

Talking Cents

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Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by Mary Betz, Catholic spiritual director and writer on ecology, justice, scripture and spirituality.

Moving on from 2020 through the lens of *Fratelli tutti*

There is no doubt that 2020 will be remembered in history around the world for the devastation wrought by the novel corona virus, Covid-19. The challenge to individual health became, early on, a consequent threat to health systems around the world when Covid-19 became a pandemic, one made criminally worse by some world leaders who refused to acknowledge it and declined to contain it.

In many countries, debate about how to deal with the pandemic boiled down to short-term economics; lockdowns threatened jobs, the viability of small businesses and the profits of big business. Not far beneath the debate ran the undercurrent for politicians: 'If I shut down the country to save lives – most at risk are the elderly and most vulnerable health-wise – the country will move into my job could be at stake.'

While there is a legitimate place for arguing the merits of various kinds of pandemic control, hardly trying at all is an unethical solution which puts economics (personal and state) above the health and the longer-term economic and social well-being of citizens. Pope Francis, in his recent encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, echoes these concerns from his 2013 *Laudato Si'*, that we have created a 'throwaway' world in which 'persons are no longer seen as of paramount value to be cared for and respected.'¹

Indeed, disproportionate health effects from Covid-19 have been documented worldwide for senior citizens and the already health-compromised, and for the poor and racial/ethnic minority groups.² It was precisely to protect

vulnerable groups that New Zealand moved early to stem the spread of the virus, and that governments here and in the Pacific have maintained closed borders.

The ideology – or idolatry – of the economy as supreme determiner of public policy is held sacrosanct by some leaders, who seek to 'dominate and control' people's hearts and minds by feeding 'extremism and polarisation', not to mention 'ridicule, suspicion and relentless criticism'³ of scientific professionals who offer meaningful solutions for both human and earth health.

Freedom, in some people's minds, has come to mean individual freedom not only to mix without social distancing or masks, but to assault (verbally or physically) people of colour who march for equal rights, to promote white supremacy, to attack (online or in person) – or spread innuendo about – people criticise them, and to invent and promote bizarre and dangerous conspiracy theories about those of opposite political persuasions.

Polarisation is thus stoked and truth is twisted on many fronts in a deliberate propaganda⁴ effort to maintain the so-called leader of the free world in his position. This includes misinformation on climate change, pandemic and political rivals, widespread fake news about voter fraud, and promotion of conspiracy theories. Post-election in the USA, the transparent quest to retain power threatens to completely undermine democracy and expose the country to violence. We can only pray for a peaceful transition.

¹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti* (18).

² <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25916>

³ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti* (15).

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/26/us-election-voter-fraud-mail-in->

[ballots](https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/10/08/government-communication-propaganda-427290)

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/10/08/government-communication-propaganda-427290>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/08/trumps-rnc-was-loaded-disinformation/615838/>

In *Fratelli tutti*,⁵ Pope Francis speaks of ‘cultural colonisation’, in which our economic and personal freedoms are driven by ‘limitless consumption and expressions of empty individualism’, with any understanding of a common good trodden underfoot. Without such a fundamental communal ethic, the populace loses its moral compass.

Quoting Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez,⁶ Pope Francis warns that ‘either from a craze to mimic others or to foment violence, or from unpardonable negligence or apathy, [people] allow others to rob their very soul, [and] end up losing not only their spiritual identity but also their moral consistency and, in the end, their intellectual, economic and political independence.’

Thankfully, Aotearoa has retained considerably more respect for its people, the truth and ordinary democratic processes. But the constant reminder from across the Pacific is how easily a country can lose its soul, descending into confusion, election chaos and health crisis due to the utter misuse of power.

One year (in the 1960s), a banner above my primary school room chalkboard read, ‘Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Freedom’. It was a warning I didn’t understand until many years later. I was reminded of it in the gospel for the first Sunday of Advent: ‘Be on your guard, stay awake, because you never know when the time will come ... you must not be found asleep.’

This caution is true for freedom and democratic principles, but also the principles we live by as followers of Jesus – truth, compassion, justice, love and peace. It is true for the principles of Catholic social teaching which are based on those in the gospels, such as human dignity, the common good, solidarity, the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, and the universal destination of the world’s goods.

Pope Francis reminds us: ‘Goodness, together with love, justice and solidarity, are not achieved once and for all; they have to be realised each day. It is not possible to settle for what was achieved in the past and complacently

enjoy it, as if we could somehow disregard the fact that many of our brothers and sisters still endure situations that cry out for our attention.’⁷

If we in Aotearoa are to truly work for the common good, Māori and Pākehā must form a genuine partnership toward transformative change. We have elected a Government whose social justice values⁸ read much like Catholic social teaching, with their emphasis on the greater good, equal opportunities and outcomes, and care for the vulnerable. Yet the need for our vigilance and wakefulness is crucial, for to embody the Government’s espoused values – and those of the Gospel – issues around Te Tiriti, housing, climate change, prison reform, health care (mental, physical and dental), child and family poverty, beneficiaries, inequality, refugees, trade and overall economic policy need a reformed bicultural analysis and courageous action.

Fratelli tutti reminds us that individual rights to pursue wealth and market freedom do not supersede ‘the rights of peoples and the dignity of the poor, or, for that matter, respect for the natural environment, for if we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all.’⁹ Pope Francis further suggests that ‘business abilities, which are a gift from God, should always be clearly directed to the development of others and to eliminating poverty, especially through the creation of diversified work opportunities.’¹⁰ A worthy aspiration for business – and all of society.

Fratelli tutti challenges us to emerge from ‘comfortable isolation’ and ‘cultural sclerosis’¹¹ into the wider world of neighbours here and afar, to befriend those different from us and discover their gifts. For Pope Francis, ‘love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political.’¹²

As we embrace our political responsibilities, through and after the pandemic, may our focus also be on the personal. May we make friends who are different from us, learn the wisdom of vigilance, yearn for ‘goodness, ... and desire to fill the lives of others with what is beautiful, sublime and edifying.’¹³

⁵ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti* (13, 14).

⁶ Ibid (14) *Homily at the Te Deum*, Santiago de Chile, 1974.

⁷ Ibid (8).

⁸ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ah2xIM0-qzemx76LP-dtmzQulahU7UO/view>

⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti* (122).

¹⁰ Ibid (123).

¹¹ Ibid (68, 134).

¹² Ibid (181).

¹³ Ibid (112).