European Journal of Environment and Public Health
2023, 7(3), em0137
e-ISSN: 2542-4904
https://www.ejeph.com

MODESTUM

Review Article

OPEN ACCESS

Fratelli tutti–Clerical dimensions of (planetary) health

Florian Fischer [1]*

[1] Institute of Public Health, Charité–Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Berlin, GERMANY
***Corresponding Author:** florian.fischer1@charite.de

Citation: Fischer F. Fratelli tutti–Clerical dimensions of (planetary) health. EUR J ENV PUBLIC HLT. 2023;7(3):em0137. https://doi.org/10.29333/ejeph/13051

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 18 Feb. 2023

Accepted: 08 Mar. 2023

ABSTRACT

On October 3, 2020, Pope Francis released his encyclical *Fratelli tutti* in Assisi. It describes a "new vision of fraternity and social friendship" (article 6). However, it is also a paradigm for planetary health. This contribution points to some aspects described in the encyclical and connects the visions on humanity and nature to the overall aims of planetary health. It shows that great and strong actions are needed to counteract the challenges caused by COVID-19 and the Anthropocene. *Fratelli tutti* is an example that clergy has the potential to initiate transformations by shaping new meanings and dictums related to planetary health.

Keywords: global health, planetary health, health determinant, social dimension, Pope, church

INTRODUCTION

Already 800 years ago, St. Francis of Assisi emphasized the relation between humanity and nature. His doctrines have led to essential changes in Christianity and environmental concerns then and now. He is not merely the patron Saint of Italy, but also patron Saint of animals and ecology. Therefore, St. Francis of Assisi is often depicted as a kind of early environmentalist nowadays. Analyses of Francis' writings, particularly the Canticle of the Sun, emphasize that many of his beliefs concerning the proper relation of humanity to the natural world either have their antecedents in writings or monastic orders of medieval times, while other ideas and practice–particularly his nature mysticism, concept of familial relationships with created things, and extension of chivalric conceptions to interactions with creatures–are entirely his own [1]. Consistent with elements of traditions from many religions, St. Francis of Assisi claimed the ethos of equality, unity of nature, poverty, and attention to basic human needs. In environmental literature, this 'egalitarian holism' is frequently cited to exemplify an ecologically correct environmental ethos [2].

When looking in statements of St. Francis of Assisi, the phrases 'ecology' or 'environment' are not used, because these are relatively modern terms that have been used in the current sense since only the 19th century (*ecology*) and 20th century (*environment*), respectively. Also, the concrete concept 'nature' is not mentioned, because St. Francis of Assisi was not a writer of philosophical treatises, but of religious texts that speak of the manifestations of God's creation in concreto. His writings much more directly refer to animals, plants, landscapes, or fire [3]. At least indirectly, St. Francis of Assisi addressed issues of climate change–in terms of preserving and cultivating creation–and inequalities–in terms of using poverty to put life in the perspective of plenitude–already in the transition from the 12th to the 13th century [4]. But nowadays, his ideas received a new spirit due the release of the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* [5] by Pope Francis in Assisi on October 3, 2020. An encyclical is a letter circulated by the Pope to Catholic churches worldwide. It is sent directly from the Pope to Catholics all over the world and is often addressed to all people of good will, namely non-Catholics who may also want to read the document. This third encyclical of Pope Francis claims the need of a new world order. It should act as a wake-up-call for the catholic church, which was impaired by various failures obvious in (contemporary) history. However, *Fratelli tutti* could also serve as a roadmap and support for

(1) acknowledging the relevance of planetary health,

(2) implementing adequate activities for promoting the health of people and planet, and, therefore,

(3) correcting and overcoming social, political, and economic failures of the past, which have been driven by capitalism and exploitation of natural resources.

PLANETARY HEALTH

Planetary health is concerned with the relationship between human health and the natural environment. The concept was founded by the Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission on Planetary Health [6]. It emphasizes that human health depends on well-functioning ecosystems and on human activities to maintain these ecosystems in good

condition. Degradation of air, water, and soils, combined with significant loss of biodiversity, have a substantial negative impact on health. These consist of loss of food security, loss of water availability, more frequent contact with communicable and non-communicable diseases, and more deaths attributable to extreme weather events. The concept is somehow complementary to the concepts of environmental health, eco-health, one health, international health, and global health [7], but has a broader scope and includes the health of the overall ecosystem.

Planetary health is a solutions-oriented, transdisciplinary field focusing on relationships between economic development, environmental degradation, and human health [8]. By doing so, the concept of planetary health emphasizes the need of system thinking to adequately address the complexity in linkages between environmental changes and human health. Furthermore, it is a social movement focusing on analyzing and addressing the impacts of human disruptions to earth's natural systems on human health and all life on earth [9] during the Anthropocene, which is defined as the geological epoch dating from the commencement of significant human impact on earth's geology and ecosystems, including, but not limited to, anthropogenic climate change [10]. In addition, planetary health aims at creating resilient social-ecological systems, and, thereby, at least implicitly addresses social dimensions of health [6].

CLERICAL DIMENSIONS OF (PLANETARY) HEALTH

This is where the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* [2] comes into play: At its core, the encyclical is a "new vision of fraternity and social friendship" (article 6), as it has been at the heart of St. Francis' teaching. In addition, it is full of direct and indirect implications and recommendations for improving populations health and planetary health. For that reason, one might consider complementing the view on social and political determinants of health on the clerical determinants. Despite secularization, clergy has the potential to initiate transformations–in itself and in society. In particular, it can shape new meanings and dictums related to planetary health, as it has now been approached in the encyclical. For example, the relevance of the health-in-all-policies approach [11] is explicitly emphasized by stating the need for "health politics, involving the most diverse sectors and skills" (article 179). But it goes much deeper: The encyclical makes a strong argument in the need for a "community of belonging and solidarity" (article 36) as a moral value and need for the contemporary world to survive.

The overarching topics of common responsibility and charity in times of COVID-19 go along with the question whether the "new normality" is not equal to somehow "obsolescent values". The Christian–and social–perspective as illustrated in the encyclical might, therefore, shed a light on recent and relevant issues. Firstly, each of us, be it politicians, economists, or any member of the (global) society needs to broaden the view from individual's well-being to population's well-being: "We are more alone than ever in an increasingly massified world that promotes individual interests and weakens the communitarian dimension of life" (article 12).

Secondly, we must not forget that planetary health depends on close interlinkages between human civilization and the natural system [6]: "Let us realize that as our minds and hearts narrow, the less capable we become of understanding the world around us" (article 147). This needs to be considered when communicating for example the effects of climate change in many regards. An understanding of the direct impact of climate change on each of us is needed to avoid that people perceive its impact as far away (either in terms of time or region). Furthermore, the connotation (e.g., "deficit model" vs. "gain model") and framing of information (be it emotion-based or formulated in a factually neutral way) need to be considered.

Thirdly, this implies that no longer financial values, but social values should be in the focus: "'Opening up to the world' is an expression that has been co-opted by the economic and financial sector and is now used exclusively of openness to foreign interests or to the freedom of economic powers to invest without obstacles or complications in all countries" (article 12).

Fourthly, it is obvious that (exponential) growth cannot be endless and we need to respect natural and social boarders: "Some economic rules have proved effective for growth, but not for integral human development" (article 21). This relates to the concept of planetary boundaries, which emphasizes that humanity can only develop and thrive in the coming centuries as long as human activities do not lead to an exceedance of these boundaries ("safe operating space") [12]. However, by 2015, already four out of nine of these boundaries (i.e., climate change, biosphere integrity, biochemical matter flow, and land use change) have already been exceeded [13].

Finally, continuous efforts are needed to make the world a better place: "Goodness, together with love, justice, and solidarity, are not achieved once and for all; they have to be realized each day" (article 11).

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, these are great and strong words in the encyclical. However, this is just one example of a writing of one religious leader. It has not been the first emphasis of the current Pope Francis to put more emphasis on topics related to our environment: Already in 2015, he released his second encyclical entitled *Laudato si'–On care for our common home* [14]. It was claimed to be an encyclical on the environment and human ecology, connecting both environmental and social issues. It should be a new step in the social teaching within the Catholic church and a roadmap for building more just societies that protect human life and the whole creation. At the time the encyclical *Laudato si'* was published (June 18, 2015), many held great hopes that it would be a powerful voice of influence in three major United Nations moments, one of which was the UNFCCC Paris Agreement on climate change and greenhouse gas emissions.

Just like *Fratelli tutti* also *Laudato si'* was inspired by the ideas of Francis of Assisi, particularly his Canticle of the Sun

(also known as 'Praise of the Creatures'), which was written in old Italian (Umbrian dialect) in the winter of 1224/25. The Canticle of the Sun is a prayer, which is not merely a hymn to God's creation, but also challenges us in our behavior toward the world and in our acceptance of illness and dying. Again, this highlights the close relationship between environment and health claimed already hundreds of years ago by St. Francis of Assisi and now re-addressed by Pope Francis in his encyclicals. In *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis explicitly addresses the need for change, which may also act as a paradigm for promoting planetary health: "In calling to mind the figure of Saint Francis of Assisi, we come to realize that a healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion, which entails the recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change" (article 218).

Although it is remarkable, indeed, that religious leaders of Christianity are converging on the issue of ecology as a central platform of their ministry, Christianity may only serve as an example here. Nevertheless, the intentions behind the statements of the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* selected for this paper may hold true for all religions and all people worldwide. For overcoming the challenges in the context of planetary health, we need to stand together, irrespective of religion, ethnicity or gender. Although the exclusive use of the masculine in *Fratelli tutti* is certainly inappropriate, it should not be forgotten that St. Francis of Assisi in his scriptures always called for his "brothers" and "sisters", implying that "Fratelli" means to include the whole humanity.

In a revision of the Episcopal Church's calendar of saints, it is expressed with astonishment that St. Francis of Assisi is "sometimes dismissed as simply a quiet bird-watcher", whereas he actually was an outspoken and controversial social activist [15]. Such kind of social activism is also needed in times of secularism from representatives of all religious communities in concerted actions. Furthermore, there is a need to bridge the gap between theological visions, political will or options for action, and scientific evidence. Clerical dimensions of (planetary) health are, therefore, not new dimensions of health. But religious leaders should formulate dogmas and visions, which are picked up by the population and political leaders for strengthening the efforts in the fight for protecting the natural and social environment.

This paper has shown that great and strong words have been formulated–already several times. Now great and strong actions need to follow to counteract the challenges caused by climate change (e.g., the increase in zoonoses or emerging infectious diseases) and the Anthropocene. It is serious, compelling, and demanding–but the only way to save humankind and nature: For healthy people on a healthy planet. Or–in other words–as stated in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*: "To care for the world in which we live means to care for ourselves" (article 17).

Funding: No funding source is reported for this review article.

Declaration of interest: No conflict of interest is declared by the author.

Ethical statement: Author stated that ethical approval was not required since it is a literature-based article.

Data sharing statement: All data are publicly available in existing literature.

REFERENCES

1. Sorrell RD. St. Francis of Assisi and nature: Tradition and innovation in Western Christian attitudes toward the environment. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2009.
2. Franz EH. Francis of Assisi, saint (1181-1226). In: Alexander DE, Fairbridge RW, editors. Environmental geology. Encyclopedia of earth science. Dordrecht: Springer; 1999. p. 262-263. https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-4494-1_141
3. Boersma JJ. Why is Francis of Assisi the patron saint of ecologists? Sci Christ Belief. 2002;14:51-77.
4. Speelman WM. The Franciscan *Usus Pauper*: Using poverty to put life in the perspective of plenitude. Palgrave Commun. 2018;4:77. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0134-4
5. The Holy See. Encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti* of the Holy Father Francis on fraternity and social friendship. Available at: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (Accessed: 6 January 2023).
6. Whitmee S, Haines A, Beyrer C, et al. Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene epoch: Report of The Rockefeller Foundation–Lancet Commission on planetary health. Lancet. 2015;386(10007):1973-2028. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)60901-1 PMid:26188744
7. Koplan JP, Bond TC, Merson MH, et al. Towards a common definition of global health. Lancet. 2009;373(9679):1993-5. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(09)60332-9 PMid:19493564
8. Iyer HS, DeVille NV, Stoddard O, et al. Sustaining planetary health through systems thinking: Public health's critical role. SSM Popul Health. 2021;15:100844. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2021.100844 PMid:34179331 PMCid:PMC8213960
9. Guzmán CAF, Aguirre AA, Astle B, et al. A framework to guide planetary health education. Lancet Planet Health. 2021;5(5):253-5. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00110-8 PMid:33894134
10. Lewis SL, Maslin MA. Defining the anthropocene. Nature. 2013;519(7542):171-80. https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14258 PMid:25762280
11. Kickbusch I. Health in all policies: Where to from here? Health Promot Int. 2010;25(3):261-4. https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daq055 PMid:20702678
12. Rockström J, Steffen W, Noone K, et al. A safe operating space for humanity. Nature. 2009;461(7263):472-5. https://doi.org/10.1038/461472a PMid:19779433
13. Steffen W, Richardson K, Rockström J, et al. Planetary boundaries: Guiding human development on a changing planet. Science. 2015;347(6223):1259855. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1259855 PMid:25592418
14. The Holy See. Encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* of the Holy Father Francis on care for our common care. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf (Accessed 6 January 2023).

15. Church Publishing Incorporated. Holy women, holy men: Celebrating the Saints. New York, NY: Church Publishing Inc.; 2010. p. 785.