

# Europe's "Neonationalism" Read Through the Lens of *Fratelli tutti*: A Call to Move from Fear to Fraternity\*

Ellen Van Stichel

Thank you for including me in this seminar. However, I really regret not being able to join you in person on this occasion, due to other responsibilities.

What I want to talk to you about is the challenge we face in Europe in general, and also in your country as well as in mine in particular, namely the challenge of so-called 'neonationalism' or 'populism' and how to respond to it from a Christian/Catholic point of view.

As I read through Mr. Yuriy Tykhovlis' presentation, I realized we are actually on the same page: A lot of what I will be saying will resonate with what he spoke about, in relation to the issue and challenge of migration. So you could say that my presentation is sketching more the background questions and framework, maybe a bit more abstract as well, while his thoughts apply to a concrete and practical challenge, namely migration.

In between the lines, you could see two responses to the challenges of migration: either we close ourselves off, close our borders and hearts in order to protect ourselves, our welfare, our culture – what populist parties on the right tend to focus on; or we open ourselves, our borders and welcome the stranger – grounded in a universal brother- and sisterhood. It is not only a question our politicians have to answer. Indeed all of us have to. And my argument is that while some Christians, also Catholics, tend to go for the first option, support the tendency to close ourselves off, out of fear of losing our identity and life as we know it, I think that with *Fratelli tutti* the pope offers a different, indeed contrasting response. That is what I will try to show here.

The sociologist José Casanova holds that the European Union has "forgotten the spiritual-religious sources of the European project." The last two decades, the EU has struggled to achieve explicit and implicit consensus on its identity, with a consequent lack of a common vision and project, and internal and external solidarity. As a significant moment, one can refer to the disagreement on the preamble of the new European Constitution in 2004, which included the question of whether or how it should mention its Christian roots and its subsequent rejection of the document by referenda in the Netherlands and France. Tendencies of what I call 'desolidarization' within the EU increased due to the 2007–8 financial crisis, when several of the wealthier, more financially cautious countries had to bail out countries such as Spain, Greece, Italy, and Ireland. A few years later, the migrant-refugee crisis of 2015 fueled "anti-immigrant nativist populism," especially in France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, Hungary, and Poland (as well as in Belgium, as the latest national elections indicate).

The political discourse consequently shifted from an anti-migrant one to an openly ‘anti-European’ rhetoric, as “rightwing populist parties were turning against the very project of the European Union blaming their national establishments and European technocrats for the crisis.” The process appears to have culminated in Brexit, causing anxiety among European elites that other nations will follow the UK’s example. At the same time, Casanova points out, Europe is facing this neonationalism in a global age, which is characterized by the decline of Europe and the West as hegemonic power centers that can control the processes of globalization.

Within this context, some neonationalist politicians increasingly refer to Europe’s “Christian heritage”, as is evident in the discourse of the Alternative for Germany, the Freedom Party of Austria, and—closer to home for me—Vlaams Belang in Belgium. This rhetoric tries to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, especially targeting Muslim immigrants who are conceived as a threat. Non-Christians are considered as non-European. Religion is used as an identity marker, and a tool for exclusion.

Not only politicians but also some Christian communities themselves—both within and outside the Catholic Church—support and feed this view and create alliances along those lines. Also some Catholics are attracted by the horizontal distinction between “us” and “them,” in which an “imagined homogenous people distinguishes itself from all foreign others, often also claiming its own superiority.” As fear and anger are the driving forces behind populism, religion is an easy ally: “Religion is one of the oldest means to respond to human fears,” Palaver notes. Hence the question: how does Catholicism as a religion respond to fear? For this will determine whether it will support neonationalism or not.

And as already mentioned, I will discuss what Francis’ response is. On the one hand Pope Francis is not unaware of the underlying dynamics that lead people to become exclusivist rather than embrace inclusion, as is shown by his recognition that fear and resentment play. But his response is different.

### ***FT* Complements Francis’s Emphasis on “Indifference,” with an Additional Focus on Fear**

From the beginning of his pontificate, Francis has been able to relate to what moves and affects people’s minds, bodies, and hearts; what makes them thrive and what hinders them; and what motivates and discourages them, as evidenced by his speeches and symbolic gestures. Francis is aware of and taps into emotions and motivations—the former literally means “to move people out” (stemming from the Latin *e-movere*)—first, with his examination of indifference, and in his latest encyclical, with his complementary focus on fear. Francis’s visit to Lampedusa in July 2013 was remarkable and fitting. The symbolic value of the location itself is noteworthy: Choosing it for his visit brought a silent and hidden humanitarian tragedy at the borders of the EU to international attention, several years before the refugee crisis would erupt in earnest. Moreover, this visit set an example, as it embodied his call to go to the peripheries, and to move beyond our indifference.

In his latest encyclical, Francis's analysis is enriched by a deeper awareness of fear and anxiety. He reads the "signs of the times" through the lens of fear, in fact. In this sense the Italian text of the encyclical's first chapter is significant: *le ombre di un mondo chiuso*," literally translated as "dark shadows of a closed world." My Polish is not sufficient I'm afraid, but in English this is translated as "dark clouds over a closed world". While seemingly insignificant, the distinction is important because "clouds" may give the impression that Francis is talking about changing phenomena, externally driven, which might just pass away, while the idea of "shadows" points to a causal relationship between the closed world(s) human beings inhabit and their effect. So, how should we understand this closed world and its shadows?

He elaborates on how we live in paradoxical times. On the one hand, we inhabit a world with continually evolving opportunities to connect, think, and even act globally. Despite impressions and the promising potential of "hyperconnectivity" (*FT*, § 7) and interconnectedness, fragmentation and closedness remain the rule rather than the exception.

First, there is the shattered dream of integration. The unification of Europe, for example, made the dream of one world unified in diversity seem like a reality, but today one increasingly sees "signs of a certain regression," as old conflicts are reignited and "instances of a myopic, extremist, resentful and aggressive nationalism" (§ 11) increase.

The globalization of the economy promises the possibility of "opening up to the world" (§ 12). However, as *FT* notes, this potential is often exploited exclusively to serve "foreign interests or ... the freedom of economic powers" (§ 12), sacrificing the common good for the sake of individual interests, mainly strengthening the powerful who can protect and shield themselves while weakening those on the margins of power" (§ 14). Moreover, the belief in, or rather the dogma of, neoliberalism has not led to the hoped-for results and is not infallible (see § 168).

The migration issue exposes the same paradox. Whether by "populist political regimes" or "liberal economic approaches," it is claimed that migration must be curtailed as much as possible—and so must financial aid to countries in difficulty, for that matter (§ 37). In contrast, the free movement of goods is encouraged in a globalized world.

In the technological globalization process, the paradox reappears virtually: Digitalization may give the impression that all are connected, but in fact it is an "illusion of communication" (*FT*, §§ 42–50). Social media such as Twitter and Facebook are developed in such a way that users first choose whom they want to be in touch with, which gives the possibility to exclude others from their conversations. As a consequence, and supported by algorithms, users limit themselves to like-minded people. "Persons or situations [and ideas] we find unpleasant or disagreeable are simply deleted in today's virtual networks" (§ 47); people with different views are outside the scope of communication. Users then create a virtual circle that isolates them from the real world they live in (see § 47). This technology creates a new lifestyle in which it is easy to "exclude all that we cannot control or know instantly and superficially" (§ 49).

Although digitalization and technology offer opportunities to connect, what is thus most apparent is how they are creating and supporting divisions (§43). In its extreme forms, within this format, social aggression can take shape and take place in an unseen way, because the diffidence that still exists in real physical contact disappears (see § 44). Ideologues know how to play this system, and it can lead to exclusivism and fanaticism even among Christians, Francis warns (see § 46).

In sum, all these processes (in the field of politics, economy, migration, and virtual communication) have one thing in common: they reveal the tendency for people to close themselves off—despite the possibilities for unity and connection—resulting in a closed and divided world.

Francis starkly uncovers the more fundamental dynamic. He reveals how fears, even “ancestral fears,” lead people to construct virtual and real, psychological and material walls to protect themselves and hide away from “the other.” The pope writes:

*Paradoxically, we have certain ancestral fears that technological development has not succeeded in eliminating; indeed, those fears have been able to hide and spread behind new technologies. Today too, outside the ancient town walls lies the abyss, the territory of the unknown, the wilderness. Whatever comes from there cannot be trusted, for it is unknown, unfamiliar, not part of the village. It is the territory of the “barbarian”, from whom we must defend ourselves at all costs. As a result, new walls are erected for self-preservation, the outside world ceases to exist and leaves only “my” world, to the point that others, no longer considered human beings possessed of an inalienable dignity, become only “them”. Once more, we encounter “the temptation to build a culture of walls, to raise walls, walls in the heart, walls on the land, in order to prevent this encounter with other cultures, with other people. And those who raise walls will end up as slaves within the very walls they have built. They are left without horizons, for they lack this interchange with others”. (§27)*

In *FT*, Francis takes seriously one of the most central political emotions of these times and recognizes it as an important element determining the dynamics in people’s (social) lives, while being aware of the risk: Fear might get them caught in a “culture of walls” —a closed world—with its consequent shadows of racism and excessive individualism, as well as indifference.

### **Fraternity as an Alternative to Fear**

Ask an evolutionary biologist about fear and he will explain how fear is one of the most basic human emotions, needed for survival. Interestingly enough, Francis believes that fear is not the only and surely not the most fundamental human emotion or response. Both fear and fraternity are natural to humanity as we have “an innate vocation to fraternity” (§ 26). For Francis, this claim is grounded in a theological *anthropology* that considers the “other” not a burden or a threat, but a gift, convinced of the idea that ultimate human flourishing lies in relationality.

After the recognition of what fear does to and among people, Francis claims that “it is also true that an individual and a people are only fruitful and productive if they are able to develop a creative openness to others” instead of letting “fear [deprive] us of the desire and the ability to encounter the other” (§ 41).

The key requirements for humans to flourish at a personal and communal level are thus not fear, retreating to comfort zones, and individualism but, rather, openness to enrichment (see §§ 95 and 146), “complementarity” (§ 146), and “encountering and relating to differences” (see § 147). Aware of the fear that openness could threaten one’s identity—as one sees in some of the neonationalist discourses—Francis argues the opposite. What is true for individuals, is also true for society: A relational life cannot be reduced to a small group or self-enclosed community. Especially interesting from the perspective of current neonationalist discourse is his observation that “a healthy openness never threatens one’s own identity” (§ 148). “For ‘our own cultural identity is strengthened and enriched as a result of dialogue with those unlike ourselves. Nor is our authentic identity preserved by an impoverished isolation’” (§ 148).

Fraternity is grounded in our human nature, but also has a divine aspect: it is grounded in humanity’s common relationship with God, our Father. So fraternity can never be merely local, but is also universal: we are all brothers and sisters of God. This understanding helps to correct a particular interpretation of fraternity. Fraternity might foster such a social cohesion that it runs the risk of turning into what Francis calls “local narcissism” and “racism,” disregarding the fate of people outside the borders of one’s community. We then live in fraternal communities, but they are isolated and closed-off. In contrast, Francis pleads for universal fraternity.

And it is a difficult balance. The task at hand is balancing two poles: to achieve “a healthy relationship between love of one’s native land and a sound sense of belonging to our larger human family” (§ 149). The need for social cohesion at a more local and communal level, as well as care for the immediate neighbor, can never be used as an excuse not to care for the “foreign” neighbor. As he indicates in the beginning of the encyclical, the universality of fraternity is Francis’s central concern.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Good Samaritan Exemplifying the Universal Scope of Fraternity**

From this perspective, Francis’s choice to reference the parable of the Good Samaritan is remarkable and crucial. In light of Francis’s call for universal fraternity, the choice of this biblical story is obvious, as it broadens the scope of the love commandment, universalizing the Jewish understanding of the *neighbor* by expanding the notion beyond the boundaries of particular communities. Not only the Jewish co-citizen is my neighbor, but everybody is.

---

<sup>1</sup> See § 6: “The following pages do not claim to offer a complete teaching on fraternal love, but rather to consider its universal scope, its openness to every man and woman.”

Neighborly love and fraternity should not have any boundaries, but should instead include everyone, as Francis asserts (§ 79).

Very interestingly, Francis gives a twist to the notion of human dignity:

*“The parable clearly does not indulge in abstract moralizing, nor is its message merely social and ethical. It speaks to us of an essential and often forgotten aspect of our common humanity: We were created for a fulfilment that can only be found in love. We cannot be indifferent to suffering; we cannot allow anyone to go through life as an outcast. Instead, we should feel indignant, challenged to emerge from our comfortable isolation and to be changed by our contact with human suffering. That is the meaning of dignity” (§ 68).*

Usually, the story of the Good Samaritan is interpreted as doing justice to the dignity of the person lying by the side of the road. Francis turns this around: Not only the dignity of the injured person is at stake but also that of every passerby, insofar as they allow themselves to be touched by what happens to their neighbor and thus to feel indignant about and engaged with another human’s suffering. Overcoming our indifference and “apathy” (§ 78) toward “the foreigner” is the criterion for one’s own human dignity.

Strikingly, the pope reduces all the diversity and distinctions made in societies to this one distinction: either one belongs to the group of bystanders and passersby who carry on indifferently and do nothing, or one stops, allows oneself to be touched by a fellow human being who has been hurt, and rolls up one’s sleeves. The daily “decision to include or exclude” (§ 69) is the crucial criterion by which social, political, economic, and religious projects must be judged. “Which side are you on?” is the implicit question Francis asks each person.

### **Call for a “Dynamic” Christianity in the Face of Neonationalism**

Francis distinguishes two possible responses to the challenges people face in a globalized world. Either they decide to close themselves off from others on both the individual and the collective level, or they choose to take the risk of encounter, to be open to what the other brings them and how this interaction can be mutually enriching. In the face of current neonationalism, that decision should be made by nations and their political leaders, supported by their citizens. Christians, too, are called to respond to those challenges, especially in a context in which Christianity is misused by political elites to support their neonationalism.

How will people define their identity? For Francis, the answer is clear with his “rejection of fear.” He envisions a universal fraternity, a crucial component of the French Revolution’s tripartite, alongside equality and liberty. Just respecting the human dignity of all by actually realizing liberty and equality would be a major step forward for today’s world, but there would still be a risk of merely living side by side in the same place or world, instead of truly living together. Fraternity is about a mutual sense of belonging. Compare it with the metaphor of a hotel. Equality and liberty might be enough for people to shape their common life and society as a hotel: various groups are given their own space in which to build their

good life separately from each other, characterized by noninterference and possibly fear and indifference. Fraternity, however, envisions “a house we build together.”

This shift from fear to fraternity reflects a different understanding of religion in general and the Catholic faith in particular, what Henri Bergson distinguished as a “static” versus “dynamic” religion. In confrontation with and in response to the uncertainty and crisis human life brings with it, the first is “a defensive reaction,” envisioning the group as united among its members, while being hostile and closed toward others. The result is a limited, closed fraternity. With the dynamic of fear and the “culture of walls” in mind, its implications are self-evident and we can see how it underpins modern nationalism and populist movements. By contrast, “dynamic religions” are grounded in another logic, which offers an alternative to the self-enclosed societies. Bergson refers to the Sermon on the Mount and its call to love one’s enemies as the culmination of dynamic religion. This Christian narrative calls for—as mystics and saints show—the creation of a “universal sister- and brotherhood that turns the social solidarity of closed societies into the open society.”<sup>2</sup> Neither intuition nor purely rational philosophical ideas but, rather, the lives and experiences of role models motivate and invite people to fellowship. Hence the importance of parables such as the Good Samaritan.

Religions can play a role in fostering fraternity, in shaping our emotional responses which foster love instead of fear, on the condition that they themselves are able to transcend any tendency to become static, which can and does feed populist movements. In that case, Palaver argues, “religions are an important counterweight against populism as soon as the spirit of dynamic religion governs the daily life of their communities.”<sup>3</sup> From the start of his pontificate, with *Evangelii gaudium*, Francis advocated for a dynamic religion characterized by dialogue, encounter, and openness for enrichment by difference. The two responses—a static versus a dynamic interpretation, and thus a closed, exclusivist or an open, inclusivist identity—are not only an issue for politics but are indeed political in the sense of involving everyone and all relations in the public sphere, local and global. For Christians, it goes to the heart of their Christian faith—especially in today’s context, in which Christians face an identity crisis and must choose which side they are on. In a time when some European politicians and Christian communities, Catholics included, do not hesitate to refer to the Judeo-Christian heritage in order to intentionally exclude others, the pope shows a different path. Countering the “shadows of a closed world” driven by fear and a “culture of walls,” Francis envisions an open world, with love at its source and fraternity as its driving force. Universal fraternity should enable people to have a sense of belonging across what divides and distinguishes them. “God willing, after all this, we will think no longer terms of ‘them’ and ‘those,’ but only ‘us’” (*FT*, § 35).

---

<sup>2</sup> Palaver, 325.

<sup>3</sup> Palaver, 325.