

# The Monastic Dream



A monastic response to *Fratelli Tutti*

— Reflections of the International Team of AIM

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# **The Monastic Dream**

Reflections of the International Team of AIM

A response to *Fratelli tutti*



## **An Introduction**

Every community living according to the Rule of St. Benedict should feel challenged by Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti* on fraternity and social friendship. In the following text, AIM (Alliance for International Monasticism) offers these communities some help in analysing this text and in reflecting on this theme in community. It has always been the goal of the AIM, indeed, to analyse the impact of social evolution on our communities of monks and nuns.

## **A call to dream**

Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all. (*FT* 8)

Pope Francis is inviting us to dream. We are to dream together, not alone - because alone we risk being deceived by illusion. His call is addressed to everyone, to every local community, because this is how we can develop a culture of encounter. This culture is needed to lead all human being towards a future of communion and harmony. A dream lived together does indeed become culture. This call should speak to those who live under the Rule of Saint Benedict, who addresses all those who yearn for life and desire to live good days (Ps 33,13; RB Prol. 15). Such people have chosen a life in a community so that Christ may bring them all together to everlasting life. (RB 72,12).

## **The monastic dream**

Monastic life goes back to a yearning first described in the Apostolic time. In his teaching, Jesus of Nazareth invited



Congresso 2016.

his disciples to leave all things so that they might reach a radical attachment to God and to their brothers and sisters.

When some of the first-generation Christians dreamed of living this kind of response as a permanent way of life, they adopted ascetic traditions that embodied a desire for the fullness of life.

When we enter a monastic community today, we become bearers of a Christian monastic desire - or monastic dream - that is rooted in the Gospel. It is also connected to the search for God that is a dream as old as the human heart.

The goal of monastic life is communion. It is first of all communion with God. This is expressed in a search for continual prayer (cf. 1 Thess 5.17) and embodied in a community life of sharing with sisters or brothers. At the same time, it is a striving for universal communion. Within the Church, this is expressed in the communion of each local community with other communities of the same congregation or order, and with the local Church and the universal Church. Communion is not to be

limited to the Church, but it also includes close neighbours and the whole of society.

Monastic life becomes therefore a privileged workshop for the development of the culture of encounter that Pope Francis calls for in his latest encyclical.

### **Francis' global theological vision**

This call of Francis to dream is a call for us to live together in such a way that we may become fully configured to the image of Christ. This call is addressed to each individual, to the whole of humanity and, indeed, to the universe. Fully to understand this teaching that Pope Francis is giving us, we must see it as a part of a global theological vision. It is by reflecting upon Pope Francis' thought as a whole that every believer, and especially monastic communities, can understand the challenges he offers. Having understood these challenges, we can then discern what our responses must be.

*Laudato si* and *Fratelli tutti* - The link between the last two encyclicals, *Laudato si* and *Fratelli tutti* is obvious. It is a call to a global ecology that implies the restoration of the harmony broken by sin:

- harmony within the heart of each person:
- harmony between each person and his or her Creator;
- harmony of each person with his or her family or community, with his or her Church, and with society; and finally;
- harmony with the whole cosmos.

These two encyclicals form a triptych with the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* written at the beginning of his pontificate. In this Exhortation, Francis set out what the main lines of his papal ministry would be: his dream for the Church.

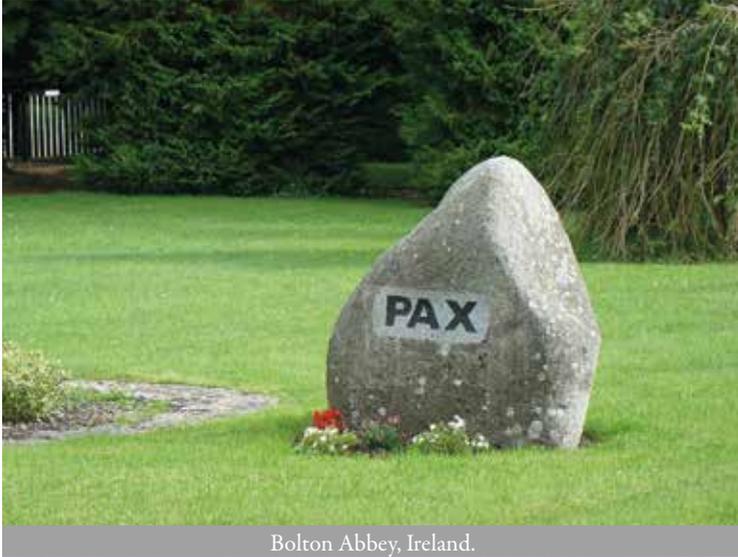
**Synodality:** This theological synthesis will no doubt be completed in two years' time by an Apostolic Exhortation on synodality. We cannot predict the precise forms of exercising synodality that will result from the work of the Synod begun on October 10, 2021. However, we already know Pope Francis' theological vision of synodality. He has presented it on various occasions. It is rooted in his theology of the people of God.

**Four polarities:** *Evangelii gaudium*, in its richness, includes a chapter on the social dimension of evangelization. In that chapter, the Pope speaks of culture and lists four polarities, each with an element superior to the one before. These polarities are very important to Pope Francis, and he returns to them again and again in his writings and speeches. The first, and perhaps most important for him, is that 'Time is greater than space.' The second is that 'Unity prevails over conflict.' The third is that 'Realities are more important than ideas;' and the last, that 'The Whole is greater than the part, and is also greater than the sum of its parts.'

These polarities, which are of particular relevance to monastic life, structure the encyclicals *Laudato si* and *Fratelli tutti*, just as they structure Francis' thought.

**Time is greater than space:** The first principle invites us to work in the long term, without being obsessed by immediate results. This helps us to bear with patience difficult and adverse situations, and make the changes which respond to the demands of reality.

To give priority to time, explains Francis, is to give priority to the processes of growth. To give priority to space is to try to use human power and self-assertion in a vain attempt to resolve everything in the present moment. In other words, giving a priority to time means developing solutions by involving other people and groups. This requires being open to welcoming the unexpected. It contrasts with pretending that one is able to make an accurate prediction of the future.



Bolton Abbey, Ireland.

**Unity prevails over conflict:** The second polarity is a call to develop communion in the context of differences, respecting them, rather than trying to suppress them. The unity of the common home is based not on uniformity but on the quality of relationships.

**Realities are more important than ideas:** Reality simply is, while an idea is something that is developed. Between the two there must be constant dialogue. Following this principle, for instance, during the Synod on the Family Francis started with a worldwide survey to see what couples were experiencing. Then he asked the Synod what the Gospel had to say about their experience. Several cardinals had asked for the opposite process: beginning with the affirmation of abstract principles on which life should be based. Similarly, before the Synod on Youth, Francis did a worldwide survey to discover the hopes, desires and problems of young people. Then he asked the Synod what the Gospel has to say to these desires and problems.

**The whole is greater than the part:** While we must constantly work on the part that is close to us and that we can reach, we must never lose sight of the whole. As Francis repeats throughout *Laudato sí*, ‘everything is connected’. Dialogue and communion are the soul of the ‘common house’ in which we live and which must protect.

Monastic communities could use these four polarities as a basis for discerning how to build up and renew their life in the present situation as part of the human family. This discernment would lead to reflecting on Francis’ teaching on integral ecology.

### **Integral ecology**

What Francis proposes in his encyclical *Laudato sí*, is not simply the preservation of a few animal or plant species, or the preservation of the quality of life on the planet, or even the preservation of the planet. The proposed goal is nothing less than the creation of a new culture, which presupposes a profound conversion of life. Here we come to the very heart of monastic living.

For Francis, ‘a true ecological approach is always transformed into a social approach, which must integrate justice into discussions on the environment, to listen to the clamour of the earth as well as the clamour of the poor.’

Francis proposes a new culture based on relationship or communion. It therefore implies a ‘relational anthropology’. Relationship is not a means but an end; not a consequence but the primary objective to be pursued. Francis speaks of a ‘cultural revolution’ (*LS* 114). It is a question, he says, of ‘changing the paradigm’ (*LS* 108) or ‘redefining progress’ (*LS* 194). It is to be brought about by what he calls an ‘integral ecology’. This objective corresponds to the very meaning of monastic life, in which the brother or the sister seeks to be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Francis's vision of 'integral ecology' involves harmony between all created beings and between creation and its Creator. It is about the quality of the relationship between people and God, between human beings, between human beings and the animal and plant worlds and the cosmos as a whole. It can be described as a 'culture of relationship' or a 'culture of encounter'.

How does Pope Francis challenge our monastic vision and life? All that has been said above is fundamental for monastic life.

**Tradition:** When any dream is lived by a large community over a period of time, it develops its own culture, which is sometimes called a tradition. It is a shared vision of the goal of life. This shared vision conditions every aspect of our life: how we relate to God and how we relate to one another, how we pray, how we work, how we make decisions, how we enter into harmony with our social and physical environment, how we receive guests, how we celebrate, how we discern, and so on. Francis' teaching throws a new light on all the aspects of our life and requires new answers from us, individually and collectively.

**Desire:** The Greek word 'monachos' was first used to translate the Syriac *ihidaya*, which was the name given to monks in early Syriac monasticism. The *ihidaya* is not one who lives alone, but rather one who has only one goal, only one love, in his or her life and who organises his or her whole existence around this single goal. Therefore, the first characteristic or virtue of the true monk is 'simplicity', the mark of the one who has a unified heart - one whose heart is not divided - and only one love. In a language of the mystics, he is a man of desire. That desire has also been called a utopia. With Francis we may call it a dream. A dream that only the Spirit of God can realize. This can happen only with our collaboration in every aspect of our monastic *conversatio*, and of our ascesis.



Dispensary of the Tutzing sisters in Jinja (Uganda).

## Cultural Revolution

During the first two thousand years of the Christian era, Christian monks were often pioneers in a variety of cultural fields, especially in education. In the Middle Ages, they helped to develop the use of the land, making it possible to feed an increasing population in Europe. In this way, they indirectly helped to change relationships between the social classes.

It has been observed that in the course of history new forms of monastic life have developed in response to the wider cultural changes affecting society. These new forms embodied the changing understanding and hopes of the people of God and humanity as a whole.

It is sometimes said that monasticism is 'counter-cultural'. That this is a myth that going back no further than 1968 is revealed by a study of the evolution of Christian monasticism. Such a study demonstrates that every time there has been a significant development of monastic life there has been a common feature: an

individual or a group of monks were particularly aware of and concerned about their own needs and those of contemporary society. They discovered answers that were valid both for themselves and for the world around them. Therefore, we can say that monks have always responded to the cultural changes of their times.

### **Today's challenge**

The challenge is still there. It is perhaps greater and more far-reaching than ever. The monastic contribution, if we choose to make it, will be born of our life of communion. That is to say through forms of relationship lived in our communities and developed from the centuries-old and diverse tradition of which we are the heirs. The cultural change will take place with or without us. It may lead humanity either to its extermination or to a new and greater depth of life.

### **The people of God**

These reflections of Francis on integral ecology must also be placed in the more general framework of his theological thought, which is rooted in that Argentinian branch of liberation theology that has been called 'Theology of the People'. A careful reading of the writings and statements of the Pope highlights the place held by the 'people of God' whom he calls the 'believing people,' and whom he likes to describe as 'infallibilis in credendo'.

This centrality of the people of God is reflected in Francis' concept of synodality. It is the responsibility of the whole people of God. It precedes the exercise of pastoral authority within the Church. This vision clearly underlies the cultural reform which the 'integral ecology' proposed by Pope Francis calls for. It is undeniable that the concept of culture implies a people. A culture is always the culture of a people. It is born of a collective experience - a collective dream.

In the section of *Evangelii Gaudium* on culture, which is related to *Gaudium et Spes*, Francis explains the important role of culture in the transmission of the Gospel. It is through a culture that has been evangelized, that is, transformed by the Gospel, that the Gospel message is transmitted to other cultures. Within the Church of Christ, monasticism constitutes a subculture, that is, a form of life that embodies and manifests, in a particular way, certain aspects of the Gospel message.

Taking into account this global vision of Pope Francis, we put forward some questions our monastic communities may ask themselves, if they want to be challenged by his most recent encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY REFLECTION AND DISCERNMENT

Francis often speaks of the importance of discernment both in personal life and in community life. It is a matter of reading our situation in the light of the Gospel in order to discern in which direction to channel our efforts of conversion and growth.

### **Discerning our community life in the light of *Evangelii gaudium***

In the light of the four polarities of *Evangelii gaudium* mentioned above, we could ask ourselves:

- 1 - Do we give priority to projects that can assure a better future for our communities, our Church and our society, or do we give too much preference to our institutions, our properties and our work?
- 2 - How do we contribute to unity in the Church? How do we contribute to interreligious dialogue? How do we show respect for minorities in our society?
- 3 - What do we do in our community to discern the needs of the world in which we live? Do we bring to its problems answers rooted in the Gospel message?
- 4 - Is our community inward looking, concerned with its own needs? Does the community take seriously its responsibilities as part of a Congregation, of an Order, of a local Church and of the human family? What are the most significant of these responsibilities?

### **Examining our community life in the light of *Fratelli tutti***

In the first chapter of *Fratelli tutti*, Francis makes an assessment of our present world, listing the dreams that are shattered, but allowing hope to shine through. The following chapters develop how that hope can be fostered.



Monastic Formators' Programme, 2017.

## I - Facing the shadows of a closed world

Today, in many countries, hyperbole, extremism and polarization have become political tools. By employing a strategy of ridicule, suspicion and relentless criticism, in a variety of ways one denies the right of others to exist or to have an opinion. (FT 15)

Some parts of our human family, it appears, can be readily sacrificed for the sake of others considered worthy of a carefree existence. (FT 18)

I invite everyone to renewed hope, for hope 'speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning.' (FT 55)

Q. - Is our *lectio divina* simply an exercise (individual or collective)?  
Do we let the Word of God reveal the quality of our common life and our community dreams?

Q. - In a society in crisis and afflicted by many forms of marginalization and inequality, are we aware that we are among the privileged?

Q. - What gives us real hope in and for ourselves? Similarly, where do we find hope in and for our brothers and sisters world-wide?

## II - Facing the stranger on the way

In today's world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia. (*FT 30*)

In this world that races ahead, yet lacks a shared roadmap, we increasingly sense that 'the gap between concern for one's personal well-being and the prosperity of the larger human family seems to be stretching to the point of complete division between individuals and human community...' (*FT 31*)

'Migrations, more than ever before, will play a pivotal role in the future of our world'. At present, however, migration is affected by the 'loss of that sense of responsibility for our brothers and sisters on which every civil society is based'. (*FT 40*)

Q. - How do we express our responsibility towards the marginalised in our society?

Q. - Are there marginalised members in our communities? How do we treat them?

Q.- Does our community make any practical response to the refugee crisis?

## III - Thinking and managing an open world

Nor can I reduce my life to relationships with a small group, even my own family; I cannot know

myself apart from a broader network of relationships [...] Our relationships, if healthy and authentic, open us to others who expand and enrich us. (FT 89)

Love also impels us towards universal communion. No one can mature or find fulfilment by withdrawing from others. (FT 95)

Every human being has the right to live with dignity and to develop integrally; this fundamental right cannot be denied by any country. (FT 107)

Q.- Our communities have increasingly international membership and/or belong to an international congregation or order. This potentially can be very fruitful. Do we take advantage of the richness of this situation?

Q. - Do we have a heartfelt response in love to some of the problems of our time which goes beyond our own geographical and cultural boundaries?

Q. - What do we defend the God-given rights of others, including those in our own communities?

#### IV - A heart open to the world

The arrival of those who are different, coming from other ways of life and cultures, can be a gift. (FT 133)

Seeing ourselves from the perspective of another, of one who is different, we can better recognize our own unique features and those of our culture: its richness, its possibilities and its limitations. (FT 147)

In fact, a healthy openness never threatens one's own identity. A living culture, enriched by



elements from other places, does not import a mere carbon copy of those new elements, but integrates them in its own unique way. (*FT* 148)

Q. - Do we relate as neighbours, after the example of the Good Samaritan, to the people who surround our monasteries, to those who visit them or come to them for help?

Q. - Do we promote, in our locality, a culture of encounter?

Q.- How does our response to local needs correspond to our dreams for the universal Church and the world?

### V - Political and economic systems

Recognizing that all people are our brothers and sisters, and seeking forms of social friendship that include everyone, is not merely utopian. It demands a decisive commitment to devising effective means to this end. Any effort along these lines becomes a noble exercise of charity. (*FT* 180)

Social charity makes us love the common good, it makes us effectively seek the good of all people, considered not only as individuals or private persons, but also in the social dimension that unites them. (FT 182)

Q. - Many of our monasteries are in countries where human rights are violated. How do we support the victims of human rights' abuse? Do we see ourselves as having a responsibility to these people wherever we live?

Q. - If we live under an oppressive system, do we share our life in communion with its victims?

Q. - If we are fortunate enough to live where the rule of law prevails, are we aware of our responsibility to work for those who do not?

## VI - Dialogue and social friendship

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. (FT 216)

Kindness frees us from the cruelty that at times infects human relationships [...] Kindness ought to be cultivated; it is no superficial bourgeois virtue. Precisely because it entails esteem and respect for others, once kindness becomes a culture within society. (FT 224)

Q. - Is dialogue a key part of our monastic life? Within the community? With those outside it?

Q. - Do we strive to develop a culture of consensus-building in our community and with the world through our encounters?

## VII - Pathways to renewal

There is also a need for peacemakers, men and women prepared to work boldly and creatively to initiate processes of healing and renewed encounter. *(FT 225)*

Truth, in fact, is an inseparable companion of justice and mercy. All three together are essential to building peace. *(FT 227)*

Working to overcome our divisions without losing our identity as individuals presumes that a basic sense of belonging is present in everyone. *(FT 230)*

Q. - Do we live in the Truth or do we seek refuge in our own versions of truth?

Q. - How do we deal, individually and collectively, with conflicts, large and small?

Q. - What are we doing to bring about and develop a culture of forgiveness within us and around us?

## VIII - At the service of fraternity in our world

Yet we Christians are very much aware that 'if the music of the Gospel ceases to resonate in our very being, we will lose the joy born of compassion, the tender love born of trust, the capacity for reconciliation that has its source in our knowledge that we have been forgiven and sent forth.' *(FT 277)*

Each one of us is called to be an artisan of peace, by uniting and not dividing, by extinguishing hatred and not holding on to it, by opening paths of dialogue and not by constructing new walls. *(FT 284)*

In the name of God [...] we declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual



São Paulo São Geraldo, Brazil.

cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.  
(*FT 285*)

Q. - Are we attentive to the image of the Gospel that we give to society around us through our way of life?

Q. - Did we reflect on what Pope Francis' call to go to the peripheries means for a monastic community?

Q. - What is our community's contribution to the interreligious dialogue and to the dialogue with every person of good will even not belonging to any religion?

## Postscript

Our time is not lacking in witnesses who have responded in their lives to the Gospel's call to universal brotherhood. Pope Francis names several of them. Let us be inspired by what he says, in the conclusion of his encyclical, about one of them, who will soon be canonised, Charles de Foucauld:

Blessed Charles directed his ideal of total surrender to God towards an identification with the poor, abandoned in the depths of the African desert. In that setting, he expressed his desire to feel himself a brother to every human being, and asked a friend to 'pray to God that I truly be the brother of all'. He wanted to be, in the end, 'the universal brother'. Yet only by identifying with the least did he come at last to be the brother of all. May God inspire that dream in each one of us. Amen.



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