

Echoing the teaching of Jesus himself, Pope Francis urges all of us to look to the needs of others and to set aside indifference and hostility. ‘Each day we have to decide whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders’ (69). –Bishop John Folda

## **Fraternal love**

These last months have been unnerving. We continue to experience the ongoing health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. The wounds of racism have come to the surface in many ways throughout our country. And the recent election season has shown how polarized and rancorous our political culture has become in the United States. But in a timely encyclical letter, Pope Francis has invited the world to overcome its growing divisions and to promote fraternity by putting love for others ahead of personal interests. The letter is titled *Fratelli tutti*, the text’s opening phrase, which means “All brothers” in Italian. The words are taken from the writings of St. Francis of Assisi, whom the Pope describes as the “saint of fraternal love.”

The Holy Father gives us a meditation on the parable of the Good Samaritan, and offers the Samaritan as a model for selfless love and fraternity, in contrast to those who passed by a man in need without stopping to help. Echoing the teaching of Jesus himself, Pope Francis urges all of us to look to the needs of others and to set aside indifference and hostility. “Each day we have to decide whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders” (69). Following the example of the Samaritan, we become the neighbor that Jesus calls us to be, one who reaches out in love and compassion.

For eight months now, our local communities and our world have been afflicted by the coronavirus. Millions have become ill and many have died. Many more millions have seen their lives turned upside down. Throughout these months, Pope Francis has often appealed to our sense of solidarity with each another, an awareness that we need one another to overcome the darkness of this health crisis. The pandemic has led to lockdowns and quarantines, but the Holy Father urges us to reach out in fraternal love, defeating the isolation that so many have felt in these difficult months. Many of you will recall the dramatic scene last March when Pope Francis stood alone in a darkened St. Peter’s Square, praying and calling on all people to turn once again to God for salvation. The pandemic reminds us of our need for God and of our need for each other. As we see the number of local cases continue to rise, we too are reminded of the importance of fraternal love. A simple precautionary act like wearing a mask, which none of us likes, might give some additional protection to a neighbor, or might make it possible for those who are vulnerable to return to Mass. A phone call or a care package for an elderly neighbor can overcome isolation and loneliness. Small acts of fraternal love, like the acts of the Good Samaritan, can make a big difference in a time like this.

The protests of last summer brought the sin of racism and indiscriminate violence to public consciousness once again. Pope Francis describes racism as a kind of virus that demeans our brothers and sisters in the human family and causes sickness in our society and our culture. There’s no doubt that racism exists, and we as followers of Christ must prevent it from gaining a foothold among us. Too often, though, the word “racist” is thrown around in such a way that its seriousness is diminished, or it is used as a pretext for violent actions and other agendas. Racism is real, and the antidote is the fraternal love that Jesus teaches in the Gospel. The Good Samaritan was an unclean foreigner to the Jews of Jesus’ time, and yet he is the one who looked beyond race and tended the wounds of the man on the road. Jesus seems to be telling us that there is no place for racism in his Kingdom. The Church is catholic, or universal, and has always included people of many different races, so racism should have no place in our lives as followers of Jesus. Fraternal love looks beyond the differences of race and sees only a brother or sister.

Most of us would agree that the election season that just concluded was divisive and harsh. Our nation is deeply polarized, and I’m convinced that the principal reason for this corrosive atmosphere is our failure as a nation to recognize the sacredness of every human life. The unborn, the ill, and the elderly have become part of the throwaway culture described by Pope Francis, and the sanctity of life is dismissed in the name of freedom, choice, and privacy. But these are all empty fronts if life itself is so easily discarded. A political culture that trades away life for power is very distant from the fraternal ideals

of our founders, and even more distant from the teachings of Jesus. It seems that the only way to redeem our national culture is through a culture of life and the fraternal love that Jesus taught. As Catholics, we are called to see beyond politics and to recognize the dignity of every human person, no matter how small or helpless. We must be a leaven for good, willing to give witness and to win over others to the cause of life. The Gospel is greater than politics, and fraternal love can change what politics can't.

All these challenges—pandemic, racism, violence, political division, and others—might seem insurmountable from a human point of view. But the followers of Christ are not limited by earthly means. Jesus gives us the grace to overcome every obstacle with fraternal love, the willingness to be a Good Samaritan to others. The saints have been changing the world through the Spirit of the Gospel and love of neighbor since the time of Christ, and now we must do the same.