



Social Justice Week 2021 September 12-18

Statement from the Catholic Bishops of Aotearoa New Zealand

A Culture of Encounter – a call to social friendship as a single human family

In Aotearoa New Zealand, along with many other parts of the world, we are seeing the rise of racism including the violent mosque attacks in Christchurch. Debates about historic injustices and enduring economic inequalities are often marked with bitter vitriolic commentary.

We find it increasingly difficult to have informed public debates about new challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic in the midst of the misinformation which quickly spreads in the digital world. It can be tempting in the face of such difficult questions to withdraw from others, or to restrict our engagement only to people who share our own views, especially when public discussion is confrontational, angry and even abusive. However, Pope Francis reminds us that “isolation and withdrawal into one’s own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal. Rather it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter.” (*Fratelli Tutti* 30).

In his recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* (literally *Brothers and Sisters All*), Pope Francis points out the irony of our world becoming more and more connected through technology while also becoming more distant in our personal relationships and neighbourhoods. Face to face communication, *kanohi ki te kanohi*, is foundational for enduring relationships between neighbours, friends and *whānau*. With more time spent on social media without authentic connections, people become increasingly isolated, lonely and less resilient. Pope Francis says “no one can face life in isolation... we need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead.” (*FT* 8). Francis calls for a closeness marked by *manaakitanga* – hospitality, reciprocity and social friendship.

The Pope’s reflections in *Fratelli Tutti* are not new in our tradition of Catholic social teaching or our Gospel values. In 1931, Pope Pius XI, reflecting on the first social encyclical, Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, introduced the concept of ‘social charity.’ In his papacy St John Paul II developed an understanding of ‘solidarity’. Now in, his time, Pope Francis describes a need for ‘social friendship’. The term ‘friendship’ calls to mind something mutual and warm which feels less distant, conceptual or philosophical. Francis’ shift in language sheds light on our

principles of human dignity, common good, promotion of peace and solidarity using a different tone of voice. He appeals to our hearts just as much as our heads.

Fratelli Tutti also challenges us all to be true ‘people of dialogue’ – to cooperate in building 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 283).

In the same way *Fratelli Tutti* has a strong emphasis on human dignity, the Beatitudes offer a biblical lens for viewing encounter and community. As such they provide a guide for us to uphold the dignity of all, to name actions and Christian characteristics that help us to foster that culture of encounter for our global family.

Overcoming division and working towards peace are crucial in working toward a culture of encounter. This Social Justice Week let us be challenged by *Fratelli Tutti* to live as people of encounter with hearts that are open to bringing the joy and love of Christ to everyone we meet. The desire of Blessed Charles de Foucauld to “feel himself a brother to every human being” inspired Pope Francis. “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.” (FT 287).

Signed

- ✠ John Dew, Cardinal Archbishop of Wellington, Apostolic Administrator of Palmerston North and NZCBC President
- ✠ Stephen Lowe, Bishop of Hamilton and NZCBC Secretary
- ✠ Michael Dooley, Bishop of Dunedin
- ✠ Patrick Dunn, Bishop of Auckland
- ✠ Michael Gielen, Auxiliary Bishop of Auckland
- ✠ Paul Martin SM, Coadjutor Archbishop of Wellington and Apostolic Administrator of Christchurch.