

Article

The Ethics of Universal Fraternity: Forgiveness and Reconciliation in a Divided World

Sanja Ivic 

Institute of European Studies, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia; sanja.ivic@ies.rs

Abstract

This paper explores the importance of forgiveness, reconciliation, and universal fraternity in achieving world peace, with a particular focus on the thoughts of Pope Francis. It examines the ethical and political dimensions of forgiveness as a transformative practice rooted in justice, memory, and responsibility. The paper also considers the role of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, the challenges posed by contemporary global trends, and the importance of political and social structures grounded in human dignity and solidarity. Finally, it addresses the continuity of these ideas in the early statements of Pope Leo XIV, emphasizing peace, dialogue, and unity.

Keywords: forgiveness; reconciliation; universal fraternity; Pope Francis; peace; dialogue; justice; human dignity

1. Introduction

This paper examines Pope Francis' contribution to the concept of forgiveness, peace and reconciliation, paying particular attention to the importance of intercultural and interreligious communication and universal fraternity. It also considers the persistence of these concepts in the early encyclicals of Pope Leo XIV, which emphasize harmony, communication and peace in a global context.

The main goal of this paper is to explore the contributions of Pope Francis on the importance of cultivating forgiveness, mercy, and intercultural and interreligious dialogue in achieving world peace. "At a time when the so-called clash of civilizations is gaining currency in some quarters, religions have a special role to play in blazing new paths to peace, in union with one another and in cooperation with states and international organizations" (Mamberti 2007). Religion is a factor of peace that has a huge impact on society. "Philosophical questioning and historical scholarship help religion to deepen its search for truth and show its reasonableness, thus facilitating dialogue and consolidating the impact of religion on peacebuilding and on society as a whole" (Mamberti 2007).

The concept of forgiveness has gained new significance in today's ethical, political, philosophical and religious debates, particularly in light of ongoing global conflicts. Pope Francis claims: "Forgiveness and reconciliation are central themes in Christianity and, in various ways, in other religions. Yet there is a risk that an inadequate understanding and presentation of these profound convictions can lead to fatalism, apathy and injustice, or even intolerance and violence" (Francis 2020, para. 237). Pope Francis viewed forgiveness as "a human right": "We all have the right to be forgiven if we ask for forgiveness" (Cernuzio 2022).

In a world marked by violence, war, and growing divisions, the topic of whether and how forgiveness is possible, both individually and collectively, has become central



Academic Editor: Joshua Snyder

Received: 31 March 2026

Revised: 17 May 2026

Accepted: 21 June 2026

Published: 6 July 2026

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to discussions about peacebuilding and reconciliation. However, it is crucial to make a distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation because reconciliation does not always imply forgiveness, and forgiveness poses various moral, social, and political questions.

In Christianity, forgiveness is seen as a fundamental moral and spiritual need. Jesus Christ's teachings, which demand forgiveness "not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22, NIV) create a standard that contradicts individual's natural desire for revenge and vengeance.

"Jesus never promoted violence or intolerance. He openly condemned the use of force to gain power over others: 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you' (Mt 20:25–26). Instead, the Gospel tells us to forgive 'seventy times seven' (Mt 18:22) and offers the example of the unmerciful servant who was himself forgiven, yet unable to forgive others in turn (cf. Mt 18:23–35)". (Francis 2020, para. 238)

Many philosophical and scientific perspectives—from Hobbes's observation that "man is a wolf to man" (*homo homini lupus*) (Hobbes 1949) to Darwin's (1859) and Freud's (1962) theories of natural selection and conflict—emphasize struggle and competition as innate characteristics of human nature. On the other hand, the Christian perspective contends that these tendencies can be overcome through love, forgiveness, and mercy. Reconciliation, mercy, and forgiveness are still essential for keeping social life from collapsing: "Truth, in fact, is an inseparable companion of justice and mercy. All three together are essential to building peace; each, moreover, prevents the other from being altered . . . Truth should not lead to revenge, but rather to reconciliation and forgiveness" (Francis 2020, para. 227).

Pope Francis is developing an ethics of universal fraternity based on peace, forgiveness and reconciliation, which aims to combat global conflicts, global injustice and inequality. He is developing a moral framework based on human dignity, solidarity, fraternity and intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

Pope Francis' approach emphasizes that reconciliation cannot be limited to forced or surface-level agreements and that forgiveness must be understood in relation to truth, memory, and justice. Rather, it necessitates the development of a culture of encounter and the transformation of relationships.

Pope Francis advocates a socially grounded and relational understanding of forgiveness, which is linked to justice, reconciliation, mercy, and political responsibility. His understanding of forgiveness is mainly developed in *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), where he addresses inequality, global conflicts, and injustice, pointing to a new ethic based on universal fraternity, which is necessary to overcome the challenges facing the world today. Pope Francis asserts that universal fraternity is not just an abstract ideal but an ethical imperative that requires the transformation of social, political, and global relations.

At the core of this vision lies the recognition of the inherent dignity of every human being, which is the basis for the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. "An authentic spirit of fraternity overcomes the individual selfishness which conflicts with people's ability to live in freedom and in harmony among themselves. Such selfishness develops socially—whether it is in the many forms of corruption, so widespread today, or in the formation of criminal organizations, from small groups to those organized on a global scale. These groups tear down legality and justice, striking at the very heart of the dignity of the person" (Francis 2013).

Pope Francis argues that authentic peace can only come from a commitment to fraternity that transcends national, cultural and religious divisions. "Fraternity necessarily calls for something greater," he claims, "which in turn enhances freedom and equality" (Francis 2020, para. 103). In this sense, fraternity acts as a mediating principle that connects individual ethical responsibility to broader social and political structures. Forgiveness

occupies a central place within this ethical framework. According to Pope Francis, “the culture of fraternal encounter shatters the culture of conflict. It makes of every encounter a possibility and a gift of God’s generous love. It leads us beyond the limits of our narrow horizons and constantly encourages us to live in a spirit of universal fraternity, as children of the one heavenly Father” (Francis 2019b).

This paper aims to explore Pope Francis’ understanding of forgiveness as a fundamental element of his ethic of universal fraternity, which is particularly relevant to today’s divided world, which is experiencing a rise in new conflicts and wars. The main research question of this study is, how does Pope Francis conceptualize forgiveness within the broader framework of his ethic of universal fraternity, and how can this idea serve as a foundation for contemporary processes of peacebuilding and reconciliation?

To answer this question, this paper analyzes Pope Francis’ idea of forgiveness as a political–theological response to structural violence, presented in *Fratelli Tutti*. Second, it examines Pope Francis’ ethics of universal fraternity, as well as his commitment to intercultural and interreligious dialogue as a path to peace. Pope Francis’ ethic of universal fraternity is particularly relevant to today’s global atmosphere. Finally, this paper situates Pope Francis’ idea of forgiveness in a contemporary philosophical context, and the debate on forgiveness in the context of historical trauma and violence, in order to clarify the specificity of Pope Francis’ approach, which advocates practical peacebuilding and social healing rather than aporetic and abstract conceptions of forgiveness.

2. Memory, Justice, and Mercy: Forgiveness as a Political–Theological Response to Structural Violence

All positivist and materialist teachings that refer to Charles Darwin, Thomas Hobbes, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, and which speak of the “war of all against all” (*bellum omnium contra omnes*), and natural selection and the victory of the strongest, are correct within the framework of the laws of fallen human nature (Jerotić 2019). The formulation of Thomas Hobbes—man is a wolf to man—could have been said many times throughout human history, especially in the first half of the 20th century during the two World Wars and today when weapons for mass destruction are being perfected and more and more new wars are emerging.

Natural laws, however, can only be defeated by divine laws—according to the words of the Apostle Paul (“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes”, Romans 10: 4). Jesus Christ asked his disciples and all those who would follow him to forgive (“not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18:22, NIV))—not to take revenge, and to patiently and forbearingly endure insults (“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” Matthew 5: 44). Although this task seems difficult, and sometimes even impossible, the history of the Christian Church, its named and unnamed saints, the way the world reorganized itself after great wars, and the ordinary people around us—are proof that this is possible and that forgiveness and reconciliation are necessary for the world not to disintegrate in destructive impulses.

Pope Francis warns: “Every act of violence committed against a human being is a wound in humanity’s flesh; every violent death diminishes us as people . . . Violence leads to more violence, hatred to more hatred, death to more death. We must break this cycle which seems inescapable” (Francis 2020, para. 227). He emphasizes that every act of violence (even passive) produces even more violence: “While rejecting certain visible forms of violence, another more insidious kind of violence can take root: the violence of those who despise people who are different, especially when their demands in any way compromise their own particular interests” (Francis 2020, para. 218).

Pope Francis asserts that “truth, in fact, is an inseparable companion of justice and mercy. All three together are essential to building peace” (Francis 2020, para. 227). The pontiff argues that social and political life should be based on forgiveness, particularly in contexts of historical trauma and violence. However, he does not detach the idea of forgiveness from memory, truth and justice. Pope Francis emphasizes: “Of those who have endured much unjust and cruel suffering, a sort of ‘social forgiveness’ must not be demanded. Reconciliation is a personal act, and no one can impose it upon an entire society, however great the need to foster it. (...) Who can claim the right to forgive in the name of others? It is moving to see forgiveness shown by those who are able to leave behind the harm they suffered, but it is also humanly understandable in the case of those who cannot. In any case, forgetting is never the answer” (Francis 2020, para. 246). Pope Francis considers forgiveness as a transformative ethical practice that should coexist with accountability. Thus, forgiving does not always mean forgetting. The pontiff emphasizes:

“The Shoah must not be forgotten. It is ‘the enduring symbol of the depths to which human evil can sink when, spurred by false ideologies, it fails to recognize the fundamental dignity of each person, which merits unconditional respect regardless of ethnic origin or religious belief.’ (...) Nor must we forget the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Once again, ‘I pay homage to all the victims, and I bow before the strength and dignity of those who, having survived those first moments, for years afterward bore in the flesh immense suffering, and in their spirit seeds of death that drained their vital energy... We cannot allow present and future generations to lose the memory of what happened. It is a memory that ensures and encourages the building of a more fair and fraternal future’. Neither must we forget the persecutions, the slave trade and the ethnic killings that continue in various countries, as well as the many other historical events that make us ashamed of our humanity. They need to be remembered, always and ever anew. We must never grow accustomed or inured to them”. (Francis 2020, paras. 247, 248)

The role of forgiveness is to transform the past. Thus, according to Pope Francis, forgiveness does not imply impunity (Cernuzio 2022). Pope Francis states: “Those who truly forgive do not forget. Instead, they choose not to yield to the same destructive force that caused them so much suffering. They break the vicious circle; they halt the advance of the forces of destruction. They choose not to spread in society the spirit of revenge that will sooner or later return to take its toll. Revenge never truly satisfies victims” (Francis 2020, para. 251).

Although Pope Francis argues about the compatibility of forgiveness with institutional justice, he expresses a concern about the instrumentalization and politicization of forgiveness in contemporary global contexts. Pope Francis warns against superficial or performative gestures of reconciliation that fail to address underlying injustices. He notes, “it is easy today to be tempted to turn the page, to say that all these things happened long ago and we should look ahead. For God’s sake, no! We can never move forward without remembering the past” (Francis 2020, para. 249). This insistence on memory underscores the ethical depth required for genuine reconciliation (Cinquetti 2023).

Moreover, Pope Francis emphasizes the interpersonal and communal dimensions of forgiveness, grounding it in the ethics of dialogue. He argues that “dialogue is the only path for peace, for encountering one another” (Francis 2024). The pontiff warns that peace cannot be achieved through superficial gestures or imposed agreements but requires a sustained process of dialogue and mutual recognition. “Truth, in fact, is an inseparable companion of justice and mercy. All three together are essential to building peace” (Francis 2020, para. 227). This triadic relation between truth, justice, and mercy under-

scores the complexity of reconciliation as both an ethical and political process. Unlike purely juridical approaches, reconciliation involves the transformation of relationships and the healing of collective memory.

Pope Francis' reflections also respond to the global context marked by conflict, migration, and structural injustice. His critique of what he calls the "globalization of indifference" highlights the ethical failure of contemporary societies to recognize the suffering of others. In contrast, universal fraternity calls for an active commitment to hospitality, inclusion, and care for the vulnerable, particularly refugees and marginalized groups. "The ever-increasing number of interconnections and communications in today's world makes us powerfully aware of the unity and common destiny of the nations. In the dynamics of history, and in the diversity of ethnic groups, societies and cultures, we see the seeds of a vocation to form a community composed of brothers and sisters who accept and care for one another" (Francis 2013). In this respect, the pontiff's thought resonates with broader philosophical concerns about the ethics of the Other, while maintaining a distinct theological grounding.

Ultimately, Pope Francis' ethics of universal fraternity offers a vision of forgiveness and reconciliation that is both personal and political. It resists the reduction in forgiveness to either a purely private act or a strategic political tool, instead situating it within a broader moral horizon oriented toward peace and the common good. In doing so, the pontiff's thought provides a constructive counterpart to more aporetic accounts of forgiveness, emphasizing not the impossibility of forgiveness (Francis 2019b), but its necessity for sustaining human coexistence in a fractured world.

3. Universal Fraternity and Cross-Cultural Dialogue as a Path to Peace

Pope Francis advocates the ethics of universal fraternity, which "may serve as a guide for future generations to advance a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters" (Francis 2019a). This ethics is based on forgiveness, mercy, peace, and cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue. The idea of universal fraternity "embraces all human beings, unites them and renders them equal" (Francis 2019a). In *A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, Pope Francis calls "upon intellectuals, philosophers, religious figures, artists, media professionals and men and women of culture in every part of the world, to rediscover the values of peace, justice, goodness, beauty, human fraternity and coexistence in order to confirm the importance of these values as anchors of salvation for all, and to promote them everywhere" (Francis 2019a).

Pope Francis points to certain trends in the world that are not in line with the development of universal fraternity:

1. The rise in fragmentation and nationalism. After World War II, the international community became aware of the importance of preserving world peace, which led to the establishment of international organizations and supranational communities such as the United Nations and the European Community. The idea of united Europe was "the firm conviction of the founders of the European Union, who envisioned a future based on the capacity to work together in bridging divisions and in fostering peace and fellowship between all the peoples of this continent" (Francis 2020, para. 10). However, there appear to be indications of a certain regression in our time. Resentful and aggressive nationalism is on the rise, and long-forgotten battles are resurfacing. Under the pretense of protecting national interests, a notion of "popular and national unity" influenced by different ideologies is fostering new types of selfishness and a loss of social sense in some nations (Francis 2020, para. 11).

2. New conflicts are emerging around the world. “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’” (Francis 2020, para. 18).
3. Insufficient universality of human rights. Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and other international human rights documents guarantee equal human rights for all, human rights are still “insufficiently universal” (Francis 2020). It often becomes evident that not everyone has equal access to human rights. A detailed examination of our contemporary societies reveals many inconsistencies that make us question whether the equal dignity of all people, which was formally declared almost eighty years ago, is indeed acknowledged, honored, safeguarded, and promoted in every circumstance (Francis 2020). Many forms of injustice still exist in today’s society, and they are caused by a profit-driven economic paradigm that is willing to exploit “and even kill human beings” (Francis 2020, para. 22).
4. Misinformation and disinformation. “Digital campaigns of hatred and destruction, for their part, are not—as some would have us believe—a positive form of mutual support, but simply an association of individuals united against a perceived common enemy” (Francis 2020, para. 43).
5. Violation of human dignity at the borders. “Certain populist political regimes, as well as certain liberal economic approaches, maintain that an influx of migrants is to be prevented at all costs. Arguments are also made for the propriety of limiting aid to poor countries, so that they can hit rock bottom and find themselves forced to take austerity measures. One fails to realize that behind such statements, abstract and hard to support, great numbers of lives are at stake” (Francis 2020, para. 37).

Taking all these phenomena into account, Pope Francis (2020) outlines new paths of hope. These paths include charity, universal communion, forgiveness and universal love. Universal love has the power to transcend the false universalism of globalization which produces new divisions and binary oppositions such as we/they, local/global, citizen/foreigner and so forth. Pope Francis asserts:

“If a certain kind of globalization claims to make everyone uniform, to level everyone out, that globalization destroys the rich gifts and uniqueness of each person and each people. This false universalism ends up depriving the world of its various colours, its beauty and, ultimately, its humanity. For ‘the future is not monochrome; if we are courageous, we can contemplate it in all the variety and diversity of what each individual person has to offer. How much our human family needs to learn to live together in harmony and peace, without all of us having to be the same!’” (Francis 2020, para. 100)

Universal love is based on the dignity of every person and includes freedom, equality and fraternity (Francis 2020). Pope Francis emphasizes that human rights should be based on the connection of all individuals, not on the perception of the individual as a “monad” (“*monás*”)—which leads to conflicts and divisions (Francis 2020, para. 111).

According to Pope Francis: “A realistic and inclusive social covenant must also be a ‘cultural covenant’, one that respects and acknowledges the different worldviews, cultures and lifestyles that coexist in society” (Francis 2020, para. 219). The pontiff emphasizes the importance of developing a social atmosphere based on kindness. “Precisely because it entails esteem and respect for others, once kindness becomes a culture within society it transforms lifestyles, relationships and the ways ideas are discussed and compared. Kindness facilitates the quest for consensus; it opens new paths where hostility and conflict would burn all bridges” (Francis 2020, para. 224).

Pope Francis also asserts that the path to peace includes promoting the moral good; promoting the value of solidarity, respecting human dignity, “re-envisioning the social role of property,” (Francis 2020) ensuring rights without borders, ensuring “the fundamental right of peoples to subsistence and progress” and so forth (Francis 2020, para. 126). “Universal fraternity and social friendship are thus two inseparable and equally vital poles in every society. To separate them would be to disfigure each and to create a dangerous polarization” (Francis 2020, para. 142). The tensions between the global and the local, between East and West, can only be bridged by the concept of universal fraternity.

The pontiff emphasizes the importance of openness to other cultures. “In fact, a healthy openness never threatens one’s own identity. A living culture, enriched by elements from other places, does not import a mere carbon copy of those new elements, but integrates them in its own unique way. The result is a new synthesis that is ultimately beneficial to all, since the original culture itself ends up being nourished” (Francis 2020, para. 148).

Pope Francis claims that it is important to be aware that we all belong to a “larger human family” (Francis 2020, para. 31) and that “global society is not the sum total of different countries, but rather the communion that exists among them” (Francis 2020, para. 149). He advocates the development of “a better kind of politics” that is at the service of the common good (Francis 2020, para. 154).

Pope Francis advocates political charity, which is based on “recognizing that all people are our brothers and sisters, and seeking forms of social friendship that include everyone” (Francis 2020, para. 180). The pontiff states: “Social charity makes us love the common good, it makes us effectively seek the good of all people, considered not only as individuals or private persons, but also in the social dimension that unites them. Each of us is fully a person when we are part of a people; at the same time, there are no peoples without respect for the individuality of each person” (Francis 2020, para. 182).

Pope Francis argues that peace is the result of a massive political endeavor based on human interdependence and shared responsibility. The pontiff emphasizes that the concept of peace has three indivisible characteristics (“peace with oneself”; “peace with others”; and “peace with all creation”); it is both communal and internal and requires conversion of heart and spirit (Francis 2018). Peace, in this framework, is primarily the result of justice, forgiveness, and fraternity. Pope Francis argues that “peace is not merely absence of war but a tireless commitment [. . .] to recognize, protect and concretely restore the dignity, so often overlooked or ignored, of our brothers and sisters,” (Francis 2020, para. 233). Forgiveness contributes to this process by enabling individuals and communities to move beyond resentment without erasing the moral significance of past injustices. It opens a space for new beginnings, while remaining anchored in responsibility and ethical accountability.

Cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue is key to developing an ethics of universal fraternity and achieving peace. Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of interreligious and cross-cultural dialogue in achieving good international relations between East and West: “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!” (Francis 2020, para. 217). The pontiff states:

“Good relations between East and West are indisputably necessary for both. They must not be neglected, so that each can be enriched by the other’s culture through fruitful exchange and dialogue. The West can discover in the East remedies for those spiritual and religious maladies that are caused by a prevailing materialism. And the East can find in the West many elements that can help free it from weakness, division, conflict and scientific, technical and cultural decline. It is important to pay attention to religious, cultural and historical differences that are

a vital component in shaping the character, culture and civilization of the East. It is likewise important to reinforce the bond of fundamental human rights in order to help ensure a dignified life for all the men and women of East and West, avoiding the politics of double standards". (Francis 2020, para. 136)

4. Pope Francis' Ethics of Forgiveness in Contemporary Philosophical Context

Forgiveness, kindness, reconciliation, and universal fraternity are the cornerstones of Pope Francis' ethical and political vision. But forgiveness does not imply forgetting, and according to Pope Francis, forgiveness has the power to improve human and international relations as well as to heal past traumas (Francis 2020). Forgiveness is, therefore, essential to ending violent cycles and establishing global peace. Pope Francis' emphasis on remembrance and accountability is based on the idea that forgiveness offers the chance to turn historical injustice and violence into chances for new ethical framework and peace projects, as well as healing the past traumas rather than ignoring them.

In contemporary philosophy, the concept of forgiveness has been most extensively examined in the work of Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur, who have developed distinct but complementary theoretical approaches to its ethical and phenomenological dimensions (Kearney 2010). Ricoeur argues that "forgiveness raises a question that in its principle is distinct from (...) the question of the representation of the past on the plane of memory and of history at risk of forgetting" (Ricoeur 2004, p. 457). Both Pope Francis and Paul Ricoeur believe that forgiveness does not mean forgetting. Ricoeur argues that "memory" is a word he would like to associate with forgiveness (Ricoeur 2005a, p. 11). He emphasizes that forgiveness does not mean erasing the memory of the evil committed (which would be impossible or unethical) but changing the way we remember that event. It allows us to remember, but without destructive anger. However, this is a very difficult process and for Ricoeur, forgiveness is an ethical achievement:

"But, if fault constitutes the occasion for forgiveness, it is the word forgiveness that gives its tone to this epilogue as a whole. This is the tone of an eschatology of the representation of the past. Forgiveness-if it has a sense, and if it exists-constitutes the horizon common to memory, history, and forgetting. Always in retreat, this horizon slips away from any grasp. It makes forgiving difficult: not easy but not impossible". (Ricoeur 2004, p. 457)

Pope Francis develops a similar understanding of forgiveness as a difficult but necessary ethical practice grounded in memory, justice, and reconciliation. Like Ricoeur, he rejects the idea that forgiveness requires forgetting historical suffering or suspending justice (Cinquetti 2023). His insistence that "forgetting is never the answer" (Francis 2020, para. 246) closely parallels Ricoeur's understanding of forgiveness as a transformation of memory rather than an erasure of the past. However, Pope Francis gives more importance to the social and political aspects of forgiveness especially in relation to global injustice, structural violence and universal fraternity (Francis 2020).

Paul Ricoeur's approach to forgiveness is mainly through phenomenology, memory and narrative identity (Ricoeur 1992). On the other hand, Pope Francis' idea of forgiveness is part of a larger ethical and political project of peacebuilding and the reconstruction of social relations (Moolakkattu 2013). In *The Course of Recognition*, Ricoeur again emphasizes that forgiveness does not imply forgetfulness (Ricoeur 2005b). "It is this idea of forgiveness as a gift, but not one requiring or expecting a gift in return but as something received and passed on as a second gift that leads the discussion of mutual recognition and states of peace" (Pellauer et al. 2026).

Ricoeur makes a sharp distinction between amnesty and forgiveness:

“Amnesty is organized forgetting, and it has nothing to do with the pacification that forgiveness can bring between two consciences. It is not by chance that there is a kinship, a semantic kinship, at any rate in French, between ‘amnesty’ and ‘amnesia.’ The institutions of amnesty are not all the institutions of forgiveness. They constitute a forgiveness that is public, commanded, and that has therefore nothing to do with what I described earlier as a personal act of compassion. In my opinion, amnesty does wrong at once to truth, thereby repressed and as if forbidden, and to justice, at it is due to the victims”. (Ricoeur 2005a, p. 10)

According to Ricoeur, justice and forgiveness are both impeded by amnesty (Ricoeur 2005a, p. 10). Pope Francis denounced superficial forms of reconciliation that suppress historical truth or instrumentalize forgiveness for political purposes. His reflections on the Shoah, war crimes, persecution and collective trauma show that forgiveness cannot be reduced to institutional forgetting or politically imposed reconciliation. The pontiff states:

“Those who truly forgive do not forget. (...) Some crimes are so horrendous and cruel that the punishment of those who perpetrated them does not serve to repair the harm done. Even killing the criminal would not be enough, nor could any form of torture prove commensurate with the sufferings inflicted on the victim. Revenge resolves nothing. [...] This does not mean impunity. Justice is properly sought solely out of love of justice itself, out of respect for the victims, as a means of preventing new crimes and protecting the common good, not as an alleged outlet for personal anger. Forgiveness is precisely what enables us to pursue justice without falling into a spiral of revenge or the injustice of forgetting”. (Francis 2020, paras. 251, 252)

Pope Francis shares Ricoeur’s concern that authentic reconciliation must maintain memory and remain connected to justice and accountability. Both thinkers oppose amnesty that erases victims’ suffering in the name of political stability or social harmony. Paul Ricoeur states:

“The question that forgiveness raises does not concern the forgiving of others, but rather the asking for forgiveness. Thus, the first relation to forgiveness is also to the one from which one asks. I am thinking of something that the Neoplatonic philosopher of Jewish origins, Vladimir Jankélévitch, said while reflecting as well on forgiveness. He said: ‘They have not even asked us for forgiveness.’ He correctly observed, therefore, that the problem of forgiveness concerns a request addressed to others”. (Ricoeur 2005a, p. 9)

Ricoeur argues that although this act of forgiveness is individual, it has a collective dimension within the framework of the group and the community. He states: “I do believe that someone, even when they forgive someone else in the secret of their heart, find themselves in deep accord with the community which carries them at this very moment, a community which is open to this problematic” (Ricoeur 2005a, p. 22). Pope Francis also emphasizes the communal and relational aspects of forgiveness. The pontiff warns: “The truth is that ‘no family, no group of neighbours, no ethnic group, much less a nation, has a future if the force that unites them, brings them together and resolves their differences is vengeance and hatred. We cannot come to terms and unite for the sake of revenge, or treating others with the same violence with which they treated us, or plotting opportunities for retaliation under apparently legal auspices’. Nothing is gained this way and, in the end, everything is lost” (Francis 2020, para. 242).

Pope Francis acknowledges that forgiveness is a deeply personal act that cannot be imposed on victims or entire societies, but he also argues that forgiveness has broader social consequences because it can break cycles of revenge, hatred, and violence:

“To be sure, ‘it is no easy task to overcome the bitter legacy of injustices, hostility and mistrust left by conflict. It can only be done by overcoming evil with good (cf. *Rom* 12:21) and by cultivating those virtues which foster reconciliation, solidarity and peace’. In this way, ‘persons who nourish goodness in their heart find that such goodness leads to a peaceful conscience and to profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties and misunderstandings. Even when affronted, goodness is never weak but rather, shows its strength by refusing to take revenge’” (Francis 2020, para. 243)

In the pontiff’s conception of universal fraternity, forgiveness is situated in a collective ethical horizon where reconciliation contributes to the healing of communities and the restoration of peaceful coexistence (Francis 2020). This collective ethical horizon is based on dialogue. Pope Francis emphasizes: “Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word ‘dialogue’. If we want to encounter and help one another, we have to dialogue” (Francis 2020, para. 198).

Jacques Derrida addresses the issue of forgiveness in relation to historical traumas like the Holocaust and apartheid in South Africa. In his essay “On Forgiveness” (Derrida 2001). Derrida contends that the idea of forgiveness disappears if the unforgivable is not forgiven: “Forgiveness is not, it should not be, normal, normative, normalising. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality” (Derrida 2001).

Derrida’s political philosophy and his ideas about justice, hospitality, forgiveness, and friendship are significant for societies eroded by the traumas of war and ethno-national divisions (Ivic 2021). “Derrida argues that true forgiveness consists in forgiving the unforgivable: a contradiction all the more acute in this century of war crimes (from the Holocaust, to Algeria, to Kosovo) and reconciliation tribunals, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. If forgiveness forgave only the forgivable, then, Derrida claims, the very idea of forgiveness would disappear” (Critchley and Kearney 2001, p. vii).

Derrida (2001) compares forgiveness to a gift. He argues that forgiveness should be seen as an unconditional giving, arguing that since forgiveness is not done to achieve a goal, it must transcend the limits of reciprocity and economic transaction (Derrida 2001). Therefore, in the context of conditional imperatives, forgiveness does not exist.

Derrida’s philosophy offers a new conception of forgiveness. He aimed to reconsider the Abrahamic roots of the modern concept of forgiveness used in political and judicial discourse. The unsolvable dichotomy between unconditional and conditional forgiveness forms the foundation of the Abrahamic tradition of forgiveness (Evans 2013, p. 24). Derrida uses the “term ‘Abrahamic’ to designate an idiom of apology, reconciliation, and forgiveness, which is the shared inheritance of the three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, it is clear what he is most concerned with is the Jewish and in particular, Christian appropriations of this idiom” (Banki 2011, p. 286).

Derrida aims to rethink the idea of forgiveness founded on the Abrahamic heritage “through the novel re-reading of the Abrahamic heritage itself. Not simply by returning to a Hebrew thought of forgiveness of which he is also aware, but (...) by re-reading the Latin idiom of the gift in its alliance with forgiveness (the verbal link of ‘don’ and ‘pardon’)” (Banki 2011, p. 293). He advocates the idea of unconditional forgiveness. He states: “If there is forgiveness, it must forgive the unforgivable—such is the logical aporia (...) If one had to forgive only what is forgivable (...) then one would not forgive” (Derrida 2002, pp. 385–86).

Like Jacques Derrida, Pope Francis believes that forgiveness becomes particularly significant in situations marked by radical evil, violence, and historical trauma (Francis 2020). The pontiff states: “How much suffering, how many wounds, how many wars could be avoided if forgiveness and mercy were the style of our life!” (Vatican News 2020). Both Pope Francis and Derrida address the question of forgiveness in the context of crime, collective suffering, and seemingly unforgivable crimes. However, the pontiff’s understanding of forgiveness differs from Derrida’s aporetic understanding of forgiveness as an impossible possibility. Derrida emphasizes the paradoxical and unconditional nature of forgiveness beyond political calculations, while Pope Francis offers a more practical and relational view of forgiveness based on mercy, justice, dialogue, and social responsibility. The pontiff’s vision of forgiveness is closely linked to his vision of universal fraternity. For Pope Francis, forgiveness is not an abstract impossibility, but an ethical and political possibility for maintaining peace and human coexistence in a divided world (Francis 2020). The pontiff emphasizes: “We cannot demand God’s forgiveness for ourselves if we in turn do not grant forgiveness to our neighbour. If we do not strive to forgive and to love, we will not be forgiven and loved either” (Vatican News 2020).

Derrida (2001) discusses the idea of forgiveness in Vladimir Jankélévitch’s *Le Pardon* (Jankélévitch 1967) and *L’Imprescriptible* (Jankélévitch 1986). According to Jankélévitch, atrocities committed during World War II cannot be forgiven. Jankélévitch emphasizes: “forgiveness died in the death camps” (Jankélévitch 1996, p. 567). Additionally, Jankélévitch highlights that forgiveness cannot be provided if it is not requested (Jankélévitch 1996). According to Jankélévitch (1986), Nazis cannot be pardoned since they did not seek for forgiveness. He highlights how the Nazis’ atrocities are unique in many respects. They represent radical evil, or “ontological wickedness” (Jankélévitch 1996, p. 556). “But above all, they are crimes against humanity in the proper sense of the term, that is, crimes against the human essence or, if you will, against the ‘hominity’ of human beings in general” (Jankélévitch 1996, p. 555). Therefore, these crimes cannot be forgiven and the question arises as to who has the power to forgive them (Jankélévitch 1996, p. 560). According to Jankélévitch (1996), these crimes are so terrible that they cannot even be discussed.

In his emphasis that some historical atrocities must never be forgotten and forgiveness cannot be imposed on the victims, Pope Francis agrees with Jankélévitch. The extreme moral gravity of such acts is also acknowledged in the pontiff’s views on the Holocaust, genocide, war crimes, and structural violence (Francis 2020). Unlike Jankélévitch, however, Pope Francis does not conclude that atrocities cannot be forgiven (Francis 2020). Instead, he argues that forgiveness remains morally important because it can end cycles of revenge and hatred while maintaining accountability, justice, and memory.

Derrida presents a different understanding of forgiveness, arguing that the idea of forgiveness contains a logical contradiction—because true forgiveness can only come from what is considered unforgivable. He argues: “forgiveness must therefore do the impossible; it must undergo the test (*épreuve*) and ordeal of its own impossibility in forgiving the unforgivable” (Derrida 2002, pp. 385–86).

Pope Francis often links forgiveness with truth, justice, dialogue, responsibility, and reconciliation: “Truth, in fact, is an inseparable companion of justice and mercy. All three together are essential to building peace; each, moreover, prevents the other from being altered . . . Truth should not lead to revenge, but rather to reconciliation and forgiveness” (Francis 2020, para. 227).

In this way, compared to Derrida, his conception of forgiveness is more socially grounded and less aporetic. Pope Francis emphasizes forgiveness as a transformative moral practice that can revitalize interpersonal and international relations through solidar-

ity, fraternity, and peacebuilding, while Derrida radicalizes forgiveness by portraying it as unconditional.

5. Conclusions

Pope Francis' ethics of universal fraternity extends his social and political vision, highlighting the necessity of recognition of human dignity, solidarity, cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue, respect for human rights and equality in all social, political, and international relations.

Pope Leo XIV also advocates this ethics of universal fraternity, emphasizing the significance of forgiveness, dialogue and reconciliation (Pope Leo XIV 2026). Both Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV advocate the politics of nonviolence. Pope Francis asserts that "The politics of nonviolence have to begin in the home and then spread to the entire human family. 'Saint Therese of Lisieux invites us to practise the little way of love, not to miss out on a kind word, a smile or any small gesture which sows peace and friendship. An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures that break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness'" (Francis 2016). Pope Leo XIV advocates the politics of disarmament. He quotes Pope John XXIII, who was the first pope to explicitly advocate disarmament:

"Everyone must realize that, unless this process of disarmament be thoroughgoing and complete, and reach people's very souls, it is impossible to stop the arms race, or to reduce armaments, or—and this is the main thing—ultimately to abolish them entirely. Everyone must sincerely co-operate in the effort to banish fear and the anxious expectation of war from our minds. But this requires that the fundamental principles upon which peace is based in today's world be replaced by an altogether different one, namely, the realization that true and lasting peace among nations cannot consist in the possession of an equal supply of armaments but only in mutual trust". (Pope Leo XIV 2026)

Both Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV envision a world in which peace is actively cultivated through encounter, ethical responsibility, and the promotion of justice. In this sense, forgiveness and reconciliation are not only spiritual, moral and religious practices, but essential instruments for the construction of a more just, humane, and fraternal global society.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Data is contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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