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Solidarity— The Newest Virtue

In *Sollicitudo rei socialis* John Paul II christened solidarity a virtue. Why would he do that? Many people, when they hear “solidarity,” immediately think of the Solidarity Movement in Poland and come to the conclusion that solidarity is simply a Polish reality. Yet it has a long history of functioning as an attitude, a duty and a principle. The Vatican II documents used solidarity five times in the Latin (twice in *Apostolicam actuositatem* nn. 8, 14, and three times in *Gaudium et spes* nn. 4, 32, 57), which indicates that it had been around in theological circles long before it became a movement in Poland.

Paul VI spoke often of the “duty of solidarity” in his encyclicals, and John Paul II often quotes those passages in his encyclicals. He also has spoken and written often of solidarity as a needed attitude in today’s interdependent world, yet in 1987 he designated solidarity a virtue. Marciano Vidal, a well-known moral theologian in Europe, has said that “in a shining universe of virtues, a new star has appeared.” Why would John Paul II want to stress it as a new virtue?

Since then, solidarity has found some acceptance as a virtue in Church documents (“Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity” issued by the Pontifical Councils *Cor Unum* and Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples); and in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (there are seventeen references to solidarity in the *Catechism*. It is spoken of as “virtue” in nn. 1942, 1948, 2407).

John Paul II has been writing about solidarity since 1969 when he wrote “The Acting Person” (*Osoba I Czyn*). It contains a chapter on the importance of the attitudes of opposition and solidarity in forming the human personality. John Paul II is concerned about human development—true human development. In finally naming solidarity a virtue, he is expressing his belief about how the person develops, how the person needs to develop to be a fully developed person. Solidarity as an attitude, duty or principle only helps the person to do the right thing, but it is virtue which helps the person to become good. Doing the right thing is not enough—being good is what the human person is really about.

Virtue, coming from the Greek, means “excellence.” It came to mean how the person was moral. The virtuous person is the one who leads a life of perfection. Aquinas stated “the virtue of each thing is what makes its possessor and his work good.” Virtue is more than a duty. A duty implies decision and action, but virtue implies a disposition, a power, and a perfection. Duty asks, “What should I do?” Virtue asks, “How shall I be?” Virtue is more than the act itself. To tell the truth at one time or another does not necessarily mean that I am a truthful person. One act of justice does not make the just person. Virtues are skills which strengthen us to decide how to act in a manner which is good for our very being. They must be learned and practiced if they are to be effective, especially in those situations which are new and difficult. Virtue helps us to not only do the right thing—but to do it for the right reason. Virtue helps one to act in such a manner that the self chooses the good to do, and in the process the self becomes good.

Virtuous acting implies that the person not only has the capacity to act but to act with reason. The choice of virtuous actions will lead us to become virtuous persons. Virtuous action implies that the person has some understanding of the self, that there is some rational understanding, and that one is responsible for one’s own actions. John Paul II has stressed virtuous action because he knows that is the best way for a society in moral chaos to regain human integrity, human virtue, and goodness.

Aquinas defined virtue as a habit, a quality that is always good. It implies a perfection of power and because perfection is involved—any and all of the virtues are a movement towards the good. But the movement towards the good today, more than at any other time in our history, is a movement that has ramifications and repercussion in ever widening circles. Because we have become a global society, a world that is evermore interdependent, solidarity is the virtue that moves society to the good.

In his introduction to *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, John Paul II said that the Church is concerned about the “authentic development of man and society which would respect and promote all dimensions of the human person” (n. 1). Development, for John Paul II, is in being—not in having. He wants us to act good so that we become good. In this major social encyclical to the world, he offers a life of virtue—solidarity—to an interdependent world, the practice of which leads to perfection, goodness, and happiness. Laws bind, virtues perfect. John Paul II sees a world in moral crisis rather than a world only at political and economic odds. The

answer then lies not in a different political or economic arrangement but at the level of being moral. He believes that the needed moral change can be brought about only by virtue. As a moral leader in the world today he desires that we become good. For that reason I think he offered solidarity as a virtue in *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, even though he frequently speaks of it as a principle, duty, or attitude. He knows that virtue is more effective in transforming persons and society.

When he describes the virtue in “*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*” he says that it is the response to relationships in a world that is interdependent . . . this response is a firm and persevering determination . . . in this response one commits oneself to the common good (n. 38). In the next section he goes on to add that the virtue is valid only when the other is recognized as a human person, equal in dignity . . . when we feel responsible for those who are weaker—the poor . . . and when all fulfill their responsibilities (rich, poor, and the intermediate groups in the context of the common good (n. 39). He avows that this refers not only to persons but also to “international relationships.”

In just these short references to the encyclical, one can see the components of the virtue of solidarity and the fact that it is not only a virtue for individual persons but also for groups and nations. It is that which makes it a new virtue. A virtue that helps not only persons to become good, but also perfects large groups and nations.

Early in the encyclical, n. 10, he notes that social problems such as human and economic development have acquired worldwide dimensions. He denounces that interdependence of “economic, financial, and social mechanisms, which, although manipulated by people, often function almost automatically, thus accentuating the situation of wealth for some and poverty for the rest.” The issue then is, what kind of interdependence is best for the world, its people, and all of creation? Interdependence is a fact. That it is functioning in the world today, more than ever before, is most visible. We are faced with choosing a life-giving interdependence or one that is death-dealing. When interdependence is such that its foundation is greed for power and money, it builds up structures of sin. When solidarity is the foundation of interdependence, it upholds the human dignity of all, is expressed in a mutuality of relationships, and a working for the common good of all.

Yet, solidarity is more than a foundation. Solidarity and interdependence are two separate entities whose actions are intertwined and order each other. They are like two friends who

balance and stabilize each other and at the same time challenge and encourage each other to greater growth and deeper friendship. Solidarity ensures that interdependence really is directed to the good of all people and the world. Interdependence, formed by solidarity, ensures that the virtue remains and becomes ever more firm and persevering.

In naming solidarity as the virtue for an interdependent world, John Paul II is taking the positive road in light of the struggles and divisions among nations, between hemispheres. In looking at the world with its economic questions, political prospects, different cultural aspirations, and ethical backgrounds, he illustrates the seriousness of our moral crisis and the need to approach it as a whole. The problems are to be faced as one—the situation of interdependence. We cannot solve just one part in one area. They are too interconnected. We can either turn into “we” and “they” camps and protect ourselves by whatever means we choose or we can see an “us” that works together to find solutions to all those problems that will either turn us into enemies or into one family. Solidarity is the hope, the assurance that we can bring the world together as one family.

If interdependence is the first constitutive element of the virtue of solidarity, a human dignity that is equal and mutual is the second. Solidarity demands that we recognize the other as person. From looking at the other as “other,” we become more aware and conscious that the other is a neighbor, a friend, the living image of God, a brother, a sister.

There is an integral connection between interdependence and human dignity. An interdependence that relates to the other as equal and mutual is an interdependence that relates with and not against the other. It then becomes an interdependence that looks for unity, not separation or division. It is an interdependence that includes the whole world, the good of the whole world, and each person in it.

With the acceptance of the other as equal, in the working towards seeing the other as equal, even when the differences seem almost insurmountable, an equality is established. As the non-essential differences disappear in the relating to the other as equal, deeper bonds of interdependence are forged and stimulate greater equality. Relating to the other in this way is what solidarity is all about. Whether this happens among individual persons or in relations among nations, solidarity is at work. Solidarity is that virtue which can help persons and nations relate equally and interdependently.

Solidarity looks at all international relations through the lens of equity as it does with individual persons to assure that those relations are mutual, respectful, moving, and progressing into equal relationships. Solidarity implies that mutuality involves a reciprocity that insures an equality which will not degenerate into paternalism or maternalism that often leads to violence. This is especially important for groups, states, and nations that are not equal at this time but because of the fact of interdependence are moving more and more in that direction.

In accepting the human dignity and therefore equality of each person as a dimension of the virtue of solidarity, it is necessary to add to it the integral factor of a preferential love for the poor to ensure that there is really equality with all. Why is this so? First, it is difficult always to see the other as an equal, a brother, a sister, a member of the same human family. It is easy to say, hard to actuate. To actuate it with each person is a rarity, especially with such operative prejudices as sexism, racism, class divisions, economic differences, educational levels, etc. The added element of an option for the poor works as a catalyst to open eyes, open mind-sets, obliterate prejudices, convert hearts to actually see all others as sister or brother.

In the encyclical John Paul II explains that a preferential option is not an exclusive option, nevertheless it is a "firm and irrevocable option." It is an option that advances inclusiveness, an option that extends. It propels us into expanding relationships of interdependence, an inclusion of all the parts working for the common good, rather than restricting some parts because of seeming inadequacies. The preferential option includes opportunities for the most deprived and dispossessed to participate in working for the good of all. A preferential option for the poor, rather than dividing or taking sides, brings together and causes more unity. By ignoring or rejecting an option for the poor one does not practice solidarity, does not respect the human dignity of all, and does not work for the common good.

An option for the poor helps us to see differently. Solidarity in connection with an option for the poor moves us to action. In the option for the poor, it is easy to slip into easy solutions for the needy individual, solutions that are swift and helpful in the short term. The option for the poor as an integral segment of solidarity helps us to see the wider issues, the intertwining of systems and structures that need to be changed so that there can be solutions that are long term and all encompassing.

The dimension of an option for the poor is linked to interdependence and the awareness and recognition of our common origin, one nature, one destiny. The poor, especially the impoverished and oppressed poor, point to the fact that solidarity and a good interdependence are not at work in society. To have a relationship of mutual equality, one must be able to know, feel, and be able to put oneself in the place of the other. This results in acts of sharing. With an eye to the other and to the common good, there is the relationship that there is never enough to go around for all that everyone wants. In solidarity one does not see the other as a rival in the sharing of goods but as one of us as we work together so that everyone has what they need.

John Paul II, in his description of solidarity, accepts and promotes that the practice of solidarity either begins with an option for the poor or ends with it. Somewhere in the judgment of the act of solidarity the poor have a role. It is not true solidarity if the poor are overlooked.

If interdependence is the first component of solidarity and equality of human dignity of each person is the second, the common good is the third constitutive element of the virtue. Given the fact of a world that is interdependent, the acceptance of each one's dignity then influences that interdependence and interdependence is then directed to the good of all. John Paul II stated that solidarity "is that firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual. . . ."

If we are a world that is in a stage of interdependence which calls us to recognize each other as equal in dignity, members of the same human family—this relationship in solidarity directs us to the good of all because in this relationship what now hurts one hurts all, and what is helpful to each one is helpful to all, to such an extent that it involves not only persons but the integrity of creation.

It is not difficult to see that implied in the common good is the equality of persons with respect for differences. There is a reciprocity between the dignity of the human person and the common good. They balance each other, inform each other, and direct each other. How the common good is defined depends on how the person is defined. How the person is defined will have an effect on how the common good is understood with its ability to function for the good of all.

Solidarity is the virtue that commits everyone to the common good. John Paul II remarks "that is to say the good of all and of

each individual, because we are all really responsible for all." But it is more than responsibility. It is a commitment to the welfare of the human family. In a healthy family something more than responsibility directs the welfare of the family. It is that care, concern, and sharing of solidarity and love. Responsibility directs me in the doing of right action that brings it about.

In an interdependent world, based on the equality of human nature, persons and nations are directed by the virtue of solidarity to work for the good of all and the health of the planet because then the common good will be actualized. Solidarity directs nations to subordinate their national interests for the good of the planet and the good of all, especially those in need, which in turn reflects the good back to them. At this time in history, due to the state of interdependence that exists, it is of utmost importance that nations look to the common good just as persons do.

For too long each individual, each nation, and people have gone their own way, for their own profit, selfishness, or national self-interests. This has not led to happiness and contentment but to fear and alienation. If one is to work for the good of one's person, one's country, what is at stake and has to be considered is the good of all because when one only considers one's own needs or wishes it inevitably leads to selfishness, greed, destruction. Interdependence needs to be informed by virtuous people who work for the common good and the good of the universe.

In his "Message for the World Day of Peace, 1990," John Paul II linked solidarity with all of creation and asked us to look at "the relationship between human activity and the whole of creation." In the face of new regional conflicts and repeated injustices by peoples and nations there is a growing lack of respect for nature as resources are misused along with the lack of respect for life and dignity of the person. In light of the common good, we cannot only look to ourselves and our needs, but also have to be responsible to those who come after us.

The greenhouse effect, the damage done to the ozone layer, the massive deforestation, the piling up of industrial waste have caused havoc on the atmosphere and the environment, have placed this generation and the generations to come in danger and no one can speak with certainty of what effect this has had on the planet in relation to other bodies in the universe. The regard, the concern, and the working for the common good have expanded its vision and horizons.

The widespread experimentation in biological sciences are another cause for concern as the experimentation occurs with much

more rapidity than the consequences and moral considerations. In more ways than ever before, the choice for the common good is connected to future generations. It can no longer be considered in terms of the common good of all today but must include the common good of all for tomorrow.

In acting for the more universal common good that stretches further into the future, we are becoming more interdependent, acknowledge more the common human dignity of everyone including the poor and the less developed nations. We see ourselves more in closer and stronger communities, and at the same time, citizens of the world community with more and different rights and responsibilities that call us to more actions and better acting together in relationships that are ever more vital. The acting together for the purpose of the good of all has changed us as a society and we are willing to take on more responsibilities that require us to work interdependently. There is no longer an attitude that we can do it alone without relating in a national, international, and global manner.

Ours is a world of interdependence. We are related and united as never before. We have choices to make in how we relate as persons, peoples, and countries. For the good of the whole universe we have choices to make in how to form and sustain this unity. This interconnectedness, and the fact of interdependence, were noticed more in those situations and systems which cause great suffering and oppression. In observing the suffering and oppression, in acknowledging the widespread alienation present in society, the worldwide fear of war, especially nuclear war, the pontiffs of this century have delved deeper, searching for causes and solutions and have called the world's attention to the fact that the basis of all these problems lies first and foremost in the moral sphere. They have to do with how we relate to ourselves, to others, and to the planet. Only in recognizing each and everyone's human dignity, treating everyone as a member of the human family, respecting the earth and the integrity of creation will we really find solutions that will direct our actions toward the common good and personal happiness.

Solidarity is the virtue for this present age because it has the capacity to inform interdependence in such a way that persons, peoples, countries, and nations will relate to each other mutually and equally, recognizing each other as members of the same human family with the possibility of becoming friends not only with each other but ultimately also with God.

Solidarity is the virtue needed for our present age and the future because it orders actions and relationships not only of individual persons but also of peoples to peoples and nations to nations, with a special care for the most needy persons, peoples, and nations.

Solidarity is the virtue offered to us by John Paul II in his solicitude for all, because as a moral leader in the world, he knows that only virtue has the potential to transform people into good persons; only virtue has the potency to turn societies and nations into good communities; and that only virtue has the power to reconstruct systems and structures which will work for the common good of all and the entire universe.

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