

SOLIDARITY

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In Catholic Social Teaching, (hereafter CST) the term “solidarity” makes explicit what is implicit in the Gospel sayings about losing ourselves for the sake of others – and in this way finding our true selves. It is about what it means to be fully human: we cannot be our own true selves outside of right relationships with others and with our environment. But the Gospel saying is not just an anthropological statement; it is a moral requirement; it leads to having life, or losing it; and it is a requirement of Christian discipleship. (cf Luke 9:23,24)

Pope St John Paul II (JP II) was being consistent with this when he spoke about the social consequences of sin. When sin alienates us from God it also alienates us from ourselves, from others, and from the world around us. “By virtue of human solidarity” the sins of individuals can create “structures of sin” that condition others’ conduct. (cf On Reconciliation and Penance, 1985, 16; On the Social Teaching of the Church, 1987, 36)

Social responsibility has been the theme of CST since the late 19th century. Modern communications and new technologies have made us more and more aware of our inter-dependence – with other people and with our environment. Recent Popes have called for these developments to be paralleled by solidarity in the moral sphere.

There are numerous human needs and human rights that are in practice unattainable except through human collaboration. This puts solidarity under the heading of “justice”. It is not a “feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortune of so many people, both near and far. ...it is *a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good.*” (JP II, On the Social Teaching of the Church, 1987, 565-66). In other words, it is a moral virtue.

CST brackets four key aspects of social life: *the dignity of the human person*, on which everything else is premised; *the common good*, which is the social conditions needed so that people, as individuals and as communities, can more easily and more fully attain their fulfillment; *solidarity*, which ensures that individuals and smaller communities are not left without the help they need from stronger or more central authorities; and *subsidiarity*, which insists on the right of individuals and smaller communities to have the scope they need to “participate”, i.e. not be pre-empted or have all their decisions made for them. These four “permanent principles” are the constants within all life’s changes. But they are not inert; they move according to changing needs; they revolve around each other and support each other – rather like the steps in a dance.

Through a general election, we have an opportunity to fan the embers of our “firm and persevering commitment to the common good”, - within our nation, and even in our international relationships, and across generations. This is because social, political and economic programmes impact on how human beings and human lives are being respected, both within our nation and off-shore; how equitably the goods of the earth and fruits of human labour are being distributed, and how the planet is being cared for. All these pertain to the common good, i.e. to the social conditions needed for people to attain more easily and more fully their fulfillment.

Citizens should develop a generous and loyal devotion to their country, but without any narrowing of the mind. In other words, they must always look simultaneously to the welfare of the whole human family. (Second Vatican Council, *The Church in the Modern World*, 75)

But there is a sense in which these lofty ideals seem out of reach. At the end of the day, human relationships cannot be governed by the standards of justice. Love will take us further than justice. It was out of love that God entered into relationship with us. If, in turn, our love for others resembles God's love for ourselves, it will be a love that goes beyond what was ever owed to us, or deserved; it will not easily excuse itself, and it will not be carefully measured. God loved us "while we were still sinners." (Romans 5:8). This kind of love makes new starts possible; it "changes everything".

This is where the discussion on solidarity needs to go; it cannot be separated from compassion. Anything less will not be sufficient to motivate us for a "firm and persevering commitment to the common good." It will not bring us to that deep identification with others that the Council so memorably claimed on our behalf:

The joys and the sorrows, the griefs and anxieties, of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ." (*The Church in the Modern World*, 1).

It all comes back to what God's love for us is like – and who is included. God's life is ecstatic love. Eastern Christians from earliest times liked to picture this as dancing (perichoresis; dancing around). Creation only came about because God wanted to share the divine life and the joy that it gives. God, as it were, looked outwards, - and we came to be, and were invited into the dance. We are true to these origins when we also look outwards. Commenting on Seamus Heaney's poetry, Australian poet Peter Steele says: "Celebration, I take it, is an act of solidarity; the dancers in its ring face outwards".

God stepped right out when "Taking on human nature, Christ bound the whole human family to Himself as a family" (Second Vatican Council, Decree on Laity, 8). Our solidarity with Him is so real that His destiny becomes ours. Along the way, what we do or fail to do for others we do or fail to do for Him; (Matthew 25:31-46; cf Acts 9:3,4). For Christians, there could hardly be a more cogent reason for taking very seriously our increasing inter-dependence and the moral responsibilities that flow from it.