

Fraternity in the Catholic Monastic Tradition

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“Fraternity” has a long history and rich theological connotations in Christianity, and particularly in its monastic tradition. “Fraternity,” or its synonym “brotherhood,” is also an important theme in Western culture. For example:

- the line from the famous Saint Crispin's Day speech in William Shakespeare's play *Henry V*: “*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; for he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother*”;¹
- the expression “*Liberté, Fraternité, Égalité*,” which became the battle cry of the French Revolution and inspired the movement towards democracy in the West;

1. Act IV, Scene iii.

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- the phrase “*Alle Menschen werden Brüder*”² from the famous choral finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which could be described as a musical representation of Universal Brotherhood;
- the closing words of the song “America,” which has all but become the second national anthem of the United States: “. . . and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.”

It must be said, however, that the theological and cultural implications of “fraternity” or “brotherhood” are also problematic. Not only does the root meaning of those two words exclude one half of humanity, but in the early Christian tradition they were used in an even more exclusive sense to refer to the followers of Jesus alone. Moreover, in the Christian monastic tradition, to call someone a “brother” was for many centuries an indication of that person's lower status in the community.

We have to confess, therefore, that in the Christian tradition, “fraternity” and “brotherhood” bear the heavy weight of having been used to express not universality and equality, but exclusivity and inferiority. On the other hand, Pope Francis is using this term to mean brotherhood and sisterhood in the sense of being related as members of siblings in a family: universal brotherhood/sisterhood in the family of humankind. It is in this sense that we address the notion of fraternity in interreligious dialogue today, as I will address below.

2. “All men shall become brothers,” from Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller's *An die Freude* [Ode to Joy] (1785).

The Christian and monastic understanding of “fraternity” is rooted in the figurative use of the word *αδελφοί*, “brethren,” in the New Testament. As one scholar puts it:

Jesus calls his hearers or his disciples His brethren, and He also uses the same term to describe the relations of the disciples to one another (Mt 23:8; Lk 22:32) . . . Christians are certainly to see themselves as His brethren . . . (Rom 8:29; Heb 2:11–12).³

In the letters of Paul alone, *αδελφοί* appears 130 times, always in the sense of “fellow Christians.” What makes Christians “brothers” is their faith and trust in Jesus as the only-begotten Son of God. This faith and trust give them a share in his divine Sonship, and thus makes them brothers of one another. In the New Testament, someone who is not a baptized follower of Jesus is never referred to as a “brother.”

In the early Western monastic tradition, the term “*fratres*” (brothers) is virtually the equivalent of “*monachi*” (monks). It expressed the radical equality of all the members of the monastic community. Although it is true that Saint Benedict devotes an entire chapter of his Rule for Monks to “Community Rank,” the kind of ranking he is referring to is not about dignity or preeminence. It refers rather to one’s place in the community, and that place, Benedict says, is determined “according the date of their entry, the virtue of their lives, and the decision of the abbot.”⁴

3. Hans Freiherr von Soden, “*αδελφός*” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 145.

4. *The Rule of Benedict*, 63:1. *RB 1980*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville Minn: Liturgical Press, 1981), 279.

In the Middle Ages, a two-class system was introduced into Western monasticism. Monastic communities were divided into choir monks and lay brothers. The choir monks were ordained to the priesthood and devoted themselves to ritual prayer and intellectual pursuits; the “lay brothers” did manual labor and often were the servants of the choir monks. The title “Brother” thus became an indication of a monk’s inferior status within the community. A lay brother, for example, did not have a vote in community deliberations and within a monastic community. A lay brother who may have been a member of the community for fifty years was nevertheless junior to a choir monk novice who had just entered. That two-class system was finally put to rest after the Second Vatican Council, and now it is not uncommon for monks who are priests and even abbots to refer to themselves as “Brother.”

However, the tradition—and the practice—of fraternity in Western monasticism is much deeper and stronger than the regrettable development of a two-class system that came into being in the Middle Ages and lasted until fairly recent times. The beginnings of fraternity as a monastic value and practice go back to the very beginnings of Christian monasticism in fourth-century Egypt, when men and women began to separate themselves from civil society and go into the desert to devote themselves to prayer and penance. This movement toward a monastic way of life also began to develop in other areas of the Mideast, but the documentary evidence from Egypt is particularly rich. While the first monks who went into the desert did so to live as hermits, a coenobitic (community) form of monasticism was soon introduced by Pachomius.

Secondary documents tend to emphasize the ascetic feats of these early monks: for example, fasting, keeping vigil, or bizarre practices such as living on top of a pole (e.g., Simeon Stylites).

Primary documents, however—that is the monks’ own sayings (*Apophthegmata*)—present another picture. As Benedicta Ward, who translated and edited the *Alphabetical Collection* of these sayings, rightly observes, the aim of the monk’s life was not asceticism but God, and the way to God was through charity. “One of the marks of this charity,” she writes, “was that the fathers did not judge.”⁵

The teaching and practice of the desert monks was an expression of their obedience to Jesus’s command, “Stop judging” (Mt 7:1; Lk 6:37). The usual translation of μὴ κρίνετε is “Do not judge.” However, a more accurate translation of the forcefulness of the active imperative form of the verb used by both Matthew and Luke, would be “Stop judging” or “Don’t even think of judging.”⁶ It is very possible that the monks also placed such great emphasis on not judging others because they were aware of how easy it is for those who are pursuing a more intense spiritual life to disparage those who are not as “holy” as they are. Over time, they probably also learned that any effort to “reform” others that sprang from an attitude of condemnation was doomed to failure.

Here are a few examples of sayings of these early monks about not judging others. They are all taken from the above-mentioned book of Benedicta Ward and are available, along with other sayings on not judging, on the website “OrthodoxRoad”:

5. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. and ed. Benedicta Ward, SLG, revised edition (Kalamazoo Mich.: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1984), xxv.

6. The use of the present imperative in Greek is a way of indicating a general rule, of what should always or never be done.

ABBA MACARIUS THE GREAT

- If you reprove someone, you yourself get carried away by anger and you are satisfying your own passion; do not lose yourself, therefore, in order to save another.
- Do no evil to anyone, and do not judge anyone. Observe this and you will be saved.

ABBA JOSEPH OF PANEPHYSIS

- If you want to find rest here below, and hereafter, in all circumstances say “Who am I?” and do not judge anyone.

ABBA MOSES THE BLACK

- The monk must die to his neighbor and never judge him at all, in any way whatever.
- This is what it means not to judge. Do not have hostile feelings towards anyone and do not let dislike dominate your heart; do not hate him who hates his neighbor.
- If the monk does not think in his heart that he is a sinner, God will not hear him. A brother asked, “What does that mean, to think in his heart that he is a sinner?” Then Abba Moses said, “When someone is occupied with his own faults, he does not see those of his neighbor.”

ABBA XANTHIAS

- A dog is better than I am, for he has love and he does not judge.

Through the writings of John Cassian, who travelled through the Egyptian desert gathering the teachings of its monastic inhabitants and their stories, the wisdom of these monks was

disseminated in the West and found its way into the sixth-century Rule of Benedict, which eventually became the dominant rule of life for Western monks. Although Benedict recognized the validity of the eremitic life, his Rule was written for cenobites. Especially in the latter chapters of the rule he emphasizes the kind of non-judgmental behavior that is essential for the creation of fraternity. For example, in chapter 72, “The Good Zeal of Monks,” which can be read as a distillation of his teaching on what is necessary for true fraternity, he writes:

Just as there is a wicked zeal of bitterness which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal which separates from evil and leads to God and everlasting life. This, then, is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love: They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other, supporting with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behavior, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another.

In other words, stop judging!

Fraternity was a prominent theme in the apostolic exhortation *Gaudium Evangelii*, “The Joy of the Gospel,” that Pope Francis issued on November 24, 2013, the first year of his pontificate.⁷ On

7. For example, no. 179: “This inseparable bond between our acceptance of the message of salvation and genuine fraternal love appears in several scriptural texts which we would do well to meditate upon, in order to appreciate all their consequences. The message is one which we often take for granted, and can repeat almost mechanically, without necessarily ensuring that it has a real effect on our lives and in our communities. How dangerous and harmful this is, for it makes us lose our amazement, our

the following January 1, he made fraternity the subject of his message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace. That message was entitled “Fraternity, The Foundation and Pathway to Peace.” A couple of months later the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue chose fraternity as the theme for its 2014 Message for the Feast of Vesakh, entitled “Buddhists and Christians: Together Fostering Fraternity.” In light of the way “fraternity” has been understood and used in the cultural and religious traditions of the West, what can we say of this present-day emphasis on fraternity in the Catholic Church, especially in the context of Buddhist-Christian dialogue?

First of all, I would point out that these three documents, at least in their English versions, make it quite clear that “fraternity” includes both men and women, as is shown by the consistent interpretation of this word to mean “brothers and sisters.” It should be noted that in many modern English translations of the Bible, ἀδελφοί is now translated as “brothers and sisters,” or by words such as “beloved” or “believers.”

Second, these documents do not refer to Buddhists or the followers of other religious traditions as “brothers and sisters *in Christ*.” The word “fraternity” is used in the more inclusive sense to mean that we all share a common humanity or that we are partners in a common mission or quest. Understanding fraternity to mean that we all share a common humanity is what we also find in *Nostra Aetate*, the declaration of the Second Vatican Council

excitement and our zeal for living the Gospel of fraternity and justice! God’s word teaches that our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation for each of us: ‘As you did it to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me’ (*Mt* 25:40).”

on the church's relation to other religions. Even though the words "fraternity" or "brotherhood" do not appear in the document, it is explicitly stated that the reason Christians not only can but also must enter into respectful, collaborative, and mutually enriching relationships with the followers of other religions is because "One is the community of all peoples, one their origin." Having begun with that statement, the document concludes with the words:

We [Christians] cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God. Man's relation to God the Father and his relation to men his brothers are so linked together that Scripture says: "He who does not love does not know God." (1 Jn 4:8)

As is obvious, inclusive language was not the norm when the Vatican documents were written and translated.

I am sure that Buddhists would appreciate and accept much, if not most, of what Pope Francis says in his New Year's message on fraternity. For example, I think few here would have a problem with his statement:

The grave financial and economic crises of the present time—which find their origin in the progressive distancing of man from God and from his neighbor, in the greedy pursuit of material goods on the one hand, and in the impoverishment of interpersonal and community relations on the other—have pushed man to seek satisfaction, happiness and security in consumption and earnings out of all proportion to the principles of a sound economy. (no. 6)

However, Pope Francis's grounding of fraternity in an exclusively Christian worldview or theology would, I suspect, cause some discomfort among Buddhists. For instance, he asserts: "True brotherhood among people *presupposes and demands* a transcendent Fatherhood."⁸ I believe Buddhists would contend that while it is appropriate for Christians to use this kind of God-language, there are other ways of providing a coherent explanation of the basis of true fraternity, as has been presented in our dialogue here.

In our discussion today I personally hope to learn more about the place of fraternity within the Buddhist traditions. What is the basis of human fraternity? Is it an important value that needs to be protected and promoted? Where and how is it especially threatened today? How might we join forces to respond to these threats? It would be my hope that if our understandings of fraternity are different—and I presume that they are, at least to some degree—those differences will complement one another and actually help us increase our awareness of and response to the suffering caused when people regard each other as enemies and strangers rather than as brothers and sisters.

The greetings that the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue sent to Buddhists last year for the Feast of Vesakh explicitly acknowledges that our differences of understanding may actually be a strength when it says:

8. "At the same time, it appears clear that contemporary ethical systems remain incapable of producing authentic bonds of fraternity, since a fraternity devoid of reference to a common Father as its ultimate foundation is unable to endure. True brotherhood among people presupposes and demands a transcendent Fatherhood. Based on the recognition of this fatherhood, human fraternity is consolidated: each person becomes a *neighbor* who cares for others" (no. 11). Emphasis added.

Drawing upon our different religious convictions, we are called especially to be *outspoken* in denouncing all those social ills which damage fraternity; to be *healers* who enable others to grow in selfless generosity, and to be *reconcilers* who break down the walls of division and foster genuine brotherhood between individuals and groups in society. (no. 5)

May our coming together these days help us find ways to awaken people to the injustice, greed, and falsehood that causes so much suffering in our society and to cooperate in bringing about the healing and reconciliation without which there can be no true fraternity.

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