Columns
Spirituality



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On the eve of the feast of St. John Vianney, I read the National Catholic Reporter column "Virtual reality and the coming Catholic Metaverse" by Phyllis Zagano, and my soul glorified the Lord. I was inspired to interview a few people who were attending or not attending online Mass.

They expressed their feelings about the churches being closed:

- I have mostly night duty working for the call center. I am happy that the churches are closed down, otherwise every Sunday morning Mom would shout, "Are you not going for Mass? God has given you everything. Can't you sacrifice one morning?" Sunday morning is the only morning of the week I have a good long sleep, sit with a cup of coffee, keep surfing a church for lively singing and creative homilies. Hope the churches will remain permanently closed.
- I am a retired teacher. Of course, I mourn for the death of loved ones and not able to pay my last respect by attending funeral Mass, etc. But I am truly grateful to God for the online Mass. It saves my time, giving me space for silent, meditative participation in the online Mass. Plenty of choices of different choirs in different languages, different places — above all without tension of catching coronavirus.
- Living in a village is a tightrope walk. I have moved out of the Catholic church. Before pandemic, my children suffered the humiliation like: "Your Mom has gone to the believer's group, she will not be buried in our cemetery." Now the arrival of the pandemic, God saved my children from those scornful eyes and I have no worries as of burial Mass and place.

I asked them how they contributed to the church collection, and they had a variety of answers:

- Oh, sister, that is very good question. As a media-savvy person, I am aware of the misuse of church collection for wrong activities by "pedophilia mafia." On a regular basis, I connect with the [nongovernmental organizations] who work on the concerns mentioned by Pope Francis in the *Laudato Si*' and *Fratelli Tutti*. I contribute more than a tithe for the cause close to my heart.

- I send a cheque to a young mother who works as my housemaid and give monthly rations to the families of the rickshaw drivers who died during pandemic.
- Instead of church collections, I pay fees of their children as a relief to those parents who find it difficult meeting both the ends.

These responses led me to an awareness of what type of church is emerging. Pope Francis's third scholarly papal encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, is a clarion call to a new way of ministering — evolving a virtual pastoral church.

With its comprehensive and solid analysis of the tribulations of our contemporary crises, *Fratelli Tutti* advocates a church evolving at the grassroot levels: helping migrants find a place to belong, changing inhuman policies to make them favorable to the poor, to women, and the excluded.

This evolving virtual church is asking us for dialogue. I counted this myself: The word *dialogue* occurs 49 times in this encyclical. To bridge the gap in our fragmented world, Anna Rowlands says, "there needs to be a dialogue — which is exactly what the document calls for — about the ways in which we relate to each other continues to be fragmented and broken."

In his Document on Human Fraternity, Francis appealed to us: "In the name of God and of everything stated thus far, [we] declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard."

Francis' dream of drawing all kindhearted people into a long-overdue dialogue to form a wider cosmic community is commendable. His plea: "Let us dream then, as a single human family" reminds me of the Indian worldview of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" — one universe family.

This dream asks all of us to recognize that we are co-pilgrims along with all creatures of Mother Earth — our common home. It echoes Rabindranath Tagore's vision, "where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls."

Dialogue will lead us, working in unity, to eliminate threats of war, the buildup of toxic armaments, famine, poverty, environmental degradation, racism, discrimination and violation of human rights. Francis invites us to make real God's dream of a new heaven and a new earth for all, challenges us to move away from

individual piety to civic ethics, to honor our Mother Earth, to respect cultural differences, and speak out for a just world.

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Dialogue will lead us to solidarity. I counted: Francis mentions the word *solidarity* 26 times in this encyclical. It is no easy task to overcome the bitter legacy of injustices, hostility and mistrust left by conflict. It can only be done by overcoming evil with good (Romans 12:21) and by cultivating those virtues that foster reconciliation, solidarity and peace.

I personally believe that without solidarity there is no salvation. We need to work hard toward recovering our shared vision and mission of creating a community where all feel like they belong. By embodying cosmic kinship, and cross-culturally uniting to realize Jesus' vision of kinship community, we will be restoring the inalienable dignity of all.

Seeking solidarity with the poor — who are part and parcel of one interconnected human family — is not a top-down, one-way process, but an openness to learn that the giver also becomes receiver and there is scope for reciprocity and mutual growth in a spirit of equality.

Solidarity brings together various gifts to accomplish the mission of Jesus: "There is one chosen people of God: one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:4). It envisages identifying, releasing, utilizing and unifying the gifts of all.

Women and men need to continue functioning as catalysts of solidarity and dialogue to speed up moving toward an egalitarian church that truly practices the teachings of Jesus on equality as imperative: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male nor female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Finally, will it be far from the truth to say that *Fratelli Tutti* promotes Gospel feminism — based not on human needs alone, but on a transformative approach that integrates the personal, interpersonal and social dimensions?

By desiring and acknowledging the dignity of all, regardless of caste, creed or religion, we can rebirth a universal dream to fraternity between men, women and all

creatures of the Earth.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis stresses the importance of nonviolence, saying, "Jesus never promoted violence or intolerance. He openly condemned the use of force to gain power over others."

But — together with the lack of reference to women in the title — one cannot fail to notice the absence of insights from prophetic women theologians, reformers or thinkers of the past or present. They are conspicuous by their absence. Is omitting women's voices in the document an act of indirect violence? Let us hope for the better church.