

The Culture of Encounter: Welcome, Listen, Engage

Fabio Cardinal Baggio CS

Introduction

During the first part of our reflection, I was invited to talk about the culture of encounter, one of Pope Francis' suggestions to heal the world's ills.

We are currently living in a complex historical moment, marked by profound issues that are negatively affecting human relationships, threatening the safety of our 'common home' and jeopardizing the future of upcoming generations. Today, confrontations seem to prevail over encounters, manifesting themselves in daily life as well as in conflict zones that have sadly increased in this early part of the millennium.

And in addressing this audience, I cannot disregard the migration context, which represents a layer within an already complex situation. Mainstream opinions on human mobility do not encourage the encounter with others, rather they foster mistrust and the rejection of strangers.

For this very reason, it is important today to stress the culture of encounter as a prophetic gesture, even if this means going against the tide.

During the time allotted to me, I would like to outline the concept of the culture of encounter, drawing directly from Pope Francis' teachings and especially from the Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti* (FT). I will also try to highlight some striking points between Pope Bergoglio's and Pope Leo's thoughts, in order to shed light on the continuity of Magisterium between these two popes.

The Culture of Encounter

In FT, published in 2020, Pope Francis interpreted the reality of the contemporary world, by pointing out a number of trends that "hinder the development of universal fraternity." (FT, 9) Among these dangerous trends, the Argentine Pontiff also mentioned 'the throwaway culture' he had already referred to in the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* (see LS, 16, 22 and 43). FT underscores the serious effects of this culture on human relationships.

Some parts of our human family, it appears, can be readily sacrificed for the sake of others considered worthy of a carefree existence. Ultimately, "persons are no longer seen as a paramount value to be cared for and respected, especially when they are poor and disabled, 'not yet useful' – like the unborn, or 'no longer needed' – like the elderly. We have grown indifferent to all kinds of wastefulness, starting with the waste of food, which is deplorable in the extreme." (FT, 18)

The throwaway culture is especially present in the general perception of contemporary migration processes, within which, due to undeniable differences, it is easier to distinguish between 'us' and 'the others', thereby justifying their exclusion.

Migrants are not seen as entitled like others to participate in the life of society, and it is forgotten that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person. Hence they ought to be "agents in their own redemption". No one will ever openly deny that they are human beings, yet in practice, by our decisions and the way we treat them, we can show that we consider them less worthy, less important, less human. For Christians, this way of thinking and acting is unacceptable, since it sets certain political preferences above deep convictions of our faith: the inalienable dignity of each human person regardless of origin, race or religion, and the supreme law of fraternal love. (FT, 39)

The throwaway culture, that peddles the illusion of omnipotence and membership in a global elite, inexorably leads to a preoccupation of one's own interests, to isolation, and to the death of fraternity. To save humanity and its ideals, and to enable it to fulfill God's creative plan, Pope Francis calls upon everyone to promote the culture of encounter.

"Life, for all its confrontations, is the art of encounter". I have frequently called for the growth of a culture of encounter capable of transcending our differences and divisions. This means working to create a many-faceted polyhedron whose different sides form a variegated unity, in which "the whole is greater than the part". (FT, 215)

The encounter with the other represents an essential dimension of human existence. The quality of human relationships determines the process of growth and the attainment of happiness for every person. "Others are constitutively necessary for the construction of a full life" (FT, 150). A human being, Pope Francis adds, "does not experience the true beauty of life without relating to others" (FT, 87).

All the encounters with others are potentially enriching, and this potential is directly proportional to the otherness of the person one meets. The more different, the more 'other' that person is, the more they will allow the person meeting them to grow in knowledge and humanity.

It is in this perspective that we must understand Pope Francis' calling to prioritize the encounter with those living in the existential peripheries, people who "have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centres of power where weighty decisions are made" (FT, 215). As the Argentine Pontiff explained in July 2019, these existential peripheries "are densely populated by people who are cast aside, marginalized, oppressed, discriminated against, abused, exploited, abandoned, poor and suffering" (Francis, 2019a).

In the midst of people living in the existential peripheries, there are many migrants, refugees, displaced people and victims of trafficking that have become "emblems of exclusion. In addition to the hardships that their condition entails, they are often looked down upon and considered the source of all society's ills." (Francis, 2019b). Forgoing the encounter with them means depriving oneself of "the gift present in an

encounter with those outside one's own circle" (FT, 90); it means missing an "opportunity for enrichment and for the integral human development of all" (FT, 133).

According to Pope Francis, to prevent an encounter from turning into a confrontation, at least three preparatory steps must be taken: a) overcoming fears; b) crossing borders; c) preparing adequately.

In communities witnessing the massive arrival of migrants and refugees, the fear of the other, perceived as a threat to personal safety and an "invader", often spreads. The risk is that this fear, often unfounded, may strongly influence human relationships, depriving many people of the desire and ability to reach out to others.

It is not easy to enter into another culture, to put oneself in the shoes of people so different from us, to understand their thoughts and their experiences. As a result we often refuse to encounter the other and raise barriers to defend ourselves. Local communities are sometimes afraid that the newly arrived will disturb the established order, will 'steal' something they have long laboured to build up. (Francis, 2018a)

In FT Pope Francis underscores that, in order to approach an encounter with a positive mindset, people must first overcome their fears. The natural instinct for self-preservation often leads to harboring doubts and apprehensions towards people who are different, foreigners. However, we are called to overcome these "primal reactions because "there is a problem when doubts and fears condition our way of thinking and acting to the point of making us intolerant, closed and perhaps even – without realizing it – racist. In this way, fear deprives us of the desire and the ability to encounter the other." (FT, 41)

Christian communities are especially called to become leaven for hosting societies, helping them to understand the complex phenomenon of migration and to foster an environment conducive to mutual encounter. In this regard, it is essential to work towards changing the narrative surrounding migrants and refugees, by engaging mass-media, starting from those with a Catholic inspiration. We must divulge the best practices of welcome and encounter, consistently use positive language when speaking of migrants and refugees, correct false representations, and promote empathy and solidarity on behalf of brothers and sisters coming from afar.

To prepare ourselves to encounter others, then, we must learn to cross boundaries. In FT Pope Francis firstly refers to geographical and political borders that in the current world end up characterizing the imbalances between those who enjoy most of the resources and those who are left with the crumbs. "If every human being possesses an inalienable dignity, if all people are my brothers and sisters, and if the world truly belongs to everyone, then it matters little whether my neighbour was born in my country or elsewhere". (FT, 125). Nevertheless, the Argentine Pontiff also refers to social, cultural, economic and religious boundaries that are being built to distinguish 'us' from 'the others'. In the name of safety "new walls are erected for self-preservation, the outside world ceases to exist and leaves only 'my' world, to the point that others, no longer considered human beings possessed of an inalienable dignity, become only 'them'." (FT, 27).

Even when geographical borders are crossed legally, other boundaries may emerge keeping foreigners on the margins of the local society. These boundaries take the form of behavioural patterns, written and unwritten rules, privileges, prejudices, and attitudes that are embedded, whether consciously or unconsciously, as driving principles in the way locals relate to foreigners. Such internalized boundaries can jeopardize migrants' efforts to integrate positively into the host community, potentially leading to the creation of ghettos and the emergence of deviant behaviour. In host societies, Christians are called to be "*bridge-builders*, fostering enriching dialogue and sharing between the local population and newcomers." (Migrants & Refugees Section, 2022:5).

Thirdly, the encounter with others, with those who are different, with migrants, is neither spontaneous nor automatic. It is the result of a lengthy process of preparation, involving especially local communities that must be equipped and ready for meaningful and life-giving encounters with migrants and refugees. For us Christians, this preparation must be integrated into faith formation across all educational settings: schools, catechism classes, youth groups, and religious education programs: "It is important that catechesis and preaching speak more directly and clearly about the social meaning of existence, the fraternal dimension of spirituality, our conviction of the inalienable dignity of each person, and our reasons for loving and accepting our brothers and sisters." (FT, 86)

Preparation for such encounters must also create opportunities to experience direct contact with migrants and refugees. Parishes should provide spaces for sharing experiences and celebrating cultural diversity. All members of Christian communities are invited to reach out to newcomers and invite them to join in parish life: "What is important is to create *processes* of encounter, processes that build a people that can accept differences. Let us arm our children with the weapons of dialogue! Let us teach them to fight the good fight of the culture of encounter!" (FT 217)

Since we are talking on the topic of encounter, its preparation is not the sole responsibility of host communities. Even those people arriving to settle in a new community must be open and well-disposed toward diversity. First and foremost, they must pay attention to the local community to understand its culture, language, and customs, in order to be fully integrated, a process that, according to Pope Francis, "implies a two-way process, based on mutual knowledge, mutual openness, respect for the laws and culture of the host countries with a true spirit of encounter and mutual enrichment."" (Francis, 2021)

Once these three preparatory steps have been completed, we can proceed with the actual encounter. The encounter itself consists of a number of actions that set up its various stages. For the purpose of this discussion, I have selected three verbs that I consider particularly significant within the context of the pastoral care of migrants: *to welcome*, *listen*, and *engage*. Beginning with the teachings of Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV and reflecting on specific passages drawn from Sacred Scripture, I would like to specifically delve into each of these three verbs.

To Welcome

The term 'welcome' refers to the act of receiving a person. In everyday language, it has generally taken on a positive connotation, denoting a benevolent and kind attitude toward the person being received. The concept of *welcome* is closely linked to hospitality, so much so that the two terms are often used as synonyms. Sacred Scripture offers a number of interesting insights to better understand the concept of welcome/hospitality from a Christian perspective. The account of Abraham and the three angels at the oaks of Mamre (Gen 18:1-14) serves as a cornerstone for our reflection.

Life in the desert and arid lands of the ancient Middle East was somehow harsh. Survival depended on access to water, food, and shelter. Knowing this from their own experience, the nomadic people of Israel devised a code of hospitality to govern every encounter with foreign travellers. This constituted a genuine 'duty of hospitality,' which Abraham put into practice during his encounter with the three wayfarers.

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on - since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." (Gen 18,1-5)

Abraham's exquisite hospitality appears all the more precious when one considers the fact that the patriarch is unaware of the three strangers' true identity. When the divine nature of his guests is revealed to him, the patriarch prostrates himself in adoration. Abraham's hospitality is thus rewarded with a special revelation: the announcement of Isaac's birth, the beginning of a descendance as numerous as the stars in the sky, just as God had promised him (see Gen 15:5).

The duty of solidarity toward strangers, whether resident or passing through, stems from an awareness of the condition of vulnerability and discrimination that often mark the experiences of migration and exile. Similar teachings are frequently repeated in the Old Testament, underscoring the importance of hospitality in the Jewish law. In the eyes of the Lord, there are three categories of people in need who are particularly worthy of protection: orphans, widows, and strangers: "You shall not deprive the stranger or the orphan of justice, nor take the widow's garment in pledge." (Deut 24:17)

In Christian tradition, the idea of welcome takes on a new dimension that goes far beyond a duty blessed by God. In the famous parable of the merciful father (Lk 15:11-32), we find the first essential element of Christian welcome. Welcoming means making room for the other person within "my" own space. As soon as he catches sight of his lost son, the father runs to embrace him and immediately orders the servants to bring the finest clothes and slaughter the fattened calf to celebrate his return. Faced

with such generosity, the older brother's negative reaction is understandable. Indeed, he believed he was entitled to a sort of "right of priority" due to his loyalty to the family. He felt the younger brother was encroaching upon a space that was rightfully his. Yet, he cannot alter his father's welcoming attitude. The father sees in the returning son a guest, a stranger, and "the lost one" for whom one must open up one's space and hold a celebration.

From a Christian perspective, welcoming others means allowing them to enter one's own world, thereby sparking a process of positive transformation in both parties. By welcoming, one does not "lose" one's own space, but rather enriches it with the presence of the other: "The presence of migrants and refugees represents a great challenge, but at the same time an immense opportunity for the cultural and spiritual growth of everyone. Thanks to them, we have the chance to know better our world and its beautiful diversity. We can grow in our common humanity and build an ever greater sense of togetherness 'us' together." (Francis, 2022a).

From the Gospel perspective, welcoming the other means ensuring space and time for an encounter. The evangelist Luke tells us how Jesus asks Zacchaeus, a wealthy chief of tax collectors in Jericho, to welcome Him to dine into his home (Lk 19:1-10). The encounter is held in a suitable place and time. The home is the ideal place for fostering an intimate relationship and breaking down the social barriers we often erect for self-protection. The chosen moment is a meal, a convivial and family time. It is an impromptu, informal meal that allows for a sincere sharing of life, transcending ceremonial formalities. Jesus' decision to visit Zacchaeus' home is in itself an act of welcome that paves the way to salvation: "Having the Lord there, in his house, makes him see everything with different eyes, even with a little of the tenderness with which Jesus looked at him. And his way of seeing and using money also changes: the gesture of is replaced by that of giving." (Francis, 2019c).

Surely, we know from the Gospel that welcoming the other, especially someone in need, means welcoming Christ Himself. The well-known parable of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:34-40) identifies the King-Judge, namely Christ Himself, with the needy people who were (or were not) cared for. The surprise of the righteous stems from the fact that they had not recognized the Son of God present in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner whom they had helped. In fact, it is not a matter of automatic recognition, but of an extraordinary ability to look beyond appearances: "It is truly Him, even though our eyes find it hard to recognize Him: with His clothing in rags, His feet dirty, His face disfigured, His body wounded, unable to speak our language..." (Francis, 2019d)

Christians are called to "recognize Christ himself in every abandoned or excluded brother or sister" (Francis, 2022b). Such acknowledgement transforms every encounter with people living in the existential peripheries into a genuine opportunity to encounter Jesus Christ himself. From this perspective, the desire for this encounter should spontaneously arise in the heart of every believer; and this attitude, in addition to being an act of fraternity, represents a theophanic event. In migration, this theophanic dimension appears somehow amplified, as the otherness of migrants and refugees better signifies the otherness of God. If it is true that every encounter with

the least and the poor is a real encounter with God, then the more people we encounter differ from us, the more they reveal the 'Totally Other' nature of God.

In his magisterium, Pope Leo XIV reiterates the concept of welcome as a fundamental element of the encounter we are all called to seek, particularly with those who come from far away.

Every welcoming society has responsibilities toward those who arrive, and those who are welcomed also discover that dignity, recognized as a right, flourishes when it becomes a duty and a sincere desire to build together with others. In this way, those who arrived as strangers can rediscover bonds, rebuild trust and feel like a living part of a community. (Leo XIV, 2026a)

In his Message for the 112th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, the Holy Father makes a direct reference to the Christological principle for encountering the migrant.

Every child, every human being, possesses an infinite dignity. Each is created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen 1:26); each is a presence of the Lord. Before every migrant child, we are called to make an act of humanity and faith, for we are able to welcome and encounter the Lord. This call becomes even more pressing in the light of another of the Lord's affirmations in the Gospel of Matthew: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35). (Leo, 2026b)

To Listen

A second important aspect of the encounter is listening. In this regard, I would like to begin my reflection with a personal anecdote. In January 2017, during the first meeting with Pope Francis with the two newly appointed under-secretaries of the Migrants and Refugees Section, Fr. Michael Czerny and myself, the Argentine Pontiff explained that the newly established Section was to have three main activities: listening, listening, and listening! With a touch of good-humoured irony, Pope Bergoglio wished to emphasize the importance of listening when engaging with local communities, whose care lay at the heart of our mandate.

In his magisterial teachings, Pope Francis repeatedly stressed listening as an essential element of human communication and encounter with others: "Listening is much more than simply hearing.. Hearing is about receiving information, while listening is about communication, and calls for closeness." (Francis, 2016)

For the Argentine Pontiff, listening represents a constitutive dimension of the synodal experience, an appropriate setting for encounter and dialogue among vastly different ecclesial realities. Listening to one another and listening to the Spirit are hallmarks of a true synodal Church.

Please, trust me when I tell you that by listening to the Spirit in dialogue, fraternity, and parrhesia, you will help us to understand that, prior to any differences, we are called in the Church to walk together in pursuit of God. By clothing ourselves with the

sentiments of Christ, we expand the ecclesial space so that it becomes collegial and welcoming. (Francis, 2025)

The Gospels provide a variety of interesting insights regarding listening. The account of Jesus' visit to the house of his friends in Bethany (Lk 10:38–42) can also be read from this perspective.

As they continued their journey he entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary (who) sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak. Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me." The Lord said to her in reply, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her." (Lk 10:38-42)

Without taking anything away from her good intentions, Martha's attitude toward Jesus and his disciples is marked by two significant shortcomings. On one hand, Martha does not ask her guests what they need. Since the Master and his companions have just arrived from a journey, she begins serving them, taking for granted that they want food, drink, and water to wash up. On the other hand, being overly anxious and preoccupied with so many things, Martha fails to pay attention to the persons of Jesus and his disciples. She does not 'waste' any time making them feel at ease in her home. Although driven by a noble purpose, Martha's anxiety ends up displeasing the Master. The right attitude for this special encounter is Mary's, who sits at Jesus' feet and focuses on listening to her guest.

In every encounter, and especially in the encounter with migrants, listening is essential. We must listen to other people if we wish to know them, understand their real needs, and respond to their actual wants. At Bethany, Jesus simply wanted to be heard. In the house at Bethany, listening to the word of the Son of God is undoubtedly more important than any other gesture of hospitality. And, considering that every encounter with another person is an encounter with Christ, listening to the person we meet means listening to the Master.

Listening is by no means easy. We are often more inclined to speak than to listen. As Pope Francis emphasizes, "There is a great need in the Church to listen and to listen to one another. [...] To listen before speaking, as the Apostle James exhorts: "Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak" (1:19). Freely giving some of our own time to listen to people is the first act of charity." (Francis 2022c)

We can learn how to listen directly from Jesus. The account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–53) serves as some sort of manual on listening, underscoring three fundamental moments: drawing near, paying attention, and empathizing.

And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing as you walk along?" They stopped, looking downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these

days?" And he replied to them, "What sort of things?" They said to him, "The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, how our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him. [...] And he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures. As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther. But they urged him, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. (Lk 24:15-29)

The two disciples were devastated by what had just occurred in Jerusalem and, despite the testimony of some women who had encountered the risen Jesus, were overwhelmed by the thought of the empty tomb. Filled with doubts and unable to comprehend, they left the capital, likely to return home. The first moment of listening occurs when the risen Christ draws near to the two travellers. One cannot listen from a distance; it is necessary to take the initiative and become a fellow traveller. This act of listening requires a willingness to hear, a disposition deriving from an ongoing attention to situations of need. As Pope Francis aptly explains while reflecting on Jesus's encounter with Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52), those who truly listen put on the back burner themselves and their own plans.

Instead, many of those with Jesus ordered Bartimaeus to be quiet (cf. v. 48). For such disciples, a person in need was a nuisance along the way, an obstacle unexpected and unforeseen. They preferred their own timetable above that of the Master, their own talking over listening to others. They were following Jesus, but they had their own plans in mind. This is a risk constantly to guard against. Yet, for Jesus, the cry of those pleading for help is not a nuisance but a challenge. How important it is for us to listen to life! The children of the heavenly Father are concerned with their brothers and sisters, not with useless chatter, but with the needs of their neighbours. (Francis, 2018b)

Those who really want to listen become fellow travellers with brothers and sisters facing difficulties, synchronizing their steps to other people's pace in order to better understand their complaint and their needs. This is precisely what Christ did. He "became our fellow traveller. He not only encourages us but accompanies us, stands by our side, and extends the hand of a friend." (Francis, 2015a)

The second aspect of listening involves paying attention. Once a dialogue has begun, maybe with a question as simple as "How are things going?", one must make room for other people to express themselves. This is no simple task, especially in the current era, when we tend to fill every second with our own words.

Today, we are overwhelmed by words and by the urgency to always have something to say or do. Indeed, how often when two people are talking, one does not wait for the other to finish his or her thought, but cuts the other off mid-sentence, and responds.... But if we do not allow another to speak, there is no listening. This is an ailment of our time. Today, we are overwhelmed by words, by the urgency to always have something to say or do. We are afraid of silence. How hard it is to listen to one

other! To listen till the end, to let the other express him or herself, to listen to one another in our families, to listen to one another at school, to listen to one another at work, and even in the Church! (Francis, 2022d)

True listening is done with humility, free from preconceptions or prejudices. It is a form of listening that always puts the other person first and voices out the listener's own interest by expressive attitudes and gestures.

Therefore, the first sentiment to hold in one's heart in order to truly listen is humility and to refrain from despising the little ones, whoever they may be: young people who are orphans or have fallen into the trap of drugs; families facing daily struggles or broken relationships; sinners, the poor, foreigners, those who have lost their faith, those who never had faith; the elderly, the disabled, young people scavenging for food in the trash, as we have heard... Woe to those who look down upon and despise the little ones. (Francis, 2019e)

The third stage of listening is empathizing, that is, being committed to deeply understanding other people's state of mind, emotions, and situation by walking in their shoes. Pope Francis explains this while reflecting on the importance of literature. When we read a book, "an imaginative empathy enables us to identify with how others see, experience and respond to reality. Without such empathy, there can be no solidarity, sharing, compassion, mercy. (Francis, 2024:34). Yet, when listening to real, flesh-and-blood people, this empathic power no longer requires imagination.

To activate empathy, however, we must learn to listen with the heart. Saint Augustine used to encourage listening with the heart (*corde audire*), to receive words not outwardly through the ears, but spiritually in our hearts: "Do not have your heart in your ears, but your ears in your heart". Saint Francis of Assisi exhorted his brothers to "incline the ear of the heart". (Francis, 2022c)

Pope Leo XIV is also deeply convinced of the importance of listening, considering it as a necessary prerequisite for the discernment entrusted especially to the shepherds of the Church.

We Bishops are called to a profound listening: to listen to the Word of God, to listen to the People of God, and thus to listen to the signs of the times, to listen also to what challenges our pastoral habits. Where listening is genuine, the community does not close in on itself, but becomes a place of discernment and mission and, to this end, knows how to renew itself. This is the meaning of the synodal journey that you have brought to completion and which, as you have emphasized, must now become a permanent way of life. (Leone, 2026c)

To Engage

The third constitutive action of the encounter that I wish to highlight is to engage. A real encounter never leaves people indifferent. It involves both the one who encounters and the one who is encountered into relationships of profound solidarity and charity. To explain this engagement, Pope Francis turns to the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). This is, in fact, a very peculiar encounter used in the Gospel

to explain the meaning of “neighbour” as the recipient of a love that serves as the criterion for attaining eternal life. For the Argentine Pontiff, “The parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbours, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good.” (FT, 67).

The engagement deriving from the encounter described in the parable sets into motion four consecutive steps: recognizing the other, feeling compassion for them, becoming a neighbour, and caring for the other.

The first step, that is recognizing the other person, requires ‘acknowledging’ their presence. Those who live closed in on themselves, uninterested in others, indifferent, fail to recognize their ‘neighbour’ beaten and abandoned along the way (see FT, 73). Therefore, recognizing our brother and sister in our neighbour requires an additional effort, especially if they do not “belong to our social group” (FT, 81). As explained above, to this immanent dimension of fraternity is added a transcendent one, which is based on an unequivocal revelation of Jesus Christ, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Mt 25:40)

As a second step, compassion takes into account the Samaritan’s ability to understand the suffering of the poor traveller and to be moved. “It is not an option; we cannot leave anyone ‘on the margins of life.’ This should outrage us, to the point of making us descend from our serenity and become shocked by human suffering” (FT, 68). However, there is also a transcendent dimension that serves as a model for divine compassion. As Pope Francis explained in 2015, “God’s compassion means placing himself in the problem, in the situation of the other, with his paternal heart.” (Francis, 2015b)

Thirdly, the ‘becoming neighbour’ comes. In this case, the Argentine Pontiff notes that it was the Samaritan “who became a neighbour to the wounded Judean. By approaching and making himself present, he crossed all cultural and historical barriers.” (FT, 81). These barriers often generate fears and prejudices that

keep us distant from others and often prevent us from “becoming neighbours” to them and serving them with love. Drawing close to others means getting personally involved, giving them the most precious thing we have: our time! The Samaritan certainly “had his own plans for that day, his own needs, commitments and desires. Yet he was able to put all that aside when confronted with someone in need. Without even knowing the injured man, he saw him as deserving of his time and attention.” (FT, 63)

Drawing close to others often means being willing to take risks: «Jesus gave us the greatest example of this when he washed the feet of his disciples: he took off his cloak, knelt down and dirtied his hands» (Francis, 2020).

Finally, there is the act of ‘caring.’ Following the example of the Samaritan, Pope Francis invites us “to bind the wounds” of every “existential stranger” (FT, 97) and every “hidden exile” (FT, 98), pouring out “oil and wine.” Oil, wine, and bandages symbolically represent all the tools we are invited to use to bring relief and healing,

from attentive listening to a timely word, to medical and psychological assistance, and from the restoration of trust to the restoration of personal dignity. Caring means taking upon ourselves the suffering of others. It is a long-term commitment that transforms us into 'traveling companions', friends sharing a journey toward a common goal. And when we realize we cannot do everything alone, we must act like the Samaritan, who took the poor man to an inn. "The Samaritan discovered an innkeeper who would care for the man; we too are called to unite as a family that is stronger than the sum of small individual members." (FT, 78)

The challenge of encounter involves everyone, and no one can step aside. "All of us have a responsibility for the wounded, those of our own people and all the peoples of the earth. Let us care for the needs of every man and woman, young and old, with the same fraternal spirit of care and closeness that marked the Good Samaritan." (FT, 79). During his visit to Lampedusa in 2013, Pope Francis recalled this shared responsibility: "Where is your brother?" His blood cries out to me, says the Lord. This is not a question directed to others; it is a question directed to me, to you, to each of us". (Francis, 2013). The question is clear and demands a response from us, because, as Pope Francis states, "at this moment, anyone who is neither a robber nor a passer-by is either injured himself or bearing an injured person on his shoulders." (FT, 70)

For Pope Leo XIV, every encounter, even one with people who are ill-disposed, can become a moment of grace, an opportunity for mutual engagement that lays the foundation for building community:

At the heart of all genuine hospitality lies a relationship stemming from the grace of an encounter. We experience many types of encounters, and thus of hospitality: encounters with those who love us, with family members, with colleagues, and even with strangers, who may at times be hostile. When an encounter is authentic, it can evolve from a personal experience and gradually come to involve others, nurturing a shared, communal experience. (Leo XIV, 2026d)

Conclusion

The topics discussed above do not claim to exhaust the richness of Pope Francis' magisterium regarding the culture of encounter. Nor can the few references to the teachings of Pope Leo XIV be considered exhaustive, also because of the fact that this pontificate is still in its early stages.

I hope, however, that the suggestions made here will prove useful to those wishing to commit themselves to a culture of encounter that stands today as a valid alternative to the rampant and destructive 'throwaway culture.'

You might have noticed the large amount of verbs used as keywords in my presentation. This was a choice I must say inevitable, due to the Argentine Pontiff's preference for verbs, for actions rather than abstract concepts, as he himself mentioned to me on several occasions.

The culture of encounter must be understood alongside Pope Francis' other 'cultural' proposals: the culture of care, the culture of hope, the culture of solidarity, and the culture of life. Specifically, the culture of encounter must be linked with the culture of care. Their joint action, in my opinion, shows the only way to save our humanity from the shipwreck of dehumanization.

The culture of encounter is the path to building a civilization of love, in opposition to a dehumanizing Babel. Everyone is invited to commit to this sublime undertaking, starting with an encounter with the people living in the existential peripheries. Pope Francis encouraged us to "touch the wounded flesh" of those who suffer, look at their faces, listen to their stories and acknowledge their wounds. Painful events require both history and memory, the former to recount the facts, the latter to bear witness to lived experiences. (Leo XIV, 2026e: 216)

References

- Francis. 2013. *Homily at Lampedusa on 8th July*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2015a. *Address to Students at Fr. Félix Varela Cultural Center, Havana*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2015b. *Meditazione mattutina del 30 ottobre*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2016. *Message for the 50th World Communications Day*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2018a. *Homily on 14th January*. LEV: Vatican City.
- Francis. 2018b. *Homily on 28th October*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2019a. *Homily on 8th July*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2019b. *Message for the 105th World Day of Migrants and Refugees*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2019c. *Angelus on 3rd November*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2019d. *Homily on 15th February*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2019e. *Incontro con i partecipanti al Convegno della Diocesi di Roma*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2020. *Message for the 106th World Day of Migrants and Refugees*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2021. *Message to Mark the 70th Anniversary of the International Organization of Migration*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2022a. *Message for the 108th World Day of Migrants and Refugees*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2022b. *Messaggio a firma del Cardinale Segretario di Stato Pietro Parolin in occasione del XLIII Meeting per l'Amicizia tra i Popoli*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2022c. *Message for the 56th World Day of Social Communications*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2022d. *Regina Coeli on 8th May*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2024. *Letter on the Role of Literature in Formation*. LEV: Vatican City
- Francis. 2025. *Homily on 26th October*. LEV: Vatican City
- Leo XIV. 2026a. *Address at "Plaza del Cristo de La Laguna" (Tenerife) on 12th June*. LEV: Vatican City

Leo XIV. 2026b. *Message for the 112th World Day of Migrants and Refugees*. LEV: Vatican City

Leo IV. 2026c. *Address to Bishops of the Italian Episcopal Conference*. LEV: Vatican City

Leo XIV. 2026d. *Address to Participants in the "Cattedra Dell' Accoglienza" Meeting*. LEV: Vatican City

Leo XIV. 2026e. *Encyclical Letter Magnifica Humanitas*. LEV: Vatican City

Migrants & Refugees Section. 2022. *Pastoral Orientations on Intercultural Migrant Ministry*. LEV: Vatican City