

A Season of Catholic Social Teaching

St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

October 2020: Solidarity and the Common Good

In times of trouble, distress, misfortune, and tragedy we know the feeling of comfort and support when someone reaches out in compassion, empathy or with a helping hand. We experienced it on a national level, after 9/11, when other countries reached out to express sympathy and support. We have witnessed it or participated ourselves during times of natural disasters when we show up to help. These are examples of **solidarity**.

We react this way because, it seems, on some deep level we accept that:

*We are one human family whatever our national,
racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences.*

As we learn more about the other CST principles, we will see that solidarity among all the teachings is perhaps the most expansive and holistic: the cornerstone of all the principles.

It is solidarity – and not justice – that is at the core of almost all the social concerns of the Church. Theologian Matthew Lamb reminds us that human justice alone has been inadequate throughout history: “Human solidarity breaks down in the cycles of violence and counter violence, as one grievance evokes another, as one war is followed by another.”

It is solidarity that is the basis of positions on war and peace, conflict and forgiveness, more equitable distribution of wealth and the world’s resources, and more equitable terms of global trade. It is the basis of positions on aid and investment in underdeveloped countries, health care, racism, the need for strong global institutions like the United Nations. It informs the contribution to society through taxes and political participation.

A **theology of solidarity** is one in which we are in solidarity with each other by the very fact of our shared creation and shared redemption. A God-centered solidarity is a new model of the unity of the human race. God’s loving solidarity with us in Christ expands the definition of love of neighbor and includes even our enemies. We are enabled by God to forgive and to sacrifice for our brothers and sisters whomever and wherever they may be.

Solidarity is more expansive and multi-dimensional than may appear at first consideration and the understanding of it has been evolving over time.

If the “Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers” (1890) began the Church’s teachings on human dignity and human rights, then *Quadragesimo Anno* (*After Forty Years* – 1931) opened the door to the Church’s evolving teaching on the common good as equally important as the individual good. In *QA*, Pius XI used the word *solidarity* to counter both liberal capitalism, which promoted individualism at the expense of common humanity, and communism, which subordinated the individual to “the collective will.”

By the 1960’s, world events demanded a timely and proactive response from the Church. In *Mater et Magistra* (*Christianity and Social Progress*) and *Pacem in Terris* (*Peace on Earth*) Pope John XXIII expanded solidarity beyond workers within nations to a *global solidarity* as necessary to any just and humane development of people. His writings also framed the guidance on right relationships in society, between states, and between people and political communities in promotion of the universal common good and the elimination of violence.

Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio* was the strongest papal document on the connection between solidarity and integral human development, i.e. the “spirit of solidarity” as a necessary condition for social justice and peace. And in *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, John Paul II described the “virtue” of solidarity as not just a vague feeling of compassion, but a “...firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good,” the good of all and of each individual, “...because we are all responsible for all.”

Many of the CST teachings in the past 20 or 30 years attempted to reframe globalization – through solidarity – as a phenomenon capable of steering us to a person-based and community-oriented worldwide communion and sharing of goods. Today, however, we see a lack of solidarity in our own country and across the globe, and a greater tendency to isolation and individualism.

The sociologist John Coleman, S.J. noted that “...strong notions of solidarity and communitarianism do not resonate as well in the United States as they do in papal social teaching.” The COVID 19 pandemic and resultant economic crisis, the unearthing of the tragedy of racial injustice, and the climate crisis, all demand a revitalization of our commitment to solidarity. We need Catholic Social Teaching to take root in our society, and especially in our Church. We look forward to Pope Francis’ encyclical on Solidarity this month. We pray that it might give us another chance at transformation.

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