Studia Oecumenica 20 (2020)
DOI: 10.25167/so.3054
s. 7–16

Przemysław Kantyka
Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II, Wydział Teologii
https://orcid.org/ 0000-0002-6571-7833

An Application of Category of Fraternity to the Grassroots Ecumenism on the Basis of Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*

Abstract

Although the encyclical of Pope Francis *Fratelli tutti* does not speak directly about ecumenism, the category of fraternity developed in it can and should apply in the ecumenical movement, especially in the grassroots contacts of Christians from different Churches. Top-down ecumenism, i.e. doctrinal dialogues and meetings of Church leaders, by themselves – although necessary – are not able to bring about an effective reconciliation of Christians living in different Churches and Ecclesial Communities. The hermeneutical key proposed by Pope Francis in the form of the category of the fraternity has a wider application than ecumenical relations. The article examines the determinants of this category and its possible application to the ecumenical movement. An example of the successful application of the idea of fraternity in the activities of the International Ecumenical Fellowship is also given.

Keywords: encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, fraternity, ecumenism, International Ecumenical Fellowship.

Zastosowanie kategorii braterstwa do ekumenizmu oddolnego na podstawie encykliki papieża Franciszka *Fratelli tutti*

Abstrakt

Chociaż encyklika papieża Franciszka *Fratelli tutti* nie mówi wprost o ekumenizmie, to jednak rozwijana w niej kategoria braterstwa może i powinna mieć zastosowanie w ruchu ekumenicznym, szczególnie w kontaktach oddolnych chrześcijan z różnych Kościołów. Ekumenizm odgórny, tj. dialogi doktrynalne, oraz spotkania przywódców kościelnych same w sobie – choć konieczne – nie są w stanie doprowadzić do skutecznego pojednania chrześcijan żyjących w różnych Kościołach i Wspólnotach kościelnych. Zaproponowany przez papieża Franciszka klucz hermeneutyczny w postaci kategorii braterstwa ma zastosowanie szersze, niż relacje ekumeniczne. W artykule prześledzone zostają wyznaczniki tej kategorii oraz jej możliwa aplikacja do ruchu ekumenicznego. Podany zostaje także przykład udanego zastosowania idei braterstwa w działalności Międzynarodowej Wspólnoty Ekumenicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: encyklika *Fratelli tutti*, braterstwo, ekumenizm, Międzynarodowa Wspólnota Ekumeniczna.

1. Introduction

Encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti*[1] of Pope Francis is subtitled *On Fraternity and Social Friendship*. This sentence clearly indicates the Pope's intention to show the need for universal fraternity in the human family, without limiting it to the circle of Catholics or even Christians. Pope Francis confessed what prompted him to write this encyclical: "I felt particularly encouraged by the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, with whom I met in Abu Dhabi, where we declared that «God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters»"[2]. In his latest encyclical, the Pope does not speak directly about ecumenism, because this is not the purpose of this papal statement[3]. However, it can be concluded that the category of brotherhood developed in it not only can, but should also be used in the ecumenical movement. Undoubtedly, the category of dialogue applies first of all to the ecumenical movement, which is inherently focused on restoring the visible unity of Christians, with a view primarily to the unity of faith. However, since the split in Christianity has affected not only the doctrinal sphere, but has penetrated deep into human relations, it is necessary to "repair unity" also in the "deep tissue" of the community of believers. This can be done by renewing the fraternal relationships of Christians from different Churches who have learned through the ages to live in separation and even in opposition to one another.

As Francis notes, the human family has "innate vocation to fraternity"[4]. The category of universal brotherhood is thus based on the most basic human relationships. However, since it can be used to describe the model of desired relationships in human society in which there are non-believers and followers of different religions, there is no reason why the same category could not be used to establish ecumenical relationships also in the spirit of brotherhood. The article will identify those elements and manifestations of fraternity as a hermeneutic category that can be applied to the ecumenical movement. The example of the International

---

[1] Francis. 2020. *Encyclical Letter Fratelli tutti on Fraternity and Social Friendship*. Vatican: Liberia Editrice Vaticana (abbr.: FT).

[2] 2019. "A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" (20.11.2020). http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html.

[3] Only in one paragraph of his encyclical Pope Francis refers directly to ecumenism: "It is also urgent to continue to bear witness to the journey of encounter between the different Christian confessions. We cannot forget Christ's desire "that they may all be one" (cf. Jn 17:21). Hearing his call, we recognize with sorrow that the process of globalization still lacks the prophetic and spiritual contribution of unity among Christians. This notwithstanding, "even as we make this journey towards full communion, we already have the duty to offer common witness to the love of God for all people by working together in the service of humanity". FT 280.

[4] FT 26.

Ecumenical Fellowship as an exemplary application of the idea of fraternity in activities for the unity of Christians will be analysed.

2. Axiological components of the category of fraternity

Ecumenical relationships among Christians today suffer from the same diseases that affect societies around the world. The globalized world ensures the speed of communication, but it is not conducive to the creation and strengthening of interpersonal bonds. As Pope Benedict XVI has already noted: "As society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbours, but does not make us brothers"[5]. The disintegration of social ties translates into atrophy of interpersonal relations, which also results in the weakening of community ties in religious groups, including Christian ones, although religious or denominational affiliation by its nature should lead to closer relations. The category of unity, which is an indispensable component of the ecumenical idea, has fallen victim to globalization along with other important categories. Pope Francis gives a radically critical assessment of this state of affairs: "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"[6]. Often these concepts have become empty slogans, no longer having a community-creating potential.

The atrophy of community bonds can trigger a defensive reaction in the form of isolationism. There is a temptation to create closed and isolated groups that are reluctant to welcome anyone outside and build relationships with other groups. In ecumenical relations, it is visible in attempts to strengthen unity within a given religious group by cutting off from other groups. Meanwhile, the attitude of isolationism towards one's neighbour is not only opposed to the spirit of ecumenism but simply opposed to love for one's neighbour.

Undoubtedly, this love of a neighbour, says Francis, "is more than just a series of benevolent actions. Those actions have their source in a union increasingly directed towards others, considering them of value, worthy, pleasing and beautiful apart from their physical or moral appearances. Our love for others, for who they are, moves us to seek the best for their lives"[7]. The transition from the category of fraternity to that of charity seems inevitable if fraternity is not

---

[5] Benedict XVI. 2009. *Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate*. Vatican: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, no 19.

[6] FT 14.

[7] FT 94.

only meant to mean a conflict-free coexistence of people side by side but to lead to the creation of a real community. The love of one's neighbour, in turn, implies the selflessness of the relationship, that is, the lack of willingness to benefit from the mutual relationship. Where "one is a neighbour only to those who serve their purpose" – says Pope Francis – "the word 'neighbour' loses all meaning; there can only be 'associates', partners in the pursuit of particular interests"[8]. Love is what prompts us to recognize first brotherhood with another human being, which then leads us to perceive him as a neighbour with whom we are not only united by common interests. And love is always a personal relationship. Recognizing another person as an equal person worthy of love results directly from recognizing his personal dignity as a child of God. Human dignity cannot be valued in any way, because it is exactly the same for every human being due to the same creative act of God who brought everyone to life. Hence, the recognition of the dignity of another human being excludes their valuation in terms of race, origin, religion, or material status[9].

For ecumenical relations, Pope Francis' thought on the concept of full citizenship can be extremely inspiring. Francis applies this concept to people who are considered minorities in society. "It is therefore crucial to establish in our societies the concept of full citizenship". The term minorities – continues to explain the Pontiff – "engenders feelings of isolation and inferiority" and thus is discriminatory[10]. In their mutual self-perception, Christians belonging to one denomination should lose their sense of superiority over Christians belonging to other denominations. There cannot be second-class citizenship in the Church of Christ. In other words, we cannot view Christians belonging to a different denominational tradition as second-class citizens or as not having citizenship in a Christian family. However, it is a very complicated thing due to the ecclesial self-awareness of individual Churches, including the Catholic Church. The *Decree on Ecumenism* of the Second Vatican Council clearly identifies the Catholic Church as having the fullness of means of salvation, and the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities as having greater or lesser ecclesial deficiencies[11]. The concept of full citizenship can help here by recognizing the equality of all Christians in a Christian family on the basis of an equal call to salvation. Adopting this assumption protects against perceiving

---

[8] FT 102.

[9] Cf. FT 106; Francis. 2013. *Evangelii Gaudium. Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*. Dublin: Veritas Publications, no 190.

[10] FT 131.

[11] Second Vatican Council. 1964. *Decree on ecumenism "Unitatis redintegratio"* no 4 (20.11.2020). http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html

other communities with a sense of superiority, without resigning from recognizing one's own religious community as having the fullness of the means of salvation.

Another determinant of the category of brotherhood, very useful for ecumenical relations, is a strong sense of one's own identity. Pope Francis in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* refers to personal, national and cultural identity: "Just as there can be no dialogue with 'others' without a sense of our own identity, so there can be no openness between peoples except on the basis of love for one's own land, one's own people, one's own cultural roots. I cannot truly encounter another unless I stand on firm foundations, for it is on the basis of these that I can accept the gift the other brings and in turn offer an authentic gift of my own"[12]. Following the way of Francis' thinking, having a strong religious identity does not have to cause isolation, closure within one's own tradition, and failure to enter into ecumenical relations. On the contrary – the sense of one's own identity resulting from the appreciation of one's own religious tradition provides solid ground for establishing relationships with Christians from a different confessional family. It gives self-esteem, which removes the fear of establishing a relationship. Those who feel confidently rooted in their own religious tradition do not have to close themselves to meeting other traditions, because such an encounter carries no danger. On the other hand, if this person does not have an established identity of his own, he or she may easily fall into cognitive uncertainty in meeting with others. Rooting in one's own religious tradition, its knowledge, and respect for it also make a person a more reliable partner in ecumenical dialogue.

An important determinant of the category of fraternity is dialogue, understood here not as the examination of individual elements of the doctrine by specialists, but as an interpersonal meeting. "Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word 'dialogue'"[13]. This definition, proposed by Pope Francis, focuses on the dimension of interpersonal encounter in which the most important thing is the relationship between the parties involved and not the intellectual object of the dialogue itself. In this way, the dialogue becomes an encounter, which in itself fulfils its purpose. Without excluding doctrinal inquiries, a dialogue understood in this way opens the dialogic parties to learning the truth together. Saint Pope John Paul II made years before this remark about the relationship between truth and dialogue: the ecumenical dialogue is primarily searching of truth,

[12] FT 143.
[13] FT 198.

which is always to be discovered and recognised. The dialogue does not create the truth but looks for it to find and read anew. It is not only an exchange of thoughts but before all: an exchange of gifts (cognitional, spiritual, and ecclesiological)[14].

The last factor of the category of fraternity to be discussed hereafter Pope Francis' *Fratelli tutti* is kindness. After Saint Paul, the Pope quotes here the Greek term *chrestótes* from Letter to Galatians (5:22). The kindness here would mean: "an attitude that is gentle, pleasant and supportive, not rude or coarse" and "can take different forms: an act of kindness, a concern not to offend by word or deed, a readiness to alleviate their burdens"[15]. The kindness thus is something that enables a true encounter introducing into relationship mutual respect and concern for the others.

3. International Ecumenical Fellowship as an example of grassroots ecumenism based on the category of fraternity

When writing his encyclical *Fratelli tutti* and defining the determinants of the category of brotherhood in it, Pope Francis probably did not apply his considerations to a specific situation or a specific community. From an ecumenical point of view, it is interesting whether this set of values that make up the categories of brotherhood can be applied in the practice of living a real community. It seems that an excellent example of the implementation of these principles is the International Ecumenical Fellowship (IEF), existing since 1967, which is an example of the implementation of grassroots ecumenism. In the foundation document, the *Fribourg Statement*, there is clearly designed the aim of the community, which is the unity of the Church: "By prayer, study and action, the International Ecumenical Fellowship (IEF) seeks to serve the movement towards the visible unity of the Church according to the expressed will of Jesus Christ by the means He wills"[16].

The aim of the Community is to build spiritual unity among people and to develop and bring closer the visible unity of Christ's Church, in accordance with the will of its Founder. IEF members try to do this through prayer, listening to the

---

[14] Cf. John Paul II. 1979. *Encyclical Letter "The Redeemer of Man"*, no 6 (20.11.2020). http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html.

[15] FT 223.

[16] International Ecumenical Fellowship. 2009. *Fribourg Statement of the International Ecumenical Fellowship*. In *Living Today the Church of Tomorrow. Forty Years of the International Ecumenical Fellowship*. Ed. Kate Davson, Szabolcs Nagypál, 29. Brussels – Rye – Budapest: International Ecumenical Fellowship.

Word of God, and celebrating the liturgy. Living in their current environments, they strive to fulfil God's will in their lives, and through study, they want to get to know the richness of the Christian family. The community gathers people of various Christian denominations, nationalities and generations[17].

Living the community takes place on a daily basis through mutual contacts, making friends, spending time together, and undertaking initiatives, meetings, conventions, and international congresses. A special manifestation of fraternity that transforms into love of a neighbour is the mutual notification of sick members of the community, so that in all regions the confreres may pray for them.

Meetings of Christians of different denominations provide the opportunity to get to know each other's denominational traditions, an opportunity for theological discussions and exchange of ideas. Above all, however, they enable mutual understanding and acceptance of each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. The dialogue at IEF takes place in two forms. Its basic form is a dialogue of life, led by members of the community who share their faith experience and everyday matters at numerous meetings. The second dimension of the dialogue is the theological commission within the IEF, which takes up issues that require deeper reflection and presenting them together to the members of the community. For example, the rules for the participation of community members from various Christian denominations in services, including Eucharistic services, were developed in individual denominational traditions[18]. For this purpose, the document *On Eucharistic Sharing*[19] was developed, providing the provisions of the sacramental discipline of each denomination included in the fellowship and the principles of participation in the Eucharist of a given denomination or refraining from participation.

The IEF does not blur confessional differences. The ecclesiastical tradition and discipline of each denomination are fully respected. The community does not try to create any "supra-church" structures, believing that the greatest gift brought to the community is a deep and living commitment to the life of its Church or Ecclesial Community, as well as readiness to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including the desired gift of visible unity[20].

---

[17] Przemysław Kantyka. 2006–2007. „Międzynarodowa Wspólnota Ekumeniczna – International Ecumenical Fellowship". Roczniki Teologiczne KUL 53–54 fasc. 7: 297–301.

[18] Cf. Piotr Kopiec. 2015. *Odpowiedzialny ekumenizm. Przykład międzynarodowej wspólnoty ekumenicznej*. In *Ekumenizm dla ewangelizacji.* Ed. Przemysław Kantyka, Sławomir Pawłowski, 157. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL.

[19] International Ecumenical Fellowship. 2007. *On Eucharistic Sharing: A Statement of the International Ecumenical Fellowship (IEF)* (21.11.2020). http://www.koed.hu/nation/sharing.pdf.

[20] Cf. Kantyka. 2006–2007. „Międzynarodowa Wspólnota Ekumeniczna – International Ecumenical Fellowship" 299.

As recorded in the community's programming document, the *Fribourg Statement*: "The IEF recognizes the importance of both striving for agreement in theological truth and in the practical problems of God's people in a sinful and divided world. It seeks ecumenical reconciliation between lay people and clergy and affirms that common prayer and liturgy are ideal means to achieve union with God and with our Christian companions and companions. As long as the divisions continue, IEF members will respect the regulations of individual churches"[21].

In the opinion of Piotr Kopiec, it is thus "a vision of ecumenism that coincides with the *Ecumenical Directory*, respecting individual religious identities. The statement of the founding declaration established a certain framework beyond which the members of the organization tried not to go beyond. At the same time, it was not easy: just as the ecumenical movement itself balances between faithfulness to its own tradition and the courage to search for new ideas and concepts that would push the cause of Christian unity forward"[22]. This assessment seems to be correct. Experience shows that people abandoning their own religious identity in favour of an undefined "open identity" have not yet done anything in the ecumenical movement. At the opposite extreme, there are those who have framed their religious identity in the hard framework of confessionalism. They also have no chance of bringing the unity of the Church closer.

Viewing Christians belonging to other confessional communities as full members of the Church of Christ is one of the conditions for striving for Christian unity. This assumption is in line with the concept of full citizenship proposed by Pope Francis in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. In this case, it is about recognizing entire confessional traditions as well as specific communities and their individual members as having their rightful place in the great Christian family, without showing to anyone a sense of superiority or paternalizing him or her.

The essence of the IEF is to bear witness to the mutual brotherhood of Christians in spite of divisions, to experience the "existing, though still imperfect" communion between the Churches. We are also united by a common search for reconciliation, in which we would like to involve as many Christians as possible[23].

Describing the relations within the community, Piotr Kopiec, until recently the president of the IEF Polish Region, drew attention to the experience of kindness that the members of the community follow in mutual relations: "Anyone who has

---

[21] International Ecumenical Fellowship. 2009. *Fribourg Statement of the International Ecumenical Fellowship*, 29.

[22] Kopiec. 2015. *Odpowiedzialny ekumenizm*, 156.

[23] Cf. Kantyka. 2006–2007. „Międzynarodowa Wspólnota Ekumeniczna – International Ecumenical Fellowship" 300.

ever participated in an ecumenical meeting, when its participants are confronted with problems resulting from confessional differences, knows how much gentle language should be used and how important it is to be kind in order not to hurt the other person. This reservation is all the more important that in the ecumenical process when different religious identities come into contact with each other, one's own identity becomes more vivid, more aware and more lived"[24]. Mutual kindness does not mean not having any disagreement but explaining each point with the assumption that it is done with respect for the other person, with openness and friendship.

It can be said with great certainty that the fraternity model described by Pope Francis in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* is fulfilled in the life and activity of the International Ecumenical Fellowship. Indeed, we find in this community all the determinants of fraternity: the striving for unity, active charity, the spirit of dialogue and reconciliation, mutual kindness: all this while maintaining a sense of one's own confessional identity and recognizing the full citizenship of all members of the fellowship in the Church of Christ.

4. Conclusion

The implementation of ecumenism of fraternity does not resolve the issue of church unity. Faith discrepancies remain to be cleared up. Neither doctrinal agreements alone can restore the lost unity of Christians without reconciling the "deep tissue" of God's people in individual churches. On the other hand, the mere fraternity of Christians will not allow them to achieve ecclesial unity, because this cannot do without unity in faith. Universal brotherhood is not an end in itself but should lead to the common goal of God's people, which is salvation in Jesus Christ. As shown above, the determinants of the category of fraternity, as enumerated by Pope Francis in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* can be in a satisfactory way applied to the ecumenical movement. The example of the International Ecumenical Fellowship is proof of that.

References

Benedict XVI. 2009. *Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate*. Vatican: Liberia Editrice Vaticana.

Francis. 2013. *Evangelii Gaudium. Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*. Dublin: Veritas Publications.

[24] Kopiec. 2015. *Odpowiedzialny ekumenizm*, 155.

Francis. 2020. *Encyclical Letter Fratelli tutti on Fraternity and Social Friendship*. Vatican: Liberia Editrice Vaticana.

International Ecumenical Fellowship. 2007. *On Eucharistic Sharing: A Statement of the International Ecumenical Fellowship (IEF)* (21.11.2020). http://www.koed.hu/nation/sharing.pdf.

International Ecumenical Fellowship. 2009. Fribourg Statement of the International Ecumenical Fellowship. In *Living Today the Church of Tomorrow. Forty Years of the International Ecumenical Fellowship*. Ed. Kate Davson, Szabolcs Nagypál, 29. Brussels – Rye – Budapest: International Ecumenical Fellowship.

John Paul II. 1979. *Encyclical Letter "The Redeemer of Man"* (20.11.2020). http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html.

Kantyka Przemysław. 2006–2007. "Międzynarodowa Wspólnota Ekumeniczna – International Ecumenical Fellowship". Roczniki Teologiczne KUL 53–54 fasc. 7: 297–301.

Kopiec Piotr. 2015. Odpowiedzialny ekumenizm. Przykład międzynarodowej wspólnoty ekumenicznej. In *Ekumenizm dla ewangelizacji*. Ed. Przemysław Kantyka, Sławomir Pawłowski, 145–161. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL.

Second Vatican Council. 1964. Decree on ecumenism "Unitatis redintegratio" (20.11.2020). http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html.