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## Synod for a Poor Church: Pope Francis, the Poor and the Synod

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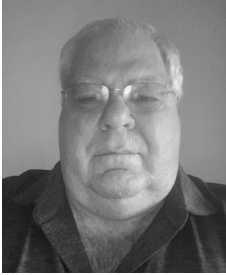
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# Synod for a Poor Church: Pope Francis, the Poor and the Synod



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DURING THE HOMILY OF THE MASS celebrating his ministry as Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis offered a challenge which has been repeated frequently throughout his reign:

I would like to ask all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political, and social life, and all men and women of goodwill: let us be ‘protectors’ of creation, protectors of God’s plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment.<sup>1</sup>

Francis’s predecessors as well as the Second Vatican Council had already highlighted environmental and social responsibilities and underscored their intrinsic interconnectedness.<sup>2</sup> All during his papacy, Francis deepens, widens, and specifies these responsibilities and duties.

Pope Francis announced the theme of the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission,” on March 7, 2020. However, Francis’s predisposition for sodality is already expressed in his first address as Pope on March 13, 2013: “And now, let us start this journey, bishop and people, bishop and people, this jour-

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1. Cf., [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130319\\_omelia-inizio-pontificato.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130319_omelia-inizio-pontificato.html)

2. Cf., Leo XIII *Rerum Novarum*; Pius XI *Quadragesimo Anno*; John XXIII, *Mater et Magister* and *Pacem in Terris*; Paul VI, *Summi Dei Verbum*, *Populorum Progressio*, *Octogesima Adveniens*; John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, *Laborem Exercens*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, *Peace with God the Creator*, *Centesimus Annus*, *Evangelium Vitae*; Benedict XVI *Deus Caritas Est*, *Spe Salvi*, and *Caritas in Veritate*.

ney of the Church of Rome, which leads all the churches in charity, a journey of fraternity, of love, of trust among us.”<sup>3</sup> The local church of Rome, of which he has been elected Bishop, is on a journey. Bishop and people walk together. This local church leads all the other churches and it is the place/communion of solidarity among them. There is no need to rehearse at length the *Vademecum*<sup>4</sup> and *Preparatory Document*<sup>5</sup> which guide the process unfolding for the Synod on Synodality. Rather this essay traces Pope Francis’s teachings on the poor, migrants, and refugees i.e., all those on the fringes and margins, and asks how well this is reflected in the Synod’s guiding texts.

### POPE FRANCIS: THE POOR AND MARGINALIZED

It’s all in the name! Cardinal Bergoglio chose the name Francis and he explained this name selection shortly after his election on March 16, 2013 when he met with more than 5,000 journalists at the Paul VI Hall.<sup>6</sup> Bergoglio wanted to always remember the poor and marginalized. He wanted to invigorate care and concern for the environment. He wanted to reform the church. He wanted to embrace and revive the mission and message St. Francis of Assisi lived out almost three centuries earlier. Bergoglio noted that the twelfth century saint “is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation.”<sup>7</sup> Bergoglio spoke his vision clearly that day: “How much I would like a poor church for the poor.”<sup>8</sup> Francis’s vision remains a focus of his papal ministry and is hopefully alive in the present synodal process.

About three months later during a conference with teachers and students from Italy and Albania, Caterina De Marchis of the Istituto Leone XIII asked why Francis had renounced the riches of the papacy. Francis explained why he decided not to live in the Papal Palace apartments and why he rides in a small car.

The times talk to us of so much poverty in the world and this is a scandal. Poverty in the world is a scandal. In a world where there is so much

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3. Cf., <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-succession-text/new-pope-francis-first-words-after-election-idUSBRE92C19Y20130313>
  4. <https://www.synod.va/en/documents/vademecum.html>
  5. <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-preparatory-document.html>
  6. Cf., [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcF\\_Zod21Ac](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcF_Zod21Ac)
  7. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcF\\_Zod21Ac](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcF_Zod21Ac).
  8. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcF\\_Zod21Ac](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcF_Zod21Ac).

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wealth, so many resources to feed everyone, it is unfathomable that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an education, so many poor persons. Poverty today is a cry. We must all think about whether we can become a little poorer. This is something we must all do. How I can become a little poorer to be more like Jesus, who was the poor Teacher.<sup>9</sup>

There was also a question from a Giacomo whose group has been engaged in many different forms of poverty. Giacomo inquired how young people should live and behave with this poverty. Francis gave a remarkable response.

First of all, I would like to say one thing to all you, young people: do not let yourselves be robbed of hope! Please, do not let yourselves be robbed of it! And who robs you of hope? The spirit of the world, wealth, the spirit of vanity, arrogance, pride. All these things steal hope from you. Where do I find hope? In the poor Jesus, Jesus who made himself poor for us. And you mentioned poverty. Poverty demands that we sow hope. It requires me to have greater hope, too. This seems a little hard to understand, but I remember that Fr. Arrupe once wrote a good letter to the Centers for Social Research, The Society's Social Centers. He spoke of how the social problem must be studied. But in the end, he told us, he said to all of us: "Look, it is impossible to talk about poverty without having an experience with the poor." You mentioned the twinning with Kenya: the experience with the poor. It is impossible to talk about poverty, about abstract poverty. That does not exist! Poverty is the flesh of the poor Jesus in this hungry child, in the sick person, in these unjust social structures. Go, look over there at the flesh of Jesus. But do not let yourselves be robbed of hope by well-being, by the spirit of well-being which, in the end brings you to become a nothing in life! The young must stake themselves on high ideals: this is my advice. But where do I find hope? In the flesh of the suffering Jesus and in true poverty.<sup>10</sup>

Several aspects of Francis response are significant. First, poverty is not an idea but a concrete reality. Second, Jesus is really present in poverty, Jesus's flesh is

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9. Cf., [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130607\\_scuole-gesuiti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130607_scuole-gesuiti.html)

10. Cf., [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130607\\_scuole-gesuiti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130607_scuole-gesuiti.html).

present, Jesus's body. In a real sense then, the encounter with poverty is a Eucharistic encounter. Third, Christians must bring hope to the poor. This encounter with hope is found in Jesus and in the embrace of authentic poverty.

A week later, Francis spoke to food and agricultural organizations. He again hinted at structural barriers which impede a fair participation in the goods of the earth by every human person. He taught that "A way has to be found to enable everyone to benefit from the fruits of the earth, and not simply to close the gap between the affluent and those who must be satisfied with the crumbs falling from the table, but above all to satisfy the demands of justice, fairness, and respect for every human being."<sup>11</sup>

On the World Day for Migrants and Refugees, two months later, Francis spoke powerfully:

While encouraging the development of a better world, we cannot remain silent about the scandal of poverty in its various forms. Violence, exploitation, discrimination, marginalization, restrictive approaches to fundamental freedoms, whether of individuals or of groups: these are some of the chief elements of poverty which need to be overcome. Often these are precisely the elements which mark migratory movements, thus linking migration to poverty.<sup>12</sup>

In his first Apostolic Exhortation, Francis taught that the gospel demand is not merely about feeding and housing the poor but their overall welfare. "This means education, access to health care, and above all employment, for it is through free, creative, participatory and mutually supportive labor that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives."<sup>13</sup>

During his meeting with Patriarch Bartholomew 1 on November 30, 2014, Francis gave the poor first priority in his address.

In today's world, voices are being raised which we cannot ignore and which implore our churches to live deeply our identity as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. The first of these voices is that of the poor. In the world, there are too many women and men who suffer from severe malnutrition,

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11. Cf., [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130620\\_38-sessione-fao.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130620_38-sessione-fao.html)

12. Cf., [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130805\\_world-migrants-day.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20130805_world-migrants-day.html)

13. Cf., [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html), par. 159.

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growing unemployment, the rising numbers of unemployed youth, and from increasing social exclusion. These can give rise to criminal activity and even the recruitment of terrorists. We cannot remain indifferent before the cries of our brothers and sisters. These ask of us not only material assistance—needed in so many circumstances—but above all, our help to defend their dignity as human persons, so that they can find the spiritual energy to become once again protagonists in their own lives. They ask us to fight, in the light of the Gospel, the structural causes of poverty: inequality, the shortage of dignified work and housing, and the denial of their rights as members of society and as workers. As Christians we are called together to eliminate that globalization of indifference which today seems to reign supreme, while building a new civilization of love and solidarity.<sup>14</sup>

In his first Encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, he once again calls for the poor and marginalized to participate in the discussions and subsequent environmental decision making.

Discussions are needed in which all those directly or indirectly affected (farmers, consumers, civil authorities, scientists, seed producers, people living near fumigated fields, and others) can make known their problems and concerns, and have access to adequate and reliable information in order to make decisions for the common good, present and future.<sup>15</sup>

In his homily for the Jubilee for Socially Excluded People, November 1, 2016, Francis calls the excluded and poor our real treasures.

Let us open our eyes to our neighbor, especially to our brothers and sisters who are forgotten and excluded, to the “Lazarus” at our door. That is where the church’s magnifying glass is pointed. May the Lord free us from turning it towards ourselves. May he turn us away from the trapings that distract us, from interests and privileges, from attachment to power and glory, from being seduced by the spirit of the world... for it is our responsibility to care for the true riches which are the poor. In the light of these reflections, I would like today to be the “day of the poor.”

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14. Cf., <https://slmedia.org/blog/addresses-of-ecumenical-patriarch-pope-francis-during-divine-liturgy-in-the-patriarchal-church-of-st-george-in-phanar-istanbul>

15. Cf., [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html), 135

We are reminded of this by an ancient tradition according to which the Roman martyr Lawrence, before suffering a cruel martyrdom for the love of the Lord, distributed the goods of the community to the poor, whom he described as the true treasure of the church. May the Lord grant that we may look without fear to what truly matters, and turn our hearts to our true treasure.<sup>16</sup>

Four days later, Francis told members of the Representative Council and Personnel of Caritas Internationalis to “combat poverty and at the same time learn from the poor.”<sup>17</sup> In the same year he addressed the Meeting of the Economy of Communion, and decried an economy which discards and hides the poor.<sup>18</sup> Francis proposed that entrepreneurs become agents of communion.

The economy of communion, if it wants to be faithful to its charism, must not only care for the victims, but build a system where there are ever fewer victims, where, possibly, there may no longer be any. As long as the economy still produces one victim and there is still a single discarded person, communion has not yet been realized; the celebration of universal fraternity is not full.<sup>19</sup>

In the First World Day of the Poor, November 19, 2017 Francis, inspired by a quote from St. John Chrysostom,<sup>20</sup> spoke about the Eucharist and communion with the poor.

If we truly wish to encounter Christ, we have to touch his body in the suffering bodies of the poor, as a response to the sacramental communion bestowed in the Eucharist. The Body of Christ, broken in the sacred liturgy, can be seen, through charity and sharing, in the faces and persons

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16. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_20161113\\_giubileo-omelia-senza-fissa-dimora.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20161113_giubileo-omelia-senza-fissa-dimora.html)

17. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20161117\\_caritas-internationalis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/november/documents/papa-francesco_20161117_caritas-internationalis.html)

18. Cf., [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/february/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170204\\_focolari.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/february/documents/papa-francesco_20170204_focolari.html)

19. Cf., [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/february/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170204\\_focolari.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/february/documents/papa-francesco_20170204_focolari.html).

20. See *St. John Chrysostom on the Gospel of Matthew* (Hom. 50, 3-4, PG 58, 508-509): If you want to honor the body of Christ, do not scorn it when it is naked; do not honor the Eucharistic Christ with silk vestments, and then, leaving the church, neglect the other Christ suffering from cold and nakedness.

of the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters.<sup>21</sup>

In speaking to the International Catholic Migration Commission on March 8, 2018 Francis reminded those gathered that, “Today as in the past, liberating the poor, the oppressed and the persecuted is an integral part of the mission entrusted by God to the church.”<sup>22</sup> Francis’s homily during the Second World Day of the Poor, November 18, 2018, reiterated the need to hear and be near the poor and that God listens to them.

“This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him” (Ps 34:6). The words of the Psalmist become our own whenever we are called to encounter the different conditions of suffering and marginalization experienced by so many of our brothers and sisters whom we are accustomed to label generically as “the poor.” The Psalmist is not alien to suffering; quite the contrary. He has a direct experience of poverty and yet transforms it into a song of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. Psalm 34 allows us today, surrounded as we are by many different forms of poverty, to know those who are truly poor. It enables us to open our eyes to them, to hear their cry and to recognize their needs... The Lord listens to those who, trampled in their dignity, still find the strength to look up to him for light and comfort. He listens to those persecuted in the name of a false justice, oppressed by policies unworthy of the name, and terrified by violence, yet know that God is their Savior.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, Francis indicated in his homily that part of God’s care for the poor is a call to all those who believe in God to act likewise by addressing their physical, psychological, and social needs as well as creating a world of justice which will change the social conditions that perpetuate poverty.<sup>24</sup>

Francis’s message for the Fifth World Day insightfully expressed the interre-

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21. Cf., [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/poveri/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170613\\_messaggio-i-giornatamondiale-poveri-2017.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/poveri/documents/papa-francesco_20170613_messaggio-i-giornatamondiale-poveri-2017.html) no3.

22. Cf., [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/march/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180308\\_icmc.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/march/documents/papa-francesco_20180308_icmc.html)

23. Cf., [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/poveri/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180613\\_messaggio-ii-giornatamondiale-poveri-2018.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/poveri/documents/papa-francesco_20180613_messaggio-ii-giornatamondiale-poveri-2018.html) num 1.

24. Homily during the Second World Day of the Poor, November 18, 2018, no. 3. “God’s answer to the poor is always a saving act that heals wounds of body and soul, restores justice and helps to live life anew in dignity. God’s answer is also a summons to those who believe in him to do likewise, within the limits of what is humanly possible.”



lationship of Jesus, the poor, and the kerygma.<sup>25</sup> Francis contrasted the attitude of some disciples and the testimony of Jesus to the woman who anointed his feet with oil in Mark 14. Some who gathered were indignant that oil seemed wasted when it could have been sold and used for assisting the poor. Jesus, however, graciously accepts the woman's gift as a foreshadowing of his post crucifixion anointing. Francis explains that "Jesus was reminding them that he is the first of the poor, the poorest of the poor, because he represents all of them. It was also for the sake of the poor, the lonely, the marginalized, and the victims of discrimination, that the Son of God accepted the woman's gesture."<sup>26</sup> Francis goes even further and identifies the poor as evangelizers.

The face of God revealed by Jesus is that of a Father concerned for and close to the poor. In everything, Jesus teaches that poverty is not the result of fate, but a concrete sign pointing to his presence among us. We do not find him when and where we want, but see him in the lives of the poor, in their sufferings and needs, in the often-inhuman conditions in which they are forced to live. As I never tire of repeating, the poor are true evangelizers, for they were the first to be evangelized and called to share in the Lord's joy and his kingdom (see Matt 5:3). The poor, always and everywhere, evangelize us, because they enable us to discover in new ways the true face of the Father.<sup>27</sup>

He then cites *Evangelium gaudium*, nos. 198–199, which noted that:

For the church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political, or philosophical one. God shows the poor "his first mercy." This divine preference has consequences for the faith life of all Christians, since we are called to have "this mind... which was in Jesus Christ" (Phil 2:5). Inspired by this, the church has made an option for the poor which is understood as a "special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the church bears witness." This option—as Benedict XVI has taught—"is implicit in our Christian faith in a God who became poor for us, so as

25. Cf., <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/poveri/documents/20210613-messaggio-v-giornatamondiale-poveri-2021.html>

26. Cf., <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/poveri/documents/20210613-messaggio-v-giornatamondiale-poveri-2021.html>, no. 1.

27. Cf., <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/poveri/documents/20210613-messaggio-v-giornatamondiale-poveri-2021.html>, no. 2.

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to enrich us with his poverty.” This is why I want a church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the center of the church’s pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them. Our commitment does not consist exclusively in activities or programs of promotion and assistance; what the Holy Spirit mobilizes is not an unruly activism, but above all an attentiveness which considers the other “in a certain sense as one with ourselves.” This loving attentiveness is the beginning of a true concern for their person which inspires me effectively to seek their good. This entails appreciating the poor in their goodness, in their experience of life, in their culture, and in their ways of living the faith. True love is always contemplative, and permits us to serve the other not out of necessity or vanity, but rather because he or she is beautiful above and beyond mere appearances: “The love by which we find the other pleasing leads us to offer him something freely.” The poor person, when loved, “is esteemed as of great value,” and this is what makes the authentic option for the poor differ from any other ideology, from any attempt to exploit the poor for one’s own personal or political interest. Only on the basis of this real and sincere closeness can we properly accompany the poor on their path of liberation. Only this will ensure that “in every Christian community the poor feel at home. Would not this approach be the greatest and most effective presentation of the good news of the kingdom?” Without the preferential option for the poor, “the proclamation of the Gospel, which is itself the prime form of charity, risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today’s society of mass communications.”<sup>28</sup>

Pope Francis continues in a truly remarkable fashion.

Jesus not only sides with the poor; he also *shares their lot*. This is a pow-

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28. Cf., [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)

erful lesson for his disciples in every age. This is the meaning of his observation that “the poor you will always have with you.” The poor will always be with us, yet that should not make us indifferent, but summon us instead to a mutual sharing of life that does not allow proxies. The poor are not people “outside” our communities, but brothers and sisters whose sufferings we should share, in an effort to alleviate their difficulties and marginalization, restore their lost dignity and ensure their necessary social inclusion. On the other hand, as we know, acts of charity presuppose a giver and a receiver, whereas mutual sharing generates fraternity. Almsgiving is occasional; mutual sharing, on the other hand, is enduring. The former risks gratifying those who perform it and can prove demeaning for those who receive it; the latter strengthens solidarity and lays the necessary foundations for achieving justice. In short, believers, when they want to see Jesus in person and touch him with their hands, know where to turn. The poor are a sacrament of Christ; they represent his person and point to him.<sup>29</sup>

Francis makes several very important affirmations here. First, Jesus shared solidarity with the poor among whom he was the first. Second, the poor being with us always is not an occasion for discouragement but an opportunity and challenge for mutual sharing. There can be no substitute for this interpersonal engagement. Third, the relationship we have with the poor is familial. They are our sisters and brothers, not strangers. We participate in their lives which includes their tribulations. We engage with them to affirm their human dignity and recognize their right to communal participation in our social world. This is not charity where we have a giver and receiver. Rather it is mutual sharing that creates a familial relationship.

Francis’s distinction between almsgiving and mutual sharing is important. Mutual sharing can avoid the pitfall of idolization wherein the almsgiver takes undue satisfaction in the gift and the receiver feels inadequate or a failure in accepting the gift. Mutual sharing strengthens solidarity and builds comradeship. Francis understands this to be the basis upon which to reform the injustices and create a just social order in which all participate and prosper. Francis proclaims the poor as sacraments. The poor point to Jesus and make Jesus really present in their flesh.

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29. Message for the Fifth World Day of the Poor, no. 3.

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On October 3, 2020, in the midst of a pandemic, Pope Francis published *Fratelli Tutti*. Isabella Piro<sup>30</sup> clearly identifies the question Francis's social encyclical seeks to answer, i.e., "What are the great ideals but also the tangible ways to advance for those who wish to build a more just and fraternal world in their ordinary relationships, in social life, politics and institutions?" She also sketches the Encyclical's answer to the question.

The Encyclical aims to promote a universal aspiration toward fraternity and social friendship. Beginning with our common membership in the human family, from the acknowledgment that we are brothers and sisters because we are the children of one Creator, all in the same boat, and hence we need to be aware that in a globalized and interconnected world, only together can we be saved.<sup>31</sup>

It is somewhat surprising that in a social Encyclical of more than 38,000 words, the word *poor* is only used forty-eight times, *migrants* eleven times, *refugees* three times and *marginalized* two times. On reflection, however, are not all human beings poor, migrants, refugees and marginalized if one of our sisters or brothers are in, and of, these conditions? We are a human family, we are brothers and sisters. We are in solidarity and communion. We are destined to share a love for others as brothers and sisters, even when they are far from us; it is a call to open fraternity, to recognizing and loving every person with a love without borders; it is a call to encounter others in a way that is capable of overcoming all distance and every temptation to engage in disputes, impositions, or submissions.

Francis uses the story of the Good Samaritan to illustrate the love our present world so profoundly needs to address the issues that are characterized as "Dark Clouds over a closed World": namely, the rise of populism, the reluctance to craft positive relations between nations, the propensity towards an in-built selfishness, the end of historical consciousness, the lack of a plan for everyone, a "throwaway" world, insufficiently universal human rights, conflict and fear, globalization, and progress without a shared roadmap, pandemics and other calamities in history, an absence of human dignity on the borders, the illusion of communication, shameless aggression, information without wisdom, forms of

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30. Isabella Piro, "*Fratelli Tutti*": long summary of Pope Francis's Social Encyclical," at <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-10/fratelli-tutti-pope-fraternity-social-friendship-long-summary.html>

31. Isabella Piro, "*Fratelli Tutti*": long summary of Pope Francis's Social Encyclical," at <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-10/fratelli-tutti-pope-fraternity-social-friendship-long-summary.html>. Piro notes the inspirational influence and frequent citation of *The Document on Human Fraternity* signed by Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in February 2019.

subjection and of self-contempt. To this list one might add economic and cultural imperialism. Yet Francis claims that God is present sowing seeds of hope. Samaritan love transformed into deeds is a corrective which can overcome all injustices and create a world of true harmony, prosperity, and peace, a world where all are brothers and sisters living together in a thriving environment.<sup>32</sup>

The love of the Good Samaritan is the love required by *Fratelli Tutti* for the transformation of the social order and creation of true solidarity, authentic fellowship among all people. The Good Samaritan's love is not checked by cultural or ethnic difference. The Samaritan's love was not controlled by difference in social class or hierarchical position. This love sought no self-interested reward or recognition.<sup>33</sup> Samaritan love is not based on physical or social proximity in defining who is one's neighbor. Francis prophetically says:

Jesus, himself a Jew, completely transforms this approach. He asks us not to decide who is close enough to be our neighbor, but rather that we ourselves become neighbors to all. Jesus asks us to be present to those in need of help, regardless of whether or not they belong to our social group. In this case, the Samaritan *became a neighbor* to the wounded Judean. By approaching and making himself present, he crossed all cultural and historical barriers. Jesus concludes the parable by saying: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). In other words, he challenges us to put aside all differences and, in the face of suffering, to draw near to others with no questions asked. I should no longer say that I have neighbors to help, but that I must myself be a neighbor to others.<sup>34</sup>

All people, Christians included, are called to perform Samaritan love and with a special attention to the outcasts, the poor, the marginalized, the abandoned, and the migrants. Francis's identification of the Dark Clouds shrouding the world is a clear indicator of his attention to the *signa temporum* ("signs of the times"). He avoids an ivory tower horizon or abstract theoretical model. Francis knows that the present wide world challenges cannot be satisfactorily addressed by refining tweaks or modest additions to the present social order. The world

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32. *Evangelium gaudium*, *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli tutti* should be read together.

33. Although unnamed in the passage, the Good Samaritan is known across the ages in the retelling of the story of the Samaritan who cares for the injured man at the roadside. Even the purely secular press frequently identifies individuals who go out of their way to help strangers as Good Samaritans.

34. Cf., [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html) nos. 80-81.

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needs a new society, a new social order.

Several hallmarks of this just society are presented throughout *Fratelli Tutti* and the church's social justice teachings. First, the social impulse to dominate must be replaced by the force of service expressed in Samaritan love of all our neighbors who constitute humanity with us and the whole world. Second, the social impulse to selfishly accumulate resources and wealth in all its forms must be replaced by a generous sharing of the goods and resources of the world which are within our stewardship. Third, family, race, citizenship etc. are significant realities but the shared humanness of ALL people must become the highest indelible and ineradicable value of the new social world. The dignity and equality of each and every person supersedes any and every other bond or loyalty. A new society supported and sustained by this value can correct the Dark Clouds now present, offer hope for the future, and give rise to concrete expressions of Samaritan love.<sup>35</sup>

#### THE SYNOD, THE POOR AND MARGINALIZED

Surprisingly, when you look at the synod documents, the *Vademecum*, the *Preparatory Document*, and the *Synodal Process*,<sup>36</sup> the extraordinary meager word count reference to the poor, migrants, homeless, asylum seekers, or outcasts is remarkable when compared with the clear priority they have across the span of Francis's papal ministry. However, the *Vademecum* has two crucial passages that specifically name marginalized groups that should be engaged in the synodal process. First it directs that:

It will be of fundamental importance that the voice of the poor and excluded also find a place, not only that of those who have some role or responsibility within the [local] churches.<sup>37</sup>

Special care should be taken to involve those persons who may risk being excluded: women, the handicapped, refugees, migrants, the elderly, people who live in poverty, Catholics who rarely or never practice their faith,

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35. For a fascinating article which uses *Fratelli tutti* as a guide to addressing violence in Northern Ireland, see Maria Power, "Creating a Social Covenant: *Fratelli tutti* as a Roadmap for Overcoming Structural Violence in Northern Ireland," *The Journal of Social Encounters* vol. 5, issues 1/3 (2021), 8–13. Available at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social\\_encounters/vol5/iss1/3](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol5/iss1/3)

36. <https://www.synod.va/en/resources/official-documents.html>

37. *Vademecum*, 1.5.

etc. Creative means should also be found in order to involve children and youth. Together, all the baptized are the subject of the *sensus fidelium*, the living voice of the People of God. At the same time, in order to participate fully in the act of discerning, it is important for the baptized to hear the voices of other people in their local context, including people who have left the practice of the faith, people of other faith traditions, people of no religious belief, etc. For as the Council declares: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. (Pastoral Constitution On the Church In the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, no. 1). For this reason, while all the baptized are specifically called to take part in the Synodal Process, no one—no matter their religious affiliation—should be excluded from sharing their perspective and experiences, insofar as they want to help the church on her synodal journey of seeking what is good and true. This is especially true of those who are most vulnerable or marginalized.<sup>38</sup>

The synod’s openness transcends listening, understanding, and discernment and hopes to connect with the many divergent experiences and reflections of those who are not overtly participatory members of the Catholic community. The synod is open to all, welcomes all and actively seeks out those who are not “insiders.” The synodal invitation is ecumenical, interreligious, socially fluid, and welcoming to all who wish to share: especially those on the periphery, those underrated without status, those frequently overlooked, and those who are the “other” or nonmembers. Why engage in this effort? Precisely because every human being has dignity and we are neighbors joined in a shared world and community. Those on the margin can bring insights, questions, and experiences undetected by those who are in the center of the community. Those of the margin may themselves undertake “good Samaritan love.” Additionally, their life story also constitutes the “signs of the times” which the church seeks to know and understand so that she might accompany and evangelize people. From their liminal position, the poor see past our usual communal horizon and stretch us in new ways.

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38. *Vademecum*, 2.1.

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Pope Francis continues:

Finally, it will be of fundamental importance that the voice of the poor and excluded also find a place, not only that of those who have some role or responsibility within the [local] churches. Religious communities, lay movements, associations of the faithful, and other ecclesial groups are encouraged to participate in the Synodal Process in the context of the local churches. However, it is also possible for them, and for any group or individual that does not have an opportunity to do so at the local level, to contribute directly to the General Secretariat ...In this sense, the diocesan phase should begin by finding the most effective ways of achieving the widest participation possible. We must personally reach out to the peripheries, to those who have left the church, those who rarely or never practice their faith, those who experience poverty or marginalization, refugees, the excluded, the voiceless, etc. The heart of the synodal experience is listening to God through listening to one another, inspired by the Word of God.<sup>39</sup>

The *Vademecum*'s directive that the voice of the poor and excluded is *fundamental* should vitiate any erroneous thought that inviting them to the synodal conversation and discussion is secondary or superfluous window dressing. The outreach to those who are peripheral should be personal. Posting advertisements for an upcoming meeting is woefully insufficient. The church will need to draw upon the wide experience of missionaries, those in mission to refugees, those who serve in halfway houses, soup kitchens and recovery centers, those who staff Newman Centers at Colleges and Universities, and hospital and prison chaplains. Without the real living encounter with those on the periphery, there can be no listening, dialogue, or communion, i.e., no synodality.

## A REFLECTION

When one compares the frequent and powerful teaching on the poor and marginalized in Pope Francis's writings and allocutions, the Synodal documents seem quite thin. To be fair, the *Vademecum* records a tacit recognition that the outreach and inclusion of those on the periphery is fundamental to the synodal process) and that special care should be taken to include those frequently

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39. *Vademecum* 1.5.



and easily overlooked. However, from a structural viewpoint and concrete plan of how to accomplish this fundamental inclusion in the synodal process, there seems to be little direction or explanation. Perhaps this is due to the church's lack of experience of being with the poor and marginalized, especially its unfamiliarity in experiencing them as a sacramental gift from whom much about God is to be learned. Perhaps such flows from a lingering propensity for Roman Catholicism to have introversion tendencies when addressing its own structures and processes. Perhaps this oozes out from a myopic view that it already possesses the fullness of truth and correct doctrine and therefore cannot learn anything truly significant from ecumenical and interreligious conversation and shared prayer and dialogue. Perhaps these result from a negative judgmental attitude about those on the periphery, those who are canonically irregular, those who have departed from the community, those who are the NONES of society, that is, individuals who are not connected to any particular religious community and may not participate in any specifically religious activities but nonetheless claim to be "spiritual."<sup>40</sup> Courage and imaginative thinking and the Spirit's sustaining grace will be required to fulfill the requirement of establishing and nurturing dialogue and communion with those on the periphery.

Pope Francis takes Vatican II seriously and brings to his papal ministry the rich experience of the post-conciliar Latin American church. The church is primarily the People of God on mission and on pilgrimage in the world. This community must continually interpret and respond to the "signs of the times" so that it can proclaim the kerygma, the good news of Jesus, who was poor and is present with the poor. Jesus is the Good Samaritan who calls his disciples to emulate his love.

The synod is a way of being and doing church. The synod is missioning. The synodal process is itself a deepening of the community which welcomes all to listen, understand, share, and express gospel love, Good Samaritan love. The active presence of the poor, whether economically impoverished, socially ostracized, refugee or migrant, brings to the conversation profound experiences of life and God which would be unknown without them. The poor are privileged not merely because of what is shared with them but the gift that they give, the gift of teaching us how to rely on and trust in God in the face of hardship, suffering, and rejection. By being close to the poor, the church abides in God's presence

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40. Read about these in Ryan P. Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going* (Fortress Press, 2021).

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and love. God hears the cry of the poor. Hopefully, the synod will celebrate the poor who are sacraments for the church.

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