

OPEN LETTER

The UN celebrates on February 4 the "International Day of Human Fraternity".

On this occasion Pax Christi Flanders and the Centre for Peace Ethics KU Leuven presents a statement for reflection.

Inspiration is found in the joint declaration on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" signed by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb and Pope Francis in Abu Dhabi on February 4, 2019 and in Pope Francis' encyclicals "Laudato Si" (2015) and "Fratelli tutti" signed at Assisi on October 3, 2020.



“FRATERNITY, EQUALITY, LIBERTY”

It is time for recalibration and broadening!

In these times of contradictions, conflicts and disasters that divide people, it is high time to recalibrate and expand the ideal of the French Revolution "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" based on new experiences and insights.

European society has devoted so much effort to the (justifiable) struggle for freedom and equality as emancipation, that the great and inspiring ideal of fraternity has been put too much on the back burner.

Is it not high time to reverse the revolutionary trio and present fraternity as an embedding for equality and freedom?

'Fraternity', and today equally 'sisterhood', refers to a deep communion with everyone and everything, which precedes all our engagements and commitments. As human beings, we are given to each other and depend on each other as being responsible for each other. 'Face-à-face' we turn towards each other for encounter and dialogue. We exist in and from a wondrous kinship that transcends any birth, origin, context, gender and sex, race and skin color. The awareness of this interpersonal connectedness inspires the commitment to everything that contributes to true human coexistence, being at peace with each other and having great respect for the earth that bears us. Through our connection to the cosmos, our responsibility takes on a truly universal dimension. We realize that selfishness and violence are not the only things that human beings are capable of: things can also be different. Committing to brotherhood and sisterhood means actively cultivating compassion from person to person, from person to nature. In this universal connection, believers in many traditions discover the signature of the One, Eternal and Merciful, through which people are sisters and brothers to one another and live connected to "sister, mother earth" (Francis of Assisi), to the cosmos and all fellow creatures, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

From this connectedness, the equality between people acquires a meaning which is not based on the preference for the other as an 'alter ego', in whom I would recognize myself as in a mirror thanks to similarities and characteristics. It is about a radical equality that, beyond 'recognition', acknowledges, respects and embraces the unique otherness of each person. This founding form of justice, also creates space to do appropriate justice to the otherness of all creatures, animals and plants and cosmic nature.

This equality is part of our human condition.
It appeals to a never-ending ethical pursuit
of just and peaceful coexistence
in solidarity with and care for creation,
realizing that our generation has inherited everything from previous generations
but must itself make efforts for future generations.

Universal connectedness also creates space for freedom,
more specifically for a qualified freedom,
which expresses itself not only in "fundamental freedoms"
but also in commitment to the rights of every other
and to everything else that is defenceless and vulnerable.
No mere individual freedom that determines "who is my brother or sister".
No freedom from the arbitrary or unbridled and disrespectful self-expression.
No "radical individualism that gives free rein to our ambitions"
at the expense of the common good (*Fratelli tutti*, no. 105).
Without denying the value of negative freedom
as the absence of external coercion and discrimination,
as a form of freedom that ends where the freedom of the other begins,
there is a greater need than ever for positive and relational freedom
that takes responsibility not only for the unfolding of one's own life,
but also for the lives of others, today and tomorrow,
and for the otherness of the cosmos, nature and environment to which we belong.

Is the ideal of universal connectedness too great?
Freedom and equality are mainly about the rights of the individual
while fraternity emphasizes community and solidarity
and that which connects us beyond all boundaries.
We are faced with the challenge of (re)discovering fraternity
in order to revitalize the power and dynamics of equality and freedom.
This also presents an opportunity and vocation for religious traditions
to see it as an essential mission to establish community
and care for the common good and for creation.

It is therefore our firm conviction that the non-violent and peaceful
"brotherly and sisterly" encounter between religions and philosophies of life
creates a necessary condition for giving shape
to the multifaceted universal connectedness as a gift and promise!

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