

## A Heart Open to the Whole World

In chapter four of his encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis addresses very specific, modern issues under the heading: "A Heart Open to the Whole World", not the least of these being the plight of refugees and exiles. What we do about these issues is what makes us actors in the parable of the good Samaritan – either the pseudo religious people who pass by on the other side of the road, or the strangers who become brothers and sisters to those in need.

Well, if that was already the teaching of the Gospel, we can hardly be surprised. Rather, what surprises, is how we ever came to imagine that the gospel required us to turn away "from the world?" This reflection is about the journey back, and how that happened for some of us.

Our propensity to imagine material creation is somehow bad is as old as the human race. It shows up in the idea that salvation means exiting from "this world", and in ascetic practices based on wrong reasons for detaching from "the world". These negative attitudes towards material creation matter greatly because sooner or later they affect our attitudes to people. Christians have even tried to make a disjunction between Jesus and material creation. Elizabeth Johnson is not exaggerating when she says: "There has been heresy after heresy in the history of the Church which has denied the genuine humanity of God in the incarnation: there was no real human body, nor real soul, nor real human will, nor real human nature. It is as though God and humanity are somehow opposed to each other, or in competition with each other, so that a choice has to be made for one or the other." (*Consider Jesus*, 28).

If choosing God seemed to require distancing God from human nature even in regard to Jesus, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that at least one nation in Europe has used its Christian faith as justification for closing its borders to desperate migrants.

For many of us, the need to re-learn our faith involved the need for some un-learning. For this I do not blame our earliest teachers in the faith, who mostly were given no formation for their task. But nor do I regret the passing of an era which, although it bred great saints, also carried the virus of Jansenism with its impression that in order to honour God and grow in holiness we needed to put human nature down. Fortunately, these put-downs of human nature never became part of the Church's official teaching, nor even the teaching of its best theologians.

Against that background, stunning insights awaited us. We learned from Pope Paul VI that we are to love the world as we love our own bodies; from Karl Rahner, that "love for God and love for the world are in direct, not inverse, proportion"; from Chenu, Congar and other great French theologians that God has called us to be co-workers in the gradual organization of a universe in which we are meant to be "its demiurges and its conscience". And it was during the enthusiastic lectures of Bernard Haring that I first heard of "Schema XVII" which eventually became the Council's document that opened with the famous lines: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."

We have come a long way. The vocation of every Christian is to bring to bear on all areas of life what our faith teaches concerning human dignity and the meaning of life; to accept the personal costs of doing so - cogently spelled out by Joan Chittister, (*The Time is Now*), and to be accountable in all the ways that citizens should be.

Often, what we learned subconsciously was harder to reach and remove than what we more consciously learned. Yet it is surely a sign of human nature's innate goodness that when the opportunity for better understanding came to us, we recognized its truth. It was as if we already knew the truth pre-consciously, and re-knew it when it was articulated for us. That was liberating, and became the sure-footing on which we could step out to embrace "the world".

Pope St John Paul II had already taught (World Peace Day, 2000) that nothing will change until we literally see each other as one family, brothers and sisters of all. Francis has been teaching that *everything* is connected (Laudato Si), and that *everyone* is connected (Fratelli Tutti). Devastating damage to the planet has taught us – what indigenous people always knew – that the spiritual, cultural, ethical, social, political, economic and ecological are inter-dependent. A post-Corvid "new order" will not be new so long as we continue to disregard their inter-dependence.

To open ourselves to all reality – to accept truth from whatever source and whatever the consequences - is how faith is different from ideology. Faith is open-ended; not limited to what can be reasonably expected. Ideology is agenda driven, which is why it can so blatantly turn a blind eye to what does not fit the agenda or match the slogan, limiting one's engagement with the world. Of course, Christians can be, and have been, guilty of this too.

The most spectacular manifestations of ideology today are those that involve disregard for the sciences, whether it is medical science's reasons for taking precautions against the spread of coronavirus, or what the sciences tell us concerning the status of a newly conceived human being, or what doctors and lawyers recommend for the protection of children suffering gender dysphoria etc. At some point, the difference between true and false no longer matters; say what you like to get what you want. Demagoguery still works. And it is counter-human, because only truth can set us free. And only the truly free can reach out to love the world and work for its enhancement.

Christian asceticism is about becoming gradually more free. The case for ascetic practices and detachment is not premised on any part of creation being bad, but on the premise that "this present age" is passing. We can be "deceived" and allured into treating creation's present forms as something they are not. To counter that contamination, we practise "letting go".

Every involvement which helps to make the world a better place is a way of letting go of what was less. Growth in holiness does not run in parallel with this involvement, but in and through it. This asceticism embraces creation.

The everlasting worthwhileness of all creation, and the transitoriness of its present forms, are both affirmed in that same document of the Council: "All the good fruits of human nature, and all the good fruits of human enterprise, we shall find again, cleansed and transfigured." (GS 39) But that final transformation will be all God's doing, and gift. That is what Hearts Open to the World open themselves to.