl, 2012; Crisp, 2016: 3-28; Kaňák, 2015; Nauer, 2015, 49-54; Dhiman/Rettig, 2017; Gehrig, Opatrný, Birther, Baumann, 2021. French philosopher André Comte-Sponville (*1952) addresses the fundamental question of the significance of religion in its diversity for human life and society. Cf. Sponville, André Comte. *The Spirit of Atheism. Introduction to Spirituality Without God*. (Prague: Filosofia, 2020), 22–37.

these reflections as an invitation to dialogue with all people of good will.² The authenticity of this invitation is underscored by the process that preceded the encyclical, it was shaped by dialogue and shared efforts, especially with non-Christian faith traditions. The encyclical builds on and deepens the *Document on Human Fraternity*, signed in Abu Dhabi in 2019 by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Sunni Islam, Ahmed al-Tayeb. Its preamble states: ‘It was sincerely and seriously developed as a joint declaration of our honest and good will, to invite all people who carry in their hearts faith in God and faith in human fraternity to unite and work together, and to serve as a guide for future generations toward a culture of mutual respect, in recognition of the divine grace that binds all human beings together’. This message is further reinforced by the declaration that God ‘created all human beings equal in rights, duties, and dignity, and called them to live together as brothers’.³

Religion in the Service of Fraternity in the World – the Position of the Post-conciliar Church

The positions articulated by Pope Francis in *Fratelli tutti* cannot be fully understood without considering the legacy of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). In line with the renewed self-conception of the Church, the Council sought to reflect on the Church’s role in the modern world. The Church opens itself to the needs of contemporary humanity and the challenges of a globalised world. It declares the need to respect freedom of conscience and religion, and advocates for the development of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, while reflecting on its own responsibilities and mission in this world and its perspectives.⁴

The post-conciliar reflection on these themes did not occur solely in official Church documents. Individual theologians also made significant contributions. One notable figure is Hans Küng (1928–2021), who in the 1990s introduced the *Global Ethic Project* based on the necessity of interfaith dialogue as a foundation for a peaceful global future in the globalised world.⁵

A consistent theme throughout post-conciliar papal documents is the understanding of the world as one God’s creation, as a community of all people who are fundamentally equal. It is based on the conviction that every human being is created in the image of God (cf. Gen 1:27). In this view, religious affiliation, ethnicity, or nationality are secondary to human dignity. Every person possesses an inherent and inalienable dignity, and is a bearer of human rights, which excludes any form of racism or xenophobia.⁶

Pope Francis’s reflections align with the broader theological framework of the post-conciliar Church. In particular, he draws on the social encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (2009) by his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI.

At the heart of both documents lies the conviction that everything originates in God – in Truth (Logos) and Love (Agape). As Benedict XVI expresses it, ‘everything finds its form in God’s love, and everything is directed towards it’.⁷ This divine reality, fully revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, is recognised as the ultimate source and driving force behind ‘the authentic development

2 Francis, Pope, *Fratelli tutti*. Encyclical on Fraternity and Social Friendship. (Prague: KNA, 2020), 6. (Hereinafter referred to as FT.)

3 *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, (Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019), in L’Osservatore Romano, 4-5 February 2019, 1. In the Czech version available at <https://www.radiovaticana.cz/clanek.php?id=28926>

4 Cf. *Documents of the Second Vatican Council* (Prague: Zvon, 1995).

5 Hans Küng, Hans Kuschel, K.-J., *Declaration on the World Ethos*. Declaration of the Parliament of World Religions. (Brno: CDK, 1997).

6 Cf. Papežská rada pro spravedlnost a mír. *Kompendium sociální nauky církve*. (Kostelní Vydří: KNA, 2008), especially, 11-142.

7 Benedict XVI, Pope, *Caritas in veritate*. Love of Truth. Encyclical on Integral Development in Love and Truth. (Kostelní Vydří: KNA, 2009), 2, 3. Hereinafter (CV).

of every human person and of all humanity'.⁸ Essentially, both Popes emphasise the necessity of realising the commandment of love. A love fulfilled in truth, understood through both faith and reason. This love becomes the basis not only for personal relationships but also for social and global interactions. It is the foundation for dialogue, communication, and community. Behind this emphasis lies the belief that truth, when not reduced to relativism, *'enables people to rise above their subjective opinions and impressions; it allows them to transcend cultural and historical limits, encounter one another, and recognise the true essence and value of things'*.⁹ In other words, *'without truth, without trust, and without a love for truth, there can be no social conscience or sense of responsibility'*.¹⁰ Otherwise, *'social action ... becomes subject to private interests and power struggles, leading to the erosion of society'*.¹¹ This danger is particularly pressing in our globalised world.¹²

In both papal documents mentioned above, a fundamental conviction of Christian faith is clearly articulated: without openness to the Father of all people, there can be no enduring and solid foundation for a genuine call to fraternity. As the documents emphasise, *'reason alone is capable of recognising human equality and supporting peaceful civil coexistence but it cannot create fraternity'*.¹³ True human connectedness and solidarity are thus grounded in the potential of love – the universally redemptive dimension of human existence. It is this capacity for love that *'makes people, in their conscience and freedom ... open to mutuality'*.¹⁴ In practical terms, this means that *'human community does not flourish solely through relationships based on rights and duties, but above all through relationships marked by generosity, mercy and a sense of communion'*.¹⁵

The prerequisite for integral development is a lived experience of fraternity and social friendship. As outlined above, such a vision requires a transcendent understanding of the human person, one that acknowledges the need for God. Only an encounter with God enables a man *'not to see "in the other only the other", but to recognise in him/her as the image of God, and thus truly discover the other, and grow into a love that becomes care and concern'*.¹⁶ In other words, the central concepts of the *Fratelli tutti*, fraternity and social friendship, are not just abstract concepts, but a practical challenge that place human relationships at the centre of social reflection and action. These values must be embodied in daily attitudes that are grounded in the simple truth of our universal interdependence, regardless of origin or social status. They are a challenge to recognise in every person a fellow human being who possesses the same value and dignity as ourselves.

The two Popes mentioned above, along with the broader tradition of post-conciliar theology, help to clarify the fundamental theological and anthropological starting point: the human vocation to love and thus to reciprocity, openness, and service to others, especially to those who are most vulnerable. In this regard, Christian faith is meant to be a source of light. It invites Christians to embody this calling through personal witness, even though, as we know, such witness is not always consistently lived out. This expectation, however, is not limited to Christianity, as *Fratelli tutti* affirms, other religions also contribute to this vision of solidarity and mutual care. Paradoxically, those who do not share biblical faith may sometimes bear more credible witness to love and

8 CV, 1.

9 CV, 4.

10 CV, 5.

11 CV, 5.

12 Cf. CV, 5; FT, 273.

13 CV, 19; FT, 272.

14 CV, 9.

15 CV, 6.

16 CV, 11.

solidarity than believers themselves.¹⁷ This only serves to reinforce the universal intelligibility and accessibility of the call for love and lived mutuality, and genuine solidarity.¹⁸

Realised Fraternity and Social Friendship as a Response to the Exclusion and Neglect of Others

To affirm the tangible nature of the vision of universal fraternity and social friendship, Pope Francis draws on the Gospel parable of the Good Samaritan, emphasising its universality. According to him, this story *‘speaks in such a way that everyone can be touched by it’*.¹⁹ The accessibility or ‘low threshold’ nature of the parable lies in its central call to extend love to all people, not only to those who are close to us but also to strangers. This inclusivity aligns with the principle of the ‘Golden Rule’ – a moral imperative common to all cultures and religious traditions: *‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’*.²⁰ Reflecting on this parable, the Pope offers concrete suggestions that, on the one hand, hold up a critical mirror to both individual and societal attitudes, and on the other hand, aim to motivate renewed action. As previously indicated, our objective is to consider these suggestions particularly in relation to the field of social work.

At the heart of the Gospel story reflected upon by Pope Francis in the encyclical (Luke 10:25–37) are four characters: the wounded, half-dead Jew lying on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho; a priest and a Levite, both religious figures, who are passing by without offering assistance; and finally, a foreigner, a Samaritan, a member of a group traditionally despised by the Jews. It is the Samaritan who treats the injured man’s wounds and ensures his continued care. The typology of these characters and the structure of the parable offer valuable insights that can inform the everyday responsibilities of social work. They speak to the motivations and attitudes expected of social workers in their professional and ethical commitments. One may argue that, when stripped of prejudice toward individuals or ethnic and religious groups, the example of the Good Samaritan – especially his profound compassion for the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalised – can continually reaffirm the essential role of such practice in shaping a more humane and just contemporary world. Moreover, the practice of social work may be further enriched by various dimensions the Pope elaborates on in the continuation of the encyclical.

In the field of social work, as in everyday life, what matters most is the willingness to *‘waste time’* with a person in need, to engage with their problems with genuine presence and attention. It is the readiness to pause, to lean in, to listen, and to be fully present for someone in distress. Pope Francis highlights a related dimension that may be of fundamental significance for the motivation of a social worker. He speaks of the openness to be transformed, out of respect for human dignity, through encounters with human suffering. This transformation, which requires a certain spiritual sensitivity, can contribute not only to the personal development of the social worker, but also to the deepening of their motivation: a renewed willingness to lift up the wounded and the fallen, and to restore their sense of dignity and honour.²¹ As the Pope also reminds us, the message of the Good Samaritan is not merely social or ethical. It also recalls a frequently overlooked aspect

17 Srov. FT, 74.

18 Cf. CV, 34. Cf. also Joseph Ratzinger, *The Europe of Benedict of Nursia in the Crisis of Cultures* (Kostelní Vydří: KNA, 2006), 41. Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that *‘love is, in a certain sense, imposed on the human being’*. It has been received as a gift by all. Cf. CV, 34.

19 FT, 56.

20 FT, 60.

21 Cf. FT, 67n.

of our shared humanity – the vocation to a fullness of life – a calling that can only be fulfilled through love.²²

The Pope also notes the difficulties that may hinder efforts to help those in need, obstacles that naturally confront social workers as well. These include confronting one's own fears and feelings of inadequacy, as well as the danger of falling into sadness or resignation. Pope Francis literally says: *'Let us seek out others and engage with the world as it is, without fear of pain or feelings of inadequacy, because it is there that we discover all the goodness that God has planted in human hearts. Difficulties that seem overwhelming are opportunities for growth, not reasons for sad resignation, which can only lead to passive acceptance of the way things are.'*²³

The daily confrontation with the often 'unhealthy' realities inherent in social work places significant demands on social workers. It calls for a firm grounding in values, sustained by a continuously renewed motivation to serve others and to maintain a genuine affection for them. Pope Francis specifies this affection, noting that *'it causes us to yearn selflessly for the good of others. All of this stems from an attitude of respect, from valuing the worth of the other.'*²⁴ He further reminds us that *'love is more than a series of charitable acts. These acts arise from a sense of unity with others – from being increasingly oriented toward the other, because I regard them as valuable, endowed with dignity, lovable and beautiful, regardless of their physical or moral condition.'*²⁵ It is precisely this kind of love, love that forms the basis of meaningful human relationships and motivates one to genuinely seek the good of the other, that, according to the Pope, affirms its universal character by *'contributing to the possibility of a social friendship that excludes no one, and a fraternity that is open to all.'*²⁶

The dimension of universal fraternity and social friendship presupposes a form of love that honours the uniqueness and originality of each human being, and thus embraces human diversity. It deliberately avoids the kind of uniformity characteristic of certain forms of globalisation, particularly those that promote a false universalism. As Pope Francis warns, such globalisation *'destroys the uniqueness of every person and every nation.'*²⁷ He continues: *'Social friendship and universal fraternity necessarily, always, and under all circumstances call for the recognition of the inherent value of every human person.'*²⁸ Closely tied to this is the demand for reliability, which, according to the Pope, *'is born of the awareness that we are responsible for the fragility of others as we seek to build a shared future'*. Solidarity becomes concrete through acts of service, which may take many forms of care for others. In this context, the Pope emphasises that ...true service involves the capacity to *'set aside personal desires and aspirations for power when faced with the concrete gaze of those who are most vulnerable... Service always recognises the face of brother, touches his body, senses his closeness, and, at times, even "endures" that closeness in an effort to help. Service, then, is never ideological, because we do not serve ideas, we serve people.'*²⁹

22 Cf. FT, 68.

23 FT, 78

24 FT, 93.

25 FT, 94.

26 FT, 94.

27 FT, 94.

28 FT, 106.

29 FT, 115.

Conclusion

The events of recent years, particularly the migration crisis (2015), the global Covid-19 pandemic (2020), and the outbreak of war in Ukraine (2022), have vividly demonstrated the deep interconnectedness of our globalised world. These crises have shown that the suffering, hardship, and distress experienced in one part of the world inevitably affect, to varying degrees, the lives of people elsewhere. This is an experience of fundamental human interdependence, which calls urgently for solidarity.

In all of these circumstances, the field of social work – and the services it provides – functions as a critical ‘first buffer zone’, tasked with identifying those in need and facilitating an appropriate assistance. This role extends beyond assistance to individuals; it also serves a broader societal function by helping to mitigate the risks of potential social unrest. In many cases, social workers are often exposed to considerable physical and psychological strain. Confronted with their own human limitations, fears, and uncertainties, they may naturally begin to question the meaning of unfolding events and the deeper significance of their service. In the process of seeking or reinforcing motivation for their service to others, they may find themselves grappling with profound spiritual questions concerning the purpose and direction of their own lives.

Pope Francis’ social encyclical *Fratelli tutti* offers valuable guidance for social workers in this regard. It clarifies the fundamental characteristics of the globalised world, its challenges, risks, and possibilities, and articulates a vision rooted in core ethical values. By emphasising universal love, the call to universal fraternity, and the ideal of social friendship, the encyclical establishes a value-based framework that can support social workers in discerning meaningful motivations and cultivating the courage necessary for selfless service and closeness to those in need. Grounded in these principles, social work can serve as a vital, daily testimony to the relevance and necessity of these values – both within society and global world.

Without a proper consideration of the global world’s close interconnectedness and its immediate impacts on individual and societal life, the meaning and significance of social work can hardly be adequately understood or articulated today. Social work is thus challenged to continuously reflect on this context and its essential value foundations in order to enhance the quality of its services, services that aim to realise the full dimension of human dignity and compassion. It is a form of social work that makes no distinctions among people, honouring their uniqueness and dignity. At the same time, it is a form of practice that appropriately considers the needs of social workers themselves – so that they may continue to carry out their tasks over the long term, professionally, kindly, conscientiously, and responsibly. Above all, this is possible when they find deep meaning in their vocation.

Social work is directly confronted with the consequences of the close global interconnectedness of today’s world, most notably through its work with migrants and refugees. However, these consequences may also manifest in other areas of practice, particularly where the global context impacts the self-perception of clients, undermines their life stability, sense of security, or the meaningfulness of their existence.

An important question that deserves due attention, and which has not yet been addressed in our reflection, concerns how to practically support a deeper understanding of the anthropological and religious foundations mentioned above, particularly in relation to the broader context of the globalised world, within social work education. How can we foster greater awareness of the importance of personal motivation among social workers for the demanding work they do, in light of their understanding of the overall meaning of life? These reflections must also take into account

the role of politics and economy – fields that, as the social encyclical under discussion likewise highlights, are not only contributors to many of the problems faced, but also bear responsibility and capacity for offering solutions.

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