

# Pope Francis' encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*

*Putting a human face on Catholic doctrine*

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**D**ear Father Kerper: For many years, I turned to the popes for guidance about matters of faith and morals. All of them, from Pius XII through Benedict XVI, taught clearly. Pope Francis, however, seems uninterested in doctrine and more concerned with secular issues like global warming, immigration and other such things. Doctrine and spiritual matters are the most important things in the Church. Why has the pope neglected to teach doctrine?

Like you, many good Catholics find Pope Francis very different from other popes they've known. As you note, he rarely speaks directly about Catholic doctrines such as classical explanations of the Eucharist, various types of grace and distinctions among sins.

This should not surprise us. After all, the reign of each pope coincides with a unique set of events, some very troublesome and unexpected. Moreover, each pope has a distinctive personality and biography. These shape his ways of communicating, governing and even worshipping.

As for Pope Francis, he became Bishop of Rome following the surprising resignation of Pope Benedict XVI and during an era of globalization, terrorism, new forms of endless warfare, increased secularization and the transformation of the Catholic Church into a vast community of mostly poor people.

In response to these trends, the Holy Father has shifted from an exclusive focus on the Mystery of God to the Mystery of the Human Person. We need this double

focus because divine revelation pertains to God and Humanity.

The Holy Father's passionate attention to supposedly secular issues does not set aside doctrinal and spiritual concerns. On the contrary, long-standing doctrine undergirds everything he says.

We find a heavy dose of standard doctrine within the Holy Father's most recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* (On Fraternity and Social Friendship). Three closely connected doctrines command special attention.

### Doctrine 1: The basic unity of the human race

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states this doctrine clearly: "The dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God...The divine image is present in every human person." (CCC 1700, 1702)

This doctrine, deeply rooted in the biblical story of creation, is rarely rejected in word. Many people, however, dismiss it by their deeds. These include new forms of nationalism that assert the "natural

superiority" of some people over others; abandoning "inefficient" or unhealthy people to euthanasia; neglecting refugees and poor immigrants; and — worst of all — killing unwanted infants and the unborn. Acts like these divide the human race into self-contained sectors, some "worthy of life" and others "less than human."

Rather than simply condemn these sins, Pope Francis has often physically consoled and touched their victims, thereby making human suffering shockingly visible.

Soon after becoming pope, he visited Lampedusa, a tiny island in the Mediterranean Sea, where he prayed for migrants who drowned while trying to reach Europe. On Holy Thursday, he washed the feet of a young Muslim woman in a Roman jail. In many cases, he has embraced and defended non-Christians, demonstrating that people of different religions are indeed brothers and sisters, united through the fatherhood of God.

### Doctrine 2: Promotion of the common good

The Holy Father has raised up the classical Catholic doctrine of the common good, including Catholic teaching about property.

Concern for the common good has diminished greatly in recent years as many people, even devout Catholics, tilt toward extreme forms of individualism.

In response to this trend, the Holy Father has sought to restore the proper balance between individual freedom and care for the entire human community.

This rebalancing also applies to property. Here Pope Francis cited two encyclicals by Pope St. John Paul II — *Centesimus Annus* (1991) and *Laborem Exercens* (1981). In the first, the long-reigning pope wrote: "God gave the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring anyone." In the second, he referred to the "common use of created goods" as "the first principle of the whole ethical and social order."

This retrieval of genuine Catholic teaching about property explains the Holy Father's "Franciscan concern" for the environment and his criticism of "consumerism," especially the coexistence of hyper-abundance with extreme poverty.

### Doctrine 3: The social nature of the human person

As many people become increasingly isolated and alone, whether voluntarily or not, Pope Francis has repeated the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "The human person needs to live in society. Society is not for him an extraneous addition but a requirement." In simple terms, "People need people."

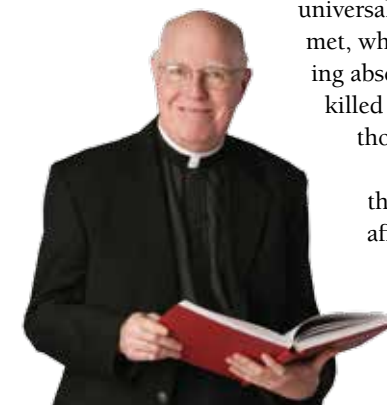
Like the other two doctrines, this one has deep roots in sacred Scripture. God created Adam as a unique individual, but almost immediately drew him into a micro-community with Eve. All subsequent human beings emerged from fathers and mothers, never alone. And Jesus, though uniquely the Son of God, opted to spread the Good News socially, drawing to himself apostles and disciples as coworkers.

He did this to make it clear that the Gospel is primarily a communal way of life. In other words, we learn the essential truths about God and humanity by observing God's loving work in and with human beings, not through the mastery of doctrine.

As to your question, I hope you can see that Pope Francis has not neglected doctrine at all. For sure, his way of communicating differs from previous popes, but his message remains fully Catholic. How could it be otherwise? He's the successor of Peter.

At the end of *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis placed an "icon" of a holy man who transmitted doctrine in a non-doctrinal way — Father Charles de Foucauld.

This obscure and poor French priest spent his entire priestly life living among Muslims in Algeria. He rarely preached. He



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baptized only one person in his entire life. His sole purpose was to become "the universal brother" to everyone he met, whether French soldiers seeking absolution or a few locals who killed him in 1916 because they thought he was a spy.

Charles perfectly lived out the three doctrines repeatedly affirmed by Pope Francis. Perhaps few people who knew Father Charles could recite the doctrines he taught; but surely they had seen them "in the flesh." And that's what matters most. ■

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