

### A LOVE EVER MORE OPEN

"In the depths of every heart, love creates bonds and expands existence, for it draws people out of themselves and towards others. Since we were made for love, in each one of us "a law of *ekstasis*" seems to operate: "the lover 'goes outside' the self to find a fuller existence in another". For this reason, "man always has to take up the challenge of moving beyond himself".

Nor can I reduce my life to relationships with a small group, even my own family; I cannot know myself apart from a broader network of relationships, including those that have preceded me and shaped my entire life. My relationship with those whom I respect has to take account of the fact that they do not live only for me, nor do I live only for them. Our relationships, if healthy and authentic, open us to others who expand and enrich us. Nowadays, our noblest social instincts can easily be thwarted by self-centred chats that give the impression of being deep relationships. On the contrary, authentic and mature love and true friendship can only take root in hearts open to growth through relationships with others. As couples or friends, we find that our hearts expand as we step out of ourselves and embrace others. Closed groups and self-absorbed couples that define themselves in opposition to others tend to be expressions of selfishness and mere self-preservation." (*Pope Francis: Fratelli Tutti, paras 88 and 89*)

The Holy Father begins the third chapter of his Encyclical by reminding us that we were all created to be living expressions of God's love. "No one can experience the true beauty of life without relating to others, without having real faces to love. This is part of the mystery of authentic human existence." There is an obvious challenge for us in these days of enforced isolation as we attempt to manage the pandemic. We find ourselves trying to come to terms with personal separation and with restrictions on movement as decreed by those we have entrusted with social authority. It is not surprising that these measures have incited an increasing plea for accountability and reasons. We have entrusted our civic leaders with the burden of making judgements about our way of life and we seek to understand their reasons for their determinations. As we embrace the fact that the spiritual dimension of our existence is fundamental to coming to an understanding of who we are, we are naturally averse to anything which limits our capacity to "go beyond ourselves". Even more than that is our natural repulsion of any attempt to limit our sense of being present to and for each other. We spontaneously admire those who overcome any instinct of self-preservation so that they may be of service to others. This is completely understandable as deep down we recognise that this is fundamental to our created being as humans.

And so Pope Francis encourages us to use every experience to reflect on and advocate the value of our shared individuality. He encourages us to embrace the challenge to be authentic to our reason for being – to give prominence to our understanding of ourselves as reflections of God's love. He expresses this in para 95 of his Encyclical: "Love also impels us towards universal communion. No one can mature or find fulfilment by withdrawing from others. By its very nature, love calls for growth in openness and the ability to accept others as part of a continuing adventure that makes every periphery converge in a greater sense of mutual belonging. As Jesus told us: "You are all brothers" (*Mt 23:8*)."

Very clearly this transcends our present circumstances to the whole of life.

#### Reflection:

1. What is God asking of me during these difficult days?
2. What am I doing to reinforce my ability to maintain and deepen my relationship with others during these days of limitations?
3. What prominence have I given to applying the spiritual values of being genuinely human in making judgements about enforced separation from others? Do I need to compensate in some way?

### **Prayer During a Pandemic**

Loving God, Holy One,  
Your desire is for our wholeness and well-being.  
We hold in tenderness and prayer the collective suffering of our world at this time. We grieve  
precious lives lost and vulnerable lives threatened.  
We ache for ourselves and our neighbors, standing before an uncertain future.  
We pray: May love, not fear, go viral.

Inspire our leaders to discern and choose wisely, aligned with the common good.  
Help us to practice social distancing and reveal to us new and creative ways to come together in  
spirit and in solidarity.  
Call us to profound trust in your faithful presence,  
You, the God who does not abandon, You, the Holy One,  
breathing within us,  
breathing among us,  
breathing around us  
in our beautiful yet wounded world.