

In new encyclical, Francis decries capitalism, war

by [Nicole Winfield](#) in the [November 4, 2020](#) issue



Free copies of the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, with Pope Francis's encyclical *Fratelli tutti* on the front page, are distributed by volunteers to the faithful in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on October 4. (AP Photo / Gregorio Borgia)

On October 4, Pope Francis laid out his vision for a post-COVID-19 world by uniting the core elements of his social teachings into a new encyclical aimed at inspiring a revived sense of the human family. *Fratelli tutti* (Brothers all) was released on the feast day of his namesake, the peace-loving St. Francis of Assisi.

Francis said the coronavirus pandemic has proven that the “magic theories” of market capitalism have failed and that the world needs a new type of politics that promotes dialogue and solidarity and rejects war at all costs. In the encyclical, Francis rejected even the Catholic Church’s own doctrine justifying war as a means of legitimate defense, saying it has been too broadly applied over the centuries and

was no longer viable.

“It is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a ‘just war,’” Francis wrote in the most controversial new element of the encyclical.

Francis began writing the encyclical, the third of his pontificate, before the coronavirus struck, and its bleak diagnosis of a human family falling apart goes far beyond the problems posed by the outbreak. He said the pandemic, however, has confirmed his belief that current political and economic institutions must be reformed to address the legitimate needs of the people most harmed by the coronavirus.

“Aside from the differing ways that various countries responded to the crisis, their inability to work together became quite evident,” Francis wrote. “Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality.”

He cited the loss of millions of jobs as a result of the virus as evidence of the need for politicians to listen to popular movements, unions, and marginalized groups and to craft more just social and economic policies.

“The fragility of world systems in the face of the pandemic has demonstrated that not everything can be resolved by market freedom,” he wrote. “It is imperative to have a proactive economic policy directed at ‘promoting an economy that favours productive diversity and business creativity’ and makes it possible for jobs to be created, and not cut.”

Francis also rejected “trickle-down” economic theory, as he did in the first major mission statement of his papacy, the 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), saying it simply doesn’t achieve what it claims.

“Neo-liberalism simply reproduces itself by resorting to magic theories of ‘spillover’ or ‘trickle’—without using the name—as the only solution to societal problems,” he wrote. “There is little appreciation of the fact that the alleged ‘spillover’ does not resolve the inequality that gives rise to new forms of violence threatening the fabric of society.”

Francis's English-language biographer, Austen Ivereigh, said with its two key predecessors, the new encyclical amounts to the final part of a triptych of papal teachings and may well be the last of the pontificate.

"There is little doubt that these three documents . . . will be considered the teaching backbone of the Francis era," Ivereigh wrote in *Commonweal* magazine.

Francis made sure that the text would have wide circulation, printing the encyclical in the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* and distributing the paper free in St. Peter's Square to mark the resumption of printed editions following a hiatus during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Francis enshrined in the encyclical his previous rejection of both the nuclear arms race and the death penalty, which he said was "inadmissible" in all cases.

Francis's call for greater "human fraternity," particularly to promote peace, is derived from his 2019 joint appeal with the grand imam of Egypt's Al-Azhar, the revered 1,000-year-old seat of Sunni Islam. Their "Human Fraternity" document established the relationship between Catholics and Muslims as brothers, with a common mission to promote peace.

The fact that he has now integrated that Catholic-Muslim document into an encyclical is significant. Francis's conservative critics had already blasted "Human Fraternity" as heretical, given that it states that God has willed the "pluralism and diversity of religions."

Vatican encyclicals are the most authoritative form of papal teaching, and they traditionally take their titles from the first two words of the text. In this case, *Fratelli tutti* is a quote from the Admonitions, the guidelines penned by St. Francis in the 13th century.

The title of the encyclical sparked controversy in the English-speaking world, with critics noting that a straight translation of the word *fratelli* (brothers) excludes women. The Vatican has insisted that the plural form of the word is gender-inclusive.

Francis's decision to sign the document in Assisi, to where he traveled on October 3, and release it on St. Francis's feast day is yet further evidence of the outsized influence the saint has had on the papacy of the Jesuit pope.

Francis is the first pope to name himself after the mendicant friar, who renounced a wealthy, dissolute lifestyle to embrace a life of poverty and service to the poor.

—Associated Press