

The Importance of Solidarity

An overview of the concept of solidarity and its importance as the Church understands it.

In order to begin looking at the principle of solidarity and its importance it will be helpful to first look at the meaning of the word itself. Dictionary definitions talk of two aspects of solidarity: the uniting of a group of people with a common purpose, and mutual-dependency (or interdependency) of people. The Church's understanding of solidarity encompasses both of these aspects. She also speaks of the 'virtue' of solidarity, which Pope John Paul II described as a 'firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the common good of all and of each and every individual, because we are all really responsible for all.'¹ The interdependence we share with our fellow human beings demands that we take responsibility for them in accordance with the measure of what we have been given by God.

Much that can be said about the importance of the principle of solidarity can be appreciated and found meaningful even by people who have no particular faith. For Christians though, its importance begins with its origins. The principle of solidarity has its roots in the scriptures. The book of Deuteronomy tells us: 'Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land."² Of course, that is only one facet of the principle, the responsibility of those who have to those who have not.

Mark's Gospel presents us with another image of solidarity. In chapter 14 he describes Jesus at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper. As he sat at the table a woman, who was clearly rich, anointed Jesus with a very costly jar of ointment. We're told that it could have been sold for more than 300 denarii (perhaps a year's wages for an agricultural labourer). As someone suffering from leprosy, Simon would have been ritually unclean, and therefore

socially marginalised. Here Jesus was accepting his hospitality, just as he did with many others who were thought not to be worthy. The woman, so Jesus said, anointed him ready for his burial. The lines of interdependence are there just waiting to be explored. We all have a need to give, and a need for the things we give to be found acceptable by their recipients. It is, according to the principle of solidarity, our responsibility to look after the needs of others. Here was Jesus making that possible for Simon and the woman (we're not told her name). At the same time he was presumably giving something of himself, at the very least the teaching that followed about doing beautiful things for God.

As we look at the issue of responsibility and our dependence on others, it is worth re-visiting the relationship that the rich have to the poor. Large portions of the worlds' developing countries are devoted to the growing of the so-called cash-crops: coffee, tea, bananas etc. Grown for the rich by the poor. In the majority of cases the farmers concerned are trapped in cycles of debt from which they have no hope of escape. The things that those rich consumers take for granted, such as healthcare and education are beyond the means of these poor producers. Even with the emergence of companies adhering to the FairTrade standard, and some coffee chains talking about their investment in sustainable sources, on the whole the rich have failed to take their responsibility for the poor seriously.

As has already been stated, solidarity is not just about the duties of the rich for the poor, 'all are responsible for all'.¹ Both the interdependence and the responsibility go both ways. However, what is expected of each individual depends on what they have been given by God. As Pope Leo XIII wrote in 1891, 'although all citizens, without exception, can and ought to contribute to that common good in which all individuals share so advantageously to themselves, yet it should not be supposed that all can contribute in the like way and to the same extent.'³ It would be a mistake, of

course, to focus solely on rich and poor here. 'All for all' means what it says. Here lies one aspect of the importance of the principle of solidarity. The fragmentation of societies and nations has not brought us isolation from the troubles of others. The rise of individualism has not brought us a better class of person. We have been encouraged to think of being 'fiercely independent' as being a virtue, and to feel that relying on other people is a weakness. The reality is that we have never been more dependent on more people than we are now in this age of globalisation.

Even if you were able to ignore the dignity of each human person, perhaps seeing people as another kind of machine, you have to be realistic about the way people are. Maybe, if you're ruthless, you can get away with treating people like machines, giving them the bare minimum to keep them 'ticking over'. That is exactly what employers were doing in the time leading up to the writing of the Church's encyclical on the condition of the working classes. It was a time of tension and violence between workers and employers. If humans have anything in common with machines, it's the fact that if you treat them badly, they will perform badly. If you want to get the worst out of people, if you want a high turnover of labour, if you want violence, then take a leaf out of the book of a nineteenth century industrialist.

It can, of course, be so much better. To attempt to live out the 'virtue' of solidarity is to work for the common good. It's not about ignoring the dignity of each human person, but recognising and respecting that dignity. If we create an environment where the best is brought out in people, we all benefit. The concept of the common good is not just some romantic notion either. The Second Vatican Council described it as, 'the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily.'⁴ We must recognise the fact that every single person, family and group has something original to offer to the community. As the Catechism of the

Catholic Church says, we all have potential inscribed in our nature, and meaningful work is a way that we can fulfil that potential, but only if we're given the chance.⁵

The Church's teaching on solidarity is counter-cultural. We are encouraged by secular society to have a view of social reality as essentially competitive and conflictive, but it's a view that must be challenged if we are to make progress. The problems of the world, and in particular those of the poor, are too great to be tackled effectively without a spirit of cooperation and harmony. Whatever the common wisdom says, it is these things that enable us to work best.

Finally then, the importance of solidarity can be understood further if we contemplate a future where its wisdom is ignored. The lack of solidarity in our world has led most people to forget not only their responsibility towards other groups of people, but also to forget their very humanness. How is one person able to contemplate the taking of another's life except by de-humanising them? It's impossible to say for sure whether the world is more violent than it has been in the past, but it certainly isn't less so. Plenty of politicians still seem to think that war is an appropriate method of solving their problems. The number of wars we are seeing and the many costs human and monetary don't vindicate their policies. In many cases what comes to mind is Tolstoy's suggestion that if you want to overthrow an evil regime using violence, you have to become more evil than them.

Without real efforts to put the principle of solidarity into practice – to take seriously our responsibility for each other – the cycles of violence that plague us will continue, and millions of the world's people will remain trapped in grinding poverty. Not that it is an easy task. The virtue of solidarity is quite demanding. Echoing the Golden Rule of the gospels it 'translates into the willingness to give oneself for the good of one's neighbour, beyond any individual or particular interest.'⁶ Mohandas Gandhi

recognised this aspect of Jesus' teaching and applied it to his own situation. As far as he was concerned, Jesus was the first proponent of non-violent resistance. Its value can't be seen from the cleverness of a theory though. He said, "it shall be proved by persons living it in their lives with utter disregard of the consequences to themselves."⁷ That is true for the importance of solidarity as well, but we have had our example of how effective it is – like Gandhi – from the beginning, from Jesus himself.

1 John Paul II – 'Sollicitudo Rei Socialis' (1987) : 38

2 Deuteronomy : Ch. 15, verse 11 (NRSV) OUP 1999

3 Leo XIII – 'Rerum Novarum' (1891) : 34

4 Vatican II – 'Gaudium et Spes' (1965) : 26

5 Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) : 2428

6 P.C. For J.&P. - 'Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church' (2005) : 194

7 M.K. Gandhi – 'Nonviolence in Peace and War' (1948)