

THE END OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS? A COMMENT ON SECTIONS 13-14 FROM THE ENCYCLICAL FRATELLI TUTTI¹


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Abstract In §§ 13 and 14, the Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti* deals with the crisis of historical consciousness and the serious consequences of the contemporary ideology of the ‘end of history’. The claim to “build everything from scratch” is a sign of the crisis of modernity and destroys the possibility of building the future. Contemporary man seems to want to do the opposite of what the historian does and what the Church proposes in the conviction that the time of Salvation cannot be only chronological. The attempt to “possess” time and to translate it into something material, into a prize, hides the fear of believing, which arises from the feeling of our fragility. Historical knowledge and historical awareness are not the same thing, but both are necessary for faith and human coexistence. Knowing the facts of others and ordering one's own is indispensable for judging reality and provides good arguments for the demand for justice, which is always a comparative evaluation based on the awareness that if life is a divine gift, historical research is a precious human gift for orienting us in time.

Keywords Historical awareness, Historical knowledge, Time, Salvation, Justice

The Encyclical *Fratelli tutti* is rich in suggestions. The text works on a “rhizomatic” basis, that corresponds to its inspiring principles, i.e. *fraternity and social friendship*. The ultimate goal of these principles is extending to all human beings the grace of a bond that projects the light of Salvation on human history. Pope Francis tells us that it's only by going beyond *genos* and blood ties that we will be able to open doors to the Christian revolution. Doors will also open up to a form of paternity and maternity that engages all men of good will in the quest for justice and in the safeguard of creation. Blood and cultural ties are just the tools through which individuals and groups contribute to the species survival. Nonetheless, they do not exhaust the human “generating power” and, above all, they can't be put forward as the bedrock of the Church, a spiritual community that lives inside history, precisely to guide it and also to witness that history itself will be ultimately overpassed.

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Nevertheless, fraternity can be the new world frontier only if we start from the awareness that humanity is going through some hard times and if we are able to compare present and past. It is clear that every age had their difficulties. But the current period is characterized exactly by the refusal to look at models from the past, as it was always done before, for thousands of years. Our age rejects what a great Catholic historian, Henri-Irénée Marrou, called the “sadness” of the job of the historian, facing all the time human weaknesses and miseries. Globalization has masked identities that close off to defend what they are without understanding how and why they are that way. It makes many peoples captive of dictators and adventurers. It generates some absurd forms of inequality and injustice.

Against a naive use of the idea of fraternity, typical of simplistic revolutionary ideologies; and against an unscrupulous, phony use of democracy, the fraternity the Encyclical puts forth is founded on the historical consciousness that, not only religions, but also humanity itself, are at risk. Besides, those who seek fraternity are exactly the people who are not “naturally” siblings and know they are not. So, fraternity is a civil virtue that requires maturity and awareness, especially from those who have the possibility to judge and act without depending on despair. The practice of fraternity is a paramount challenge for the rich ones and the wise ones. A strong historical consciousness of personal and collective experience is the indispensable premise of a staunch practice of fraternity. Historical knowledge of the past teaches us that fraternity is always difficult, all the more so if we want to extend it to humankind. But historical consciousness suggests to us that the past will not influence the future, unless we allow it to last. Past and future are projections of men on time. They exist because they are filled with meanings that men share. Historians document the past and build up historical knowledge, but historical knowledge rises when people head to the future in light of a faith.

The end of history and the deconstruction of meanings.

In sections 13 and 14, the Encyclical deals with the crisis of historical consciousness and the serious consequences of the «end of history» ideology. In the text, «deconstructionism» is mentioned, i.e. the claim to «create everything starting from zero». The term, typical of Derrida's philosophy, belongs to the vocabulary of structuralism from the seventies of the nineteenth century, but it originated from Nietzsche's and Heidegger's philosophies. Deconstruction was a strategy to read texts without claiming to explain their full sense; conversely, it tried to seize their contradictions, that prevented from giving a univocal sense to what was expressed. Every sign and every judgement can't be extrapolated from the symbolic universe people are experiencing. This way, the scope of reading and writing would become enormously wide; to the point that every transcendentality of “logos” and every metaphysical claim to give an order to things and words – based on permanent, ontological structures – would become impossible. In the Encyclical, the reference to deconstruction serves the purpose of criticizing the claim to deny value to Tradition, which is the translation of Revelation in history.

Time and theology.

For thousands of years, the Catholic Church has been adopting the formula of Tradition to interlace Kingdom of God and Kingdom of men. Notwithstanding, as is known, the theological interpretation the Church has given of time presents quite a lot of interpretive difficulties. It also clashes against the modern epistemology of history. The theology of time refuses both the analytical philosophy of history and every form of absolute historicism. It does not disdain the translation of time in history, but it attributes to history a wordly feature, that differentiates it from the salvific significance it has in God's plan. Since when the process of secularization imposed itself on the European scenario, at least from the eighteenth century, the study of history has changed direction and method. It has abandoned the moralistic and documentary trait to welcome the hermeneutical, reconstructive trait, has opened the door to a sophisticated reflection about the so-called Sciences of Mind – the *Geisteswissenschaften* W. Dilthey talked about in his 1883 *Einleitung* – and, on the bounce, to a tight confrontation between a positivistic conception and a hermeneutics of facts. With Schleiermacher, hermeneutics aspires to go beyond the study of single texts and single events to become the doctrine of understanding in general and of all forms of communication. Men understand each other and build discourses. Discourses lead to choices, even very different from one another, because all individuals feel, following the hermeneutical doctrine, like they have some unity in mankind.

Chronology and Salvation. The figures of time.

Christian theology on history has some roots that are much older than the roots put forward by modern philosophy. The biblical idea of history is not progressive but dialogic. It stems from the conviction that there is a «pact» between a God-person and its People. Thus, historicism is the dimension in which the dialogue between the Savior and the entire humanity gets fulfilled, without any chronological, still less any cultural, exclusion. It is questionable if the coming of Christ is actually the fulfillment of History. But, although in the difference between Jewish and Christian vision, Christian theology can't overlook the acknowledgement of that event. In *The City of God*, Augustine led the way: in history, before and after are neither chronological nor topological, but salvific because they are separate from sin and grace. From a theological standpoint, Christian history contains the value of a personal and collective conversion, that transforms the interpretation of facts into soul-searching on human weakness and into a glorification of the Divine. In this perspective there surely were stretches and sophistries, most of the time caused by the difficulty to combine divine attributes, omnipotence and omniscience, with human freedom. The heated debates on predestination and the different types of grace men can have available are the most relevant examples of the difficult relationship between faith and history, that brought about some fierce disputes. In the same way, the theory of Theodicy, i.e. of God's justification before the court of human reason, is for sure at the basis of all modern philosophies of history. All in all,

Christian theologians' worry has always been to fight against the ancients' determinism, but also against the moderns' relativism. Bossuet, sixteenth century's great apologist, talked about the Christians drama of holding tight in their hands the chain of faith's two ends: the way leading them to God and, at the same time, the certainty of their inner freedom.

The main figurative models of time were two. The Eastern, and partly Greek, model of time as a circle, and the Jewish-Christian model of time as a line. On one side, we had a «nonhistorical» model, meaning that the sense of history was out of it; on the other side, we had a linear eschatological model, which inspired the modern idea of progress but couldn't explain the Cross inconsistency, and above all the insertion of sin and guilt in the world. Beside these two main figures, many variants were born. Despite this, it is not possible to state that, before individual conscience, the issue of personal salvation has ever been sorted out. The unrest it brings about in those who believe is not different than the unrest it brings about in those who do not believe. This is because they both have in common the problem of death and of its assumption in the scope of collective life. Death and salvation are mediated by the presence of time, whose absence is valid for the two of them. Plenitude does not reside in time just as the end is not caused by dying in time. On a philosophical level, the relationship with time forms is one of the most complex, also because time in itself is nothing, it affects every single thing and, mostly, it fills and swells our conscience. Imperceptible substance that guarantees a huge success to watches, but that directly leaves marks not only on bodies and minds, but also on social relationships and all things produced by men. Manufactured goods are thrown into time to try to absorb it and stop its flow, just like sponges uselessly thrown into the sea to drain it.

These are topics that have impassioned those who have developed their own world vision beyond chronology or the fleeting moment iteration and who have sought in the «reduction» of time to thought (to *idea*) the key to an authentic consideration for reality. Examples of this are all the philosophies founded on the concept of intellectual experience, phenomenology in particular, which is central in contemporary thinking.

Historical consciousness and political dimension of time.

In *Fratelli tutti* thought, the end of historical consciousness is not mentioned referring to the relationship between epistemology and theology. This is no theoretical matter. It is rather seen as a political and educational matter regarding the loss of that collective ethos, residing at the basis of communal historical consciousness. Therefore, deconstruction is the way to blow the whistle on the loss of collective memory lying at the foundation of democratic rebirth after two world wars. The whistleblowing does not only regard political models and government forms, but also and especially the crisis involving all educational agencies. These agencies have the responsibility to build bridges between generations. Without these educational agencies, even the Church would not have any room for a catechesis measuring up to today's challenges. Social friendship can't replace

faith, but there is no efficient Announcement unless it translates into a social vision living up to Salvation's contents. Hence, multiple are the hints the Encyclical provides to reflect on the problem of the relationship between memory and history. The most relevant of these hints is about a proper consideration of what time is to men's life and humanity's destiny.

The attempt to own time.

In spite of contemporary thinking about temporality, the consideration we normally have of time is very naive and chiefly altered by a fake awareness of time "lack". Men are always very jealous of their time. They perceive it as some kind of possession and fear it can be taken away from them. To the point that, through the instruments of power and several work forms, men try to take over as much time as they can, even other people's time, to increase their self-assurance and to stand out. In one of his stories (*Aleph*), Borges wrote that «all things happen to everyone always and exactly *now*. Centuries and centuries, but it is only in the present moment that facts occur. Countless men in the skies, on the land and on the seas, but all that comes about for real is only what comes about to me».

The sociologist H. Rosa examined the fact that modern life is subjected to a continuous acceleration (cfr. *Alienation and Acceleration. Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*, NSU Press, Aarhus 2010). If the tools allowing us to save time have by now reached an exceptionally high level of development, thanks to production and communication technologies, the predominant feeling in affluent societies is that people do not have enough time to make their dreams come true or to satisfy what is imposed on them from social models. On average, people live longer than in the past, yet they suffer time lack, as if the time they live was not meaningful in itself. Rather than proceeding to a critical review of what is in their power and meeting true human nature face-to-face, they react by bending to the chase of something that runs away, raging against the bodies and the room each one takes up, not to lose positions in the success race. Nowadays, it is clear that the majority of men have at their disposal much more time than their predecessors, although we complain about working too much and badly. Twelve working hours are way fewer than the hours worked by our ancestors, who could never sleep, if not with one eye open. Still, we feel like we lack time and, especially, we are led to believe that time flow stops if we fill it more and, above all, if we exchange it for things. Bulimics eat not only a lot, but also fast. While anorexics not only eat very little, but also rarely and badly.

The way to «inhabit» time and to sanctify it is a crucial challenge, particularly to those who believe, provided that it is not possible to exchange the perspective of Salvation for the perspective of worldly prosperity. For these reasons, the matters of time and history are suited to a "Catholic" reflection, founded on a theology which does not turn prosperity into the sign of divine benevolence, but which turns fraternity into the sign of human responsibility. We come back, even though in a different way, to some theological and political cruxes already tackled in other epochs. And this is

a further proof of the relevance a historical consciousness holds in the picture of the construction of a community spirit.

The immaterial substance of time.

The time which is in our mind is never pure. It is produced thanks to what we have learned, what we do or how we act. Every civilization has its specific manner to represent it in space and society. Every civilization differentiates external and internal time. We can enrich our experience of time precisely by working on the distinction between these two 'rooms' of time, fostering our inner time and wading in on environmental time, in our working and relational life.

Time is all pushed out of us, and time and ourselves try to compete in a race, to see who will survive. Meritocracy is, for instance, one of the most dangerous forms of competition between talents and time. It is among the most powerful ideologies, which nudge to consider people's existence the only possible life and to consider peer recognition, here and now, the only thing that counts. It focuses on life lived, not on life hoped for, and it turns any other assessment down. In particular, it turns historical assessment down, which widens perspectives up, compares facts, drives to judgments exceeding the immediate emotional and psychological dimension, sets free from anxieties, teaches to live. Thus, merit is not a dimension covering only the materiality of things or economic relations among people: it is no coincidence that it is a prominent topic in the educational field. Educating is a complete anthropological act, integrated in a human life which, at its first occurrence, at its birth, does not know and does not claim any recognition nor prize. This is because human life already finds recognition and prize in living itself, and because from an animal viewpoint, all experiences have equal value. To men, the *meaning* of what they live is intelligible only in a global analysis of human relationships, of a *sense*. This is because, to recall the famous definition of M. Mauss in *The Gift* (1923), living is a "total social fact".

The gift can't be translated into a market value (even though it passes through things, it uses up space and time), because it resides, first of all, in men's just being there, in life, then in the community people feel like they are a part of. Thus, but only ultimately and not always, it resides in the explicit compresence of donor and giver, one before the other. Educating equals to reciprocating, that is, it equals to a giving and a taking, whose right, the justification, does not depend on the way, let alone on the reason why, people give and take. This justification rather depends on the trust people put in life and on the freedom, they arrange themselves with in space and time. Only human beings are reciprocal, not the concepts or the money, which is a 'material concept'.

The mistakes of memory without history.

Historical culture is necessary to fine-tune peoples' policies and strategic choices, but a mighty willingness to always and only decide in the present often leads to make a banal use of history, that identifies it with memory. But memory is something very different from history, also because it is

prone to a deformed use, in virtue of a series of physical, psychic and social conditions that are not easily controllable. Studies on the mistakes of memory, or on the distorted use of collective memory pieces unhampered from a healthy historical knowledge, are under everyone's eyes. It is enough to see how the reference to the *Shoah* or the extermination gets trivialized, to designate phenomena having nothing in common with that tragic historic event. Language draws from memory without knowing how the elements to remember settled in there.

A society centered on the present prefers science and technology that often feed the atheism of historical knowledge. By translating every life dimension into the present and into what you know; and by neglecting things you can't give a rational explanation for, you end up glorifying the gamble. This way, entire pieces of society are thrown into the hands of unscrupulous players, as it often happens in the financial sector.

Every time we insist on the idea that, for what is best, there is no limit, and that the best demands all efforts to benefit from it (money, information, relationships...) and not to safeguard it, overrunning each limit becomes the only possible aim. Those who push to take success to higher and higher levels also show they have serious issues in the relationship with that form of excellence, the genius, they place out of the daily world. Genius, instead, represents an acceleration of what could be reached through the contribution of many. It is therefore expression of the return of time to society, of a possible gift to humanity. It does not imply the lack of effort, conversely it implies the transformation of this effort into some further creativity, which burns tiredness just like fire burns log. In *Letter to the peasants on poverty and peace*, the French writer J. Giono (1895-1970) wrote: «Sowing wheat has become an act of war. And please, do not think the act of war is the transformation made by chemistry on wheat. No, the act of war is when a man owns six hundred thousand kilos of wheat, while they only need six hundred to eat. It is when they do not give away what is superfluous. You will tell me that six hundred thousand kilos of wheat demand a lot of effort, so it is not right to donate such a big effort. The truth is, it is not right that people even make that effort! Peace is the quality of advised men».

The perspective to exclude history from the use of time and to exclude memory from history is typical of competitions, that are founded on the present and exclude any form of reward other than visible prizes. A competition can't be transferred, it can be either done or put off. While memory and recollections follow different mind paths and they need an inner space.

Knowledge and historical consciousness as human liberation.

Historical knowledge is a tremendous antidote against the temptations of owning time through the consumption of all that has offered us, without scrutinizing how and why it is there. And without historical knowledge there can't be any historical consciousness. One is sister to the other, because the crux of historical consciousness lies in the experience of recognizing the past without becoming its prisoner, but rather by contemplating it. Where should we look for inspiration to fight against

the temptation to own time neglecting history? Positive inspiration comes to us right from the study of how the first Greek historians invented the job of the historian in a moment of human history in which the world of Gods got in touch with the *polis*, i.e. the world of men where men became the main players of their destiny and created the laws. Herodotus (484-430 BC), - the first of the great historians of ancient times, he who created the term *demos-kratia* (power to the people)-, had an idea of history as being dominated by Fate. Men did not have any opportunity to choose and they bore their destiny within, just like a genetic code. But, right because of this, with the awareness that not even Xerxes, the great Persian emperor, could ever change fate, Herodotus wanted to demonstrate that fate makes use of men. And also, that the encounter of destiny with men's passions, ambitions and intellect makes it somehow human. Herodotus tried this way to collect information, to tell all that had been seen. He provided detailed descriptions of characters, laws, attitudes, gazing at the main players' faces, at the details of the mighty and at the vastness of empires. By doing this, he «anthropomorphized» destiny and found out that the bases of history were human multiplicity and the variety among men in considering time and space. He wanted «men's endeavors not to be forgotten» and created one of the most powerful excuses so that men, not only God, begun writing Books. To hand down and not to forget. But what were men supposed not to forget, if everything was ruled by fate? Herodotus developed a deep sense of beginning. Just like all great Greek thinkers, he was charmed by the problem of not forgetting origins to go up the river of events and understand why all things changed without ever changing and why each man, great or little, had to die.

Nowadays we are assisting at the return to a fatalistic vision of History: what has been has been. The idea of an end of History witnesses that we are not able to consider its essential quality, which is just being the gift men offer themselves. Historians try to document the past in light of the present, of their needs, of emerging interests, of the drive to know human events. By doing so, they pay homage to men's stories and they fight against illusions or useless pretensions. They give back, in historical form, what time allowed men to build and live. They open up perspectives on how it could have been and how it could be. The refusal to foster, to nourish a historical consciousness through history study and history teaching kills posterity, instead. That is, it kills the ambition to survive and to be able to accept ourselves in our finitude, it demeans the expectation for a different and better life, which went along with the needy for thousands of years. Contemporary men seem to wish to do the opposite of what historians do. In broad terms, we could say that collective memory is a thought that translates into a fact, while the reading of what even the Gospel calls the «signs of time», i.e. the sense of history and our being its children, leads us to a voluntary submission to the humanity inside us in view of a deeper good, which is the keeping of men's spiritual life.

History, men's typical, symbolic invention, is the translation into narrative form of human mind's projection skill, of that specific desire of men to grasp the measure for their lives. Knowing other

people's facts and putting in order own's facts generates the need for justice and provides sound arguments to politics.

Notes

¹ *The end of historical consciousness*

§13. As a result, there is a growing loss of the sense of history, which leads to even further breakup. A kind of “deconstructionism”, whereby human freedom claims to create everything starting from zero, is making headway in today's culture. The one thing it leaves in its wake is the drive to limitless consumption and expressions of empty individualism. Concern about this led me to offer the young some advice. «If someone tells young people to ignore their history, to reject the experiences of their elders, to look down on the past and to look forward to a future that he himself holds out, doesn't it then become easy to draw them along so that they only do what he tells them? He needs the young to be shallow, uprooted and distrustful, so that they can trust only in his promises and act according to his plans. That is how various ideologies operate: they destroy (or deconstruct) all differences so that they can reign unopposed. To do so, however, they need young people who have no use for history, who spurn the spiritual and human riches inherited from past generations and are ignorant of everything that came before them» (Esort. ap. postsin. *Christus vivit* (25 marzo 2019), 181.

§14. These are the new forms of cultural colonization. Let us not forget that «peoples that abandon their tradition and, either from a craze to mimic others or to foment violence, or from unpardonable negligence or apathy, allow others to rob their very soul, end up losing not only their spiritual identity but also their moral consistency and, in the end, their intellectual, economic and political independence» (Card. Raúl Silva Henríquez, S.D.B., *Omelia al Te Deum a Santiago del Cile* (18 settembre 1974). One effective way to weaken historical consciousness, critical thinking, the struggle for justice and the processes of integration is to empty great words of their meaning or to manipulate them. Nowadays, what do certain words like democracy, freedom, justice or unity really mean? They have been bent and shaped to serve as tools for domination, as meaningless tags that can be used to justify any action.