



A stained-glass window at Sacred Heart Church in Freeport, Minnesota, depicts the good Samaritan. The 2,000-year-old parable of the good Samaritan is the anchor of the encyclical "*Fratelli Tutti*, on Fraternity and Social Friendship." (CNS/The Crosiers/Gene Plaisted)



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Last week more than 30 bishops and cardinals joined with theologians, journalists and other Catholic leaders at Fordham University for an ecclesial gathering, "*Fratelli tutti*: Cultivating the Politics of Communion and Compassion." The topic could not have been more timely and the conversations were frank and fascinating, conducted under Chatham House rules to encourage candor.

The gathering was hosted by Fordham's [Center on Religion and Culture](#), led by its incomparable director David Gibson. The co-sponsors are the [Boisi Center](#) for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, the [Hank Center](#) for The Catholic Intellectual Heritage at Loyola Chicago and the [Center for Catholic Studies](#) at Sacred Heart University. Full disclosure: I am one of the organizers of these meetings.

The gathering began with a joint reception with our friends at [FADICA](#), which was concluding a day-long summit on sustainability to mark the 10th anniversary of "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home." One of the participants suggested we make a short video of attendees wishing Pope Francis a happy anniversary of his election as pope. We were thrilled when Vatican News posted the [video](#).

The next morning began with holy Mass at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle, next door to the Fordham Lincoln Center campus. Archbishop Roberto González Nieves of San Juan, Puerto Rico, who got his doctorate at Fordham, was the principal celebrant and homilist. Hartford Archbishop Christopher Coyne led us at Mass on the second day.

The opening panel placed *Fratelli Tutti* in an ecclesial context, examining how the encyclical builds on themes found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and earlier magisterial teachings by Pope Francis. There was an especially fine presentation on the importance of "rootedness" in *Fratelli Tutti*, which states: "A land will be fruitful, and its people bear fruit and give birth to the future, only to the extent that it can foster a sense of belonging among its members, create bonds of integration between generations and different communities, and avoid all that makes us insensitive to others and leads to further alienation" (Paragraph 53).



Pope Francis signs his then-new encyclical, "*Fratelli Tutti*, on Fraternity and Social Friendship" after celebrating Mass at the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, Italy, on Oct. 3, 2020. (CNS/Vatican Media)

The presentations were short, five to seven minutes. There are no keynotes. The goal is to toss out some ideas that everyone can engage and, so, stimulate a conversation. When the presenters finished, we had 15 minutes of small group, synodal discussion at each table and then we opened the discussion up to the entire room. A critical component of these conferences, and a most frustrating one, is the need to keep the total attendance to around 80 people. This facilitates the conversation but inevitably means that we can't invite all the people we would want to invite. Given all that is happening in the world of politics, the microphones flew around the room as people contributed to the conversation.

The second panel looked at obstacles and opportunities for teaching *Fratelli Tutti*. One presentation developed an insight first attributed to religious historian Mircea Eliade: The opposite of "Catholic" is not "Protestant," the opposite is "sectarian."

Another explained how the church came to embrace liberal democracy and its focus on human rights and dignity, while a third discussed the ways we moderns erect idols that take the place of the Christian God. A final presentation discussed civic engagement on the part of bishops.

After a mid-afternoon break, a third panel discussed "*Fratelli tutti*: Forming Consciences and Prudential Judgments." One panelist pointed out that while religious liberty is constitutive of the common good, it also must be exercised in accordance with the common good, a point that had many bishops nodding in agreement. Another panelist explained the concept of cooperation with evil and why it enables civic engagement with people of differing points of view and necessarily banishes a more puritanical understanding of morality. We joked in the conversation that the headline would read: Bishops endorse moral impurity!

On that same panel, another theologian suggested we not only consider cooperation with evil in framing our moral obligations in civil society, but cooperation with good. A fourth panelist detailed the ways conscience formation is not as individualistic a task as we Americans think and pointed to *Fratelli Tutti*'s reference to "historical conscience" rather than "memory," as an example of this more collective understanding of conscience formation. The conversation that followed was especially helpful to the bishops as they plan to draft a new version of their document on voting.

The next day, two panels looked at some more practical applications of the ideas discussed the first day. The room laughed when one priest recounted preaching recently about humility, only to have a parishioner accost him after Mass: "Why are you preaching against Trump!" Another panelist explained why an updating of the catechetical directory was essential, while a professor discussed lessons learned while educating young people in the Catholic intellectual tradition.

I have three major takeaways from the conference. First, the bishops are, like many Americans, bewildered by some of the actions of the Trump administration, especially the cutoff of foreign aid and the draconian immigration policies. They want to find ways to bring *Fratelli Tutti* to greater prominence in the life of the U.S. church. One of the best questions of the entire gathering was from a bishop: "There is so much in this encyclical. Where do you think is the best place to start?"

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Second, while there is a lot of unpack in *Fratelli Tutti*, the bottom line is this: A politics that does not start with compassion will miscarry no matter how it is structured.

The third takeaway is a criticism: There was a dearth of focus on the working class. One bishop raised the issue, but it did not become central to the conversation. In America today, the principal marker of political polarization is along educational lines, the so-called "diploma divide." Unless the church meaningfully engages working-class Catholics, we should not be surprised that they seek solidarity in Trump's empty promises.

This was the fourth "Way Forward" gathering. It is hard to describe these gatherings without feeling a bit of pride. They are unique. The conversations sparked by the panels go in all sorts of interesting directions, and the questions the bishops have as pastors intersect with those the theologians and other church leaders pose in surprising ways. There are also important side conversations. The celebration of the Eucharist together is the most essential component of the conference's success.

One first-time participant sent the organizers a note afterwards. She described her frustrations and fears as polarization has grown within our society and within our world. "I never imagined that I would be in a setting — and in a community — that would help me to name these wounds, and even express them candidly and without reservation to a group of open-minded and open-hearted bishops, and leave feeling not only heard but also in some way healed, on a very deep level," she wrote. "And yet, this is the grace that I feel I received at this gathering."

Our friends at America Media will be making a videotape of the gathering. Here are two short videos of prior gatherings, [in 2023](#) at Boston College to discuss synodality and [in 2024](#) at the University of San Diego to focus on *Laudato Si'*. The videos capture some of the flavor of these gatherings.

In a life filled with blessings, starting these "Way Forward" gatherings four years ago with my colleagues has been one of the greatest. Each time, I leave much better informed about how the bishops view the times in which we live, the challenges the church faces and the opportunities that exist. The time spent with outstanding theologians is deeply enriching. Each time, I leave more hopeful than when I entered. Each time, I leave feeling more committed to the church we all love.