



# Responses to the COVID-19 and Reflections on FRATELLI TUTTI

Rome, March 8, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Our world and our Church have presented us with a paradox: while we are experiencing a worldwide pandemic causing us to isolate and socially distance, Pope Francis has called us to remember that



we are one in the human family, in communion with one another.

It is my desire that, in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity... Let us dream, then, as a single human family, ... as children of the same earth, which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all. — *Fratelli tutti*, 8

In this time of pandemic and its consequent social distancing and great fear, we can be motivated or immobilized. As we hear the Spirit call to us to risk (carefully and thoughtfully) to be with our brothers and sisters in need on so many levels. Or we can be paralyzed by worry into non-action. The testimonies given by our TOR Sisters show the struggle it is to hold this tension in their lives.

Francis of Assisi must have known it also as he wrote his second letter to his followers:

<sup>43</sup> And let the *brothers/sisters* have and show mercy to each of their *brothers/sisters* as *they* would want them to do were *they* in a similar position. ...<sup>48</sup> And the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon all those men and women who have done and persevered in these things and the Spirit will make a home and dwelling place in them. <sup>49</sup> And they will be the children of the heavenly Father, Whose works they do.

Let us be encouraged to recognize the paradoxes that divide and work toward unity of communion, our common home on earth and dwelling place of the Spirit of love.

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# FRANCISCANS, OUR TIME IS NOW!

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Original language: English

Pope Francis has sought again the inspiration of St. Francis in his latest encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. It is another opportunity for Franciscans to help sow this message of fraternity and social friendship for a Church and a world in urgent need of a response to the challenges we encounter today. We are called to work together, to overcome individualism and an apathetic response to critical environmental and social needs with our Franciscan spirit.

To cultivate our answers to these challenges, we are asked to ponder the personal fruitfulness of our seeds of goodness with the following three questions:

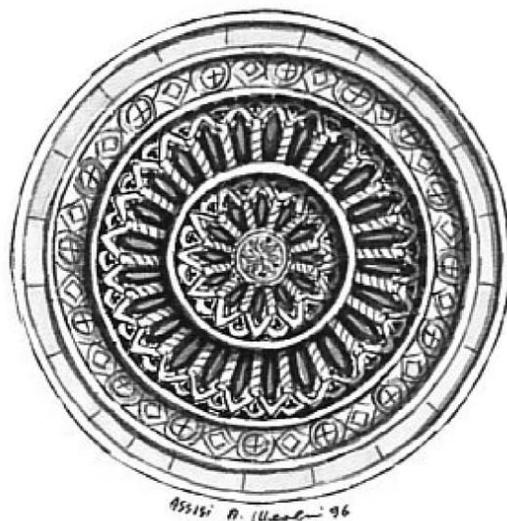
- 1) What positive forces did I unleash?
- 2) How much social peace did I sow? And
- 3) What good did I achieve in the position entrusted to me? (FT 197)

Let us engage in our responses together. St. Francis spoke from the integrity of a united heart. He was consistent in his own self-reflection and sought out the counsel of trusted companions. He grew in his understanding of his calling, from physically rebuilding the Church of San Damiano (1Celano 18) to building up the Church of God. To be vibrant messengers, we need to have our lives integrated with the Gospel message—the good news. It is for us an ongoing day to day journey. We are to reach out to the marginalized and to find ways to enable them to grasp a sense of belonging. In reflecting on the Good Samaritan, we see that time is a precious gift we can give to others. We can also consider ways that advocate for the wellbeing of others by respecting their dignity, as we consider the need for their inclusion. We are asked to passionately reach out in an encounter and dialogue. We are to embrace the isolated and welcome them, as belonging to our common home, just as St. Francis embraced the leper (2Cel 9) and realized in after thought, he had kissed the face of Christ. This was not just an event, but a process of learning how to accompany, care and support the most frail and vulnerable members. (FT 64) A revolution of tenderness is in the DNA of being a Franciscan.

St. Francis is paradigmatic as a person of peace. He was a person who sought peace within himself and called on others to do the same. His words of “peace and all good” was an urging to create such a place on Earth for all. Such a peace extended to all of creation entailing ecological concerns of both environmental and social. We are to look at ways in which unity prevails over conflict. St. Francis dealt with strife between the mayor and the bishop of Assisi through the singing of a verse in the “Canticle of Creation”, together with the citizens of Assisi in the presence of the two opponents (MP 101). Pope Francis calls us to regard our political concerns in the same manner as we relate with our families. He asks us to view political opponents like we view disputes in the family, where the joys and sorrows of each of the members are felt by all. (FT 230) The diversity of our opinions is to be seen in the context of love and the integrity of our positions. We are encouraged to create such places where dialogue can be possible because it comes from the respect of the inherent dignity of the persons and the desire to build a common home. Today we have the “*Need for peacemakers to work boldly and creatively to initiate processes of healing and renewed encounter.*” (FT 225)

The good we achieve in the position entrusted to us, yearns for a personal response based on our skills, capabilities and opportunities on one level and as a collective response on another. This cannot be answered once and for all, but on a day-to-day basis. The people of Assisi still tell how when St. Francis would speak to a crowd gathered outside San Rufino, he would be in prayer as long as necessary to be prepared to share the message for the day. The crowd knew to wait. We are asked to be constantly open to others, whatever is our task in life. We are about spreading love. Our unique response is imperative. We respond from that interior space by being contemplatives in action. This connection is so integrated that it is sacred action interconnecting all of creation. Each day offers new opportunities. *“We have the space we need for co-responsibility in creating and putting into place new processes and changes.”* (FT 77)

Now is the time for our Franciscan Spirit to contribute to the vitality of our Church. St. Francis and we, his followers, contribute to actualizing the reality of the interconnectedness of all of creation. He sang of his reverence for all of creation and even in his walk, he would remove worms from his path so that they would not be trampled on. Such was his ability to walk his talk. St. Francis engaged in dialogue, through translation with Al Kamil, a Muslim, even as the fighting of the crusade continued. (1 Cel 422) Both men were open to one another and the special place that Franciscans have in the Holy Land is due to this encounter. Today, we are asked to engage in many opportunities for such dialogue. In a similar way, *“we are asked to promote a ‘culture of encounter’—to be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone.”* (FT 216) We need to be responsive to whatever is being asked of us at this time. It is important to believe in the dynamic power of the whole of our Franciscans Family which is better than the sum of our parts. As each of us make our humble contribution, we realize that *“it is truly noble to place our hope in the hidden power of the seeds of goodness we sow, and thus, to initiate processes whose fruits will be reaped by others”* (FT 196), knowing that *“The spiritual stature of a person’s life is measured by love”*. (FT 92)



## *A Modern Day Encounter with Lepers*

Sr. Joanne Schatzlein  
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Original language: English

As part of completing an MA in Franciscan Studies, my final thesis attempted to answer the question: "If Francis ministered to lepers most of his life, why didn't he contract the disease?" My professor, Conrad Harkins OFM, delighted in new thoughts about Francis' illnesses and published the thesis in *Franciscan Studies*, 1987. It was updated and reprinted by Tau Publishing, LLC in 2014. In May, 2019, I participated in a medical conference in Baltimore, MD, where international medical experts, using modern diagnostic tools, agreed that Francis died from a form of leprosy.



This leper experience inspires a reflection on three 2020 events in my country: a killer pandemic, the unjust death of George Floyd, and the election of a new President. New and unexpected faces of "lepers" emerged, leading to a deeper understanding of Francis' words in his *Testament*: "The sight of lepers nauseated me... I was led among them ... and I showed Mercy."

**Police Officers & George Floyd:** George's death in the city of my birth was incomprehensible; his face with the shoe on his neck still haunts me. He begged for mercy - bystanders screamed for it, but four merciless officers refused and George died. His death led to numerous, diverse protesters - still pleading for police reform to end social injustice.

**Mr. Trump:** I can't call him President, but rather "he who shall not be named," from the Harry Potter lexicon, referring to Voldemort. My response when Trump tested positive to COVID wasn't compassionate. I did a little dance, then quickly prayed that he would recover, but hoped for long-delayed actions to reduce the number of victims meeting Sister Death alone.

**A defiant voter:** to ensure safe voting options in the November 2020 election, I volunteered to work at the polls. A gentleman appeared to vote but refused to wear a mask - a legal requirement. Refusing other options, he stood his ground with a smirk on his face. The poll superintendent cleared the space, allowed him to vote, but announced that he illegally refused to wear a mask and to stay 6 feet away from him. In effect she shamed him. At that moment a small voice in my heart stirred. Compassion surfaced – believing that while he was wrong, he was still a human being, not deserving public humiliation.

Reflecting on these modern day lepers, I recall a comment made during a communal reflection on Francis' meeting a leper, living with them and bandaging their wounds. We focused on Francis' conversion, but then a wise elderly Sister asked "Who am I a leper for?" That changed everything and still challenges me as I face these modern day lepers. I am consoled that the poll supervisor's actions caused discomfort in my heart, leading to compassion. It gives me hope that my transgressions may lead me to deeper moments of personal conversion, and, like St. Francis and Pope Francis in *Fratelli tutti*, recognize the face of Christ in every human being and all of creation.

## REFLECTION ON THE FIRST 3 CHAPTERS OF *FRATELLI TUTTI* IN LIGHT OF LIVING THE THIRD ORDER CHARISM

*Sister Mariella Erdmann, O.S.F.  
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Original language: English*

There is one question I would like to address in this article. How do we as Franciscans help to reach out to the stranger in our closed world and engender an open world? We need to begin by turning to the life of Christ in the scriptures and to the life of Francis as a true disciple of Christ.

Both Christ and Francis reached out to the marginalized: the lepers, the sinners, the poor, the widows, the lonely and even the wealthy. They excluded no one. They both experienced great joy and profound sorrow. Pope Francis is asking us to do the same in a world that is in so much need of healing and unity. A world filled with divisions, hatreds, exclusions, addictions and loss of hope.

The world as it is today cannot remain closed, we cannot ignore the stranger on the road in need of help. As followers of Christ and inspired by Francis' charisms, we must move out of our comfort zone and into a broken, messy world. But in order to do this effectively, we need to be rooted in Christ as Francis was. If we are not rooted in Christ we are building on sand. Francis was overwhelmed by God's love and that love penetrated all he did, who he met and his whole outlook on nature. Each person was precious in his eyes and all creatures led him to praise God.

How do we do this as Franciscans? We do it with one person at a time. We have missions with the marginalized in various states and countries, which include Native Americans, the poor of various nationalities, the uneducated and ill. Reaching out to those we serve as brothers and sisters in Christ worthy of our love and care, is a means to build bridges of trust and a sense that we are in this together. Also, in each of our families we may have one or another who is on the fringes of society. We cannot write them off. We must, not as self-righteous people but as humble sinners on the same journey in life, seek them out. We need to learn to dialogue with others and listen to their stories. Where we live, we have Sisters who are ill or with various needs and lay employees whom we touch each day. Do we leave out those we do not like or do we embrace each person with respect and love?

I would like to close with the quote by Randall B. Smith, a Professor of Theology at the University of St. Thomas. "I hardly need point out how different it would be if we envisioned dialogue as something taking place between persons 'made in the image of God,' but also tragically fallen and broken, in need of redemption, created for communion with others and with God. Dialogue should not become a war of words; it should be seen as the human participation in the Word becoming flesh, the goal of which is not the destruction of an enemy, but a sacrificial death-to-self in service to Goodness, Love, and Truth."



## RECIPROCAL BELONGING AS BROTHERS AND SISTERS

Sr. Jenny Favarin  
Suore Francescane dei Poveri  
Original language: Italian

*"What are you going to do in the Philippines?"* Question that at the imminent of my departure last February 2020 had become a mantra. My response was always, *"I'm going to do this and that but basically I am going to be a sister, like here!"*

I am Jenny, an Italian Sister of the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor. Except for a brief parenthesis in the United States, I have always lived in community between Padua and Rome. Offering my availability to live in our community in the Philippines was a natural consequence of what I have desired day by day.

Two weeks after arriving at my destination full of excitement and curiosity, we entered lockdown for Covid-19. I look back on these months of almost uninterrupted confinement with the eyes of someone who knows how true it is that *no one is saved alone*<sup>1</sup>. How many mornings when I woke up there was anguish, and how many times it was replaced by gentleness, kindness and care of the sisters with whom I am sharing this period. After all...*I am here to be a sister!* And given this, we go again each day to stubbornly nurture hope, support each other, and find creative ways to not completely close our ministries, despite the fact that last September a situation of calamity was declared until September 2021.



*The inner call to be neighbors*<sup>2</sup>, paradoxically, has become even stronger and more manifest in this context of social distancing and distrust, in community and in those sporadic meetings in the two villages where we are allowed to distribute food. I am having the experience of being welcomed in a new way, because here I am a "foreigner". This beautiful land welcomes us with a smile, and thanks us because, as much as we can, we don't forget the most exposed in this pandemic. But perhaps the greatest truth that I

must acknowledge, in this time when we all find ourselves vulnerable, is that it is precisely these last ones who have not forgotten us, me, calling me "sister"; it helps me to find the deepest sense of my presence here among them. And in *this belonging to each other as sisters and brothers* there is a strength and a truth that transcends every impediment and every prohibition, every isolation. The *no one is saved alone* provokes/stimulates a reciprocity that has never before been so inescapable and true.

In the coming months, we will be called upon constantly to listen to the cry of the poor and of the earth, to discern carefully what possible gestures of healing to promote, to play/gamble our all in what is small and essential, in the ability to recognize ourselves as sisters and brothers.

<sup>1</sup> Fratelli Tutti, 54

<sup>2</sup> (ibid. 101)

I find all this beautifully summed up in these words: "*...it is the hour of truth. Will we bend to touch and heal the wounds of others? Will we stoop to carry one another on our shoulders? This is the current challenge of which we must not be afraid. In moments of crisis, the choice becomes pressing: we could say that, at this moment, anyone who is not a brigand and anyone who is not passing by at a distance is either wounded or is carrying some wounded on his or her shoulders*<sup>3</sup>. [...] Let us take a leap towards a new way of living and discover once and for all that we need and owe each other, so that humanity may be reborn with all faces, all hands and all voices, beyond the borders we have created"<sup>4</sup> .



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<sup>3</sup> (ibid.70)

<sup>4</sup> (ibid. 35)

# How we respond to the Covid-19 pandemic

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Original language: English

St. Francis calls us to do more and greater things in imitating Jesus Christ (cf. *Letter to all the Faithful*, the Second version). This is a constant and strong challenge in our religious life and mission. During the pandemic time when the most of regular activities have come to a halt or have been performed on-line, there are also more opportunities to look creatively for new ways to go towards our neighbor, especially the neediest.

While I as a catechist during the first wave of pandemic dedicated myself in the first place to children, the young and families, epidemiological conditions in the second, much harder wave showed me another way of serving people in need. In senior citizens homes, conditions were aggravating more and more because of infections among the employed and the residents. Our Provincial superior encouraged the sisters and some of us responded to the call of the state government to help in the homes as volunteers.

After appropriate training I started all-day work in a senior citizens home and helped with nursing, feeding the residents, etc. During the first weeks it was very strenuous as there was much more work in these circumstances, and the personnel much fewer. It also happened that there was only one nurse caring for 54 residents. But there was a sense of great solidarity and mutual help among us.

Residents had to stay in their rooms for several weeks, so they were so much happy when an employee or a volunteer visited them for a while. When protection measures were released a bit and we could take residents out, although only for a short time, I played guitar and we sang and also celebrated something.



I was in a uniform of a nurse and not in my habit, so only few knew I am a religious sister. They were happy to know that and we talked about God and my way of life and work. Especially nice, genuine and witnessing relationships were woven with the employees. Although not in the same faith, we were united as brothers and sisters in a faithful and dedicated work (cf. *Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular*, 18).

Working in a senior citizens home was so a rich missionary experience for me, and still more a precious experience of spiritual life. Because of a hard workday in the home and tasks of my regular mission in my spare time, my prayer life was rather curtailed, but I always felt God is coming to me in a different way. When I worked all day, I could not participate in Holy Mass. When I was washing a lady one Sunday and bowed to soap her feet I thought of Jesus who by his example of washing the feet of his disciples invited us to do the same. It was exactly the time of Sunday mass ... I experienced in my heart how the Eucharist is in fact the most profound Christ's service to man who needs His help to purify his soul. In the work I was allowed to do the Lord was close to me in the suffering and in those who help them.

With the graces I received both from God and the good example of my neighbors – patient residents and staff – I can trust and hope we all will be among those who by God's grace will come out of these epidemiological conditions stronger and more dedicated to God. My heart remains thankful to the sisters who gave me an opportunity to help in this way. I have experienced that serving in senior citizens homes is a service by all of us.



# Let Us Be Bold!

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Original language: English

In Pope Francis' homily, preached during the Eucharistic Celebration of the Birth of Christ, our Holy Father simply stated that this celebration is not about "God giving us something but Someone." As Franciscans, our understanding of creation has always focused on the primacy of Christ, the first born of all creation, "the Eternal Someone." As Franciscans we believe that it is through Christ that we are called and empowered to recognize others as "someone" also, as sister, as brother. The value of Fraternity remains at the very center of our understanding of ourselves as followers of Christ, as Franciscans. In the Third Order we describe it as sharing a "Common Heart."



*Fratelli tutti* in many ways continues the conversation begun in *Laudate Si*. Yet, it is much more than that. It is not coincidental that the encyclical begins with the words of St. Francis and the story of Francis' encounter with the Sultan. In *Fratelli tutti* Pope Francis courageously stands before the modern sultans of power and might. He critiques the policies, politics, and politicians, calling for open, inclusive and integrated societies. In Chapter Two of *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis encourages us to see our origin in the one Creator, quoting the Book of Job: "Did not he who made me in the womb also make him? And did not the same on fashion us in the womb?" (Job 31:15)

While Pope Francis challenges those in power, he does so by talking about a "better kind of politics" based on "political love" and "social friendship." This is where the conversation seems to subtly shift in some ways from those who are in power to those of us who empower our leaders. The shift moves from the politicians to the body politic, to you and me. Pope Francis does this when he examines each of the characters in the Story of the Good Samaritan. Further along in the encyclical the Pope implores us to confront the social injustices in our world as clearly violating "a love that integrates and unites," recognizing all as sister and brother who share a common home. As

Franciscans, St. Francis offers us an example of speaking truth to power. Pope Francis in this encyclical offers us a roadmap, a blueprint for doing so.

Ironically, while the current pandemic which has caused us to actually live more isolated lives, at the same time it has helped us to recognize that we are not alone. Pope Francis emphasizes this in directly addressing the pandemic in the last section of Chapter One, which he entitled "HOPE." He invites us to renewed hope, stating simply and yet so profoundly "Hope is bold." St. Paul speaks of faith, hope and love, declaring the greatest of these is Love. St. John tells us God is Love, incarnated in the Eternal Someone, Christ, whose dwells among us. Hope gives courage and conviction, empowering us to see new visions and dream new dreams through the eyes of Love Incarnate, embracing all as sister and brother. As Franciscans, let us call each other and our world to be hopeful. And, let us be bold!

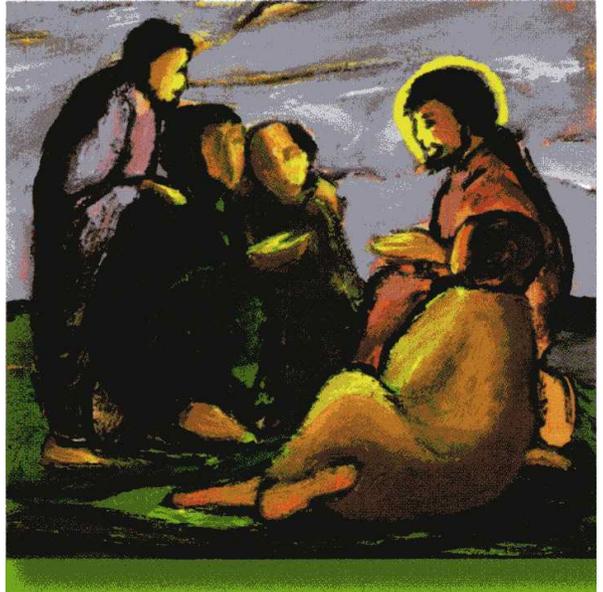
# FRATELLI TUTTI

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Original language: English

*Fratelli tutti* overflows with an abundance of rich material for prayer and reflection. Not only is it deeply rooted in the teachings and lived example of Saint Francis of Assisi, but it is also grounded in the realities of our world today. The Covid-19 pandemic erupted on a global scale as Pope Francis was writing this encyclical. Of all the possible Franciscan values the concurrence of the encyclical and the pandemic present, one emerges most strongly for me: radical fraternity

In the spirit of Saint Francis and Pope Francis, not only Franciscans but the whole world--peoples, individuals, cultures, races, governments, religions--are challenged to embrace every other human as sister and brother. In this worldview or perhaps, Godview, no person is less than any other; no person deserves less; no person can be relegated to the fringes of society or treated as if they do not matter; in fact ...." no one is useless, no one is superfluous." (*Fratelli tutti*, 215).

Sister Maria Elena Martinez, OSF, a keynote speaker at the Franciscan Federation Conference in 2002, stood on stage and boldly proclaimed, "There is no enemy!" From this stance of radical fraternity that does not exclude even those who oppress or need correction, (see *Fratelli tutti* 241-242), we are required to see as brother or sister all those who ignore or defy safeguards to protect themselves and others from the virus. We must diligently work to counteract attitudes that insinuate, "they should get sick; if they get sick, they shouldn't be given the hospital bed, life-saving equipment, or the care that an innocent person also needs." In the Commentary on the 1983 Revised TOR Rule, Article 22 states, "the highest form of poverty for us is to be non-judgmental..."



The ultimate place of compassion is the womb/heart of God. In this Divine space, no one, nothing is excluded. Scripture tells us that we are made in the image and likeness of God (see Gen. 1, 27). We then are intrinsically called to open wide our own hearts to embrace all. However, this is a life-long process of conversion that we shall never perfect but still must strive for. A powerful guide to help us on this journey is to use an image of the human heart. Inside the heart, write the names of who/what you love and fully embrace. Near the edges, or half-in and half-out, write who/what you struggle to embrace. Finally, completely outside the heart, write who/what you cannot/do not love or embrace.

After you have completed the "examination" of your heart, pray the following:



- **Jesus, you extended compassion to all who came to you in their need. Teach me to be more compassionate.**
- **Jesus, you embraced all as brother and sister, even Judas who betrayed you. Open me to experience radical fraternity.**
- **Jesus, from the cross, you forgave all of us. Alone, I cannot forgive those who have injured me. Carry me as I struggle to forgive.**

# Look and Act

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Original language: German*

"True wisdom demands an encounter with reality." With this resounding call, Pope Francis encourages us in his Encyclical "Fratelli tutti" (47) to a creative restlessness and respectful encounter with our fellow human beings as the basis for a humane world.

The patroness of our Religious Order, St. Elizabeth of Thuringia, inspired by St. Francis, lived this wisdom lovingly, cheerfully and persistently for the poor, the sick and the outcast, overcoming many prejudices of her times. This commitment to the needy in body and soul has always been part of the DNA of the Elisabethines. The motto of our convent in Graz, "Look and Act!" consolidates this attitude of St. Elisabeth to which the Holy Father is directing us.

Especially in today's pandemic situation, where ever more barriers are being erected between people and their communities, we Elisabethines strive in this spirit to give our patients a home in dignity. This is just as necessary today as it was when the first three Sisters of the Elisabethines arrived in Graz 330 years ago, on October 19, 1690. Since then, many positive changes have taken place in our pluralistic society, for which we can be very grateful

Yet, even today, there is loneliness, thoughtlessness and insensitivity, especially toward those who are on the margins of our increasingly globalized world. For all our achievements, we are "illiterate when it comes to accompanying, caring for and supporting the most frail and vulnerable in our developed societies," as Pope Francis notes in his prophetic Encyclical. (FT 64)

For us Elisabethines, this diagnosis does not lead to resignation or elitist cultural pessimism, rather it is a motivation to search ever anew for depth and breadth in our lives and our faith, and to act quickly where we see a need. The example of our three founding sisters in Graz, who spent two years walking from Aachen through regions ravaged by the Thirty Years' War to care for women in need in Graz, encourages us to face the challenges ahead with trust in God, curiosity and loving attention



The work of these three power women has grown today into a convent with 12 Sisters, a non-profit acute-care hospital with around 500 employees, the VinziDorf hospice for the homeless, the inpatient hospice St. Elisabeth in conjunction with our palliative care unit, the spa in Marienkron in Burgenland,

housing options for seniors and numerous educational programs. Our activities for and in our colourful city of Graz and for the people in our country thus encompass numerous works, which we have divided into four fields of activity in conjunction with the Elisabethines in Austria: **faith and life, health and life, dwelling and life and learning and life.**

The Corona pandemic has shown us how fragile the ostensible certainties of our lives are. Our employees are doing an outstanding job, especially in this challenging situation, to give the people entrusted to us support in their faith, as well as health and well-being, to provide them with a home in dignity for body and soul, and to develop perspectives together for a vital society "post Corona".The pandemic has shown us, painfully and realistically, beyond all question of care, medicine and therapy, that "goodness, together with love, justice and solidarity ... have to be realized each day", as Pope Francis states. (FT 11) An inspiring word of encouragement for a society in which all can truly be sisters and brothers.

