

The Value of Solidarity in the Congregation of the Mission¹

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During this year when we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the origin of the Vincentian Charism, we want to respond to two questions about solidarity: [1] what are the components of this virtue of solidarity (a theme that for many years has been developed in various universities), [2] how is this virtue practiced and lived in the Vincentian world (this is the fruit of sharing with hundreds of confreres).

¹ Cf. Palme, Olof. *El valor de la Solidaridad [The Value of Solidarity]*, Zaragoza, Libros Del Innombrable, 2009; Vidal, Marciano. “Ética de la solidaridad” [“Ethics of Solidarity”] in *Moralía* 55-56 (1992) 347-362; Braun, Rafael. “la solidaridad en la sociedad libre” [“Solidarity in the Free Society”] in *Criterio* 2205/6 (1997) 568-572; Carraud, V. “Solidarité ou les traditions de l’idéologie” [Solidarity or the Traditions of Ideology”] in *Communio* 14 (1989) 195-198; Parent, Remi. “Teología de la praxis de solidaridad” [“Theology of the Praxis of Solidarity”] in *Moralía* 55-56 (1992) 321-346; Nitsch, T. “Social Catholicism: Birth and Tradition of Solidarism” in *International Journal of Social Economics* 15/9 (1988) 3-38; Vidal, M. “La solidaridad: nueva frontera de la teología moral” [“Solidarity: A New Frontier of Moral Theology”] in *Studia Moralía* 23 (1985) 99-126; Cortina, A. “Más allá del colectivismo y el individualismo: autonomía y solidaridad” [“Beyond Collectivism and Individualism: Autonomy and Solidarity”] in *Sistema* 96 (1990) 3-17; González Amuchastegui, J. “Notas para la elaboración de un concepto de solidaridad como principio político” [“Notes for the Elaboration of a Concept of Solidarity as a Political Principle”] in *Sistema* 101 (1991) 123-135; Fernández, Celestino. *Vicente de Paúl un corazón sin medida. De la memoria al compromiso. [Vicent de Paul a Heart without Measure. From Memory to Commitment.]*, Madrid, La Milagrosa, 2014.

The etymology of solidarity

The word, *solidarity*, is rooted in the Latin word, *solidus*, which means solid, compact, whole. In the beginning, this word was utilized in the realm of construction. In other words, something is solid because all its parts are combined in the best possible manner. As often occurs in the evolution of language, later this word was utilized in a more symbolic manner. It was used in the area of jurisprudence, that is, *soliditus* referred to the unity of law. Laws were compact and secure as a result of the fact that they were interconnected, thus providing a balance to law (a truly marvelous concept). Still later, the word solidarity was applied to the ethical-political sphere. In this sense, the word was intended to convey the idea that a group was truly united because of the interdependence of its members. The concept of solidarity was developed in a very significant manner by the members of the Solidarist Movement. Leon Bourgeois, one of the foremost thinkers of this movement, witnessed the evils that were caused by unbridled liberal economics and offered an alternative: social interdependence. That concept was grounded on a principle that affirmed rights as well as obligations: the principle of solidarity. The members of this movement also believed that in order for solidarity to be effective, organizational planning was necessary – solidarity could not be left to the spontaneity of good feelings.

The appearance of the concept of solidarity in the Christian world

We can ask: how did the concept of solidarity enter into the Christian world? Theologians involved in the development of the concept of solidarity shared a common concern: how to recover the social dimension of charity so that it would no longer be viewed as some private activity. In this way, from the perspective of Christian responsibility, a powerful social transformation could occur. Obviously, all of this is in harmony with our charism. In fact, we could say that the entrance of the word *solidarity* into Church

discourse is due to the influence of the theologian Lebreton, who pointed out the fact that the problem of development in the world gives greater significance to the concept of solidarity. Therefore, Lebreton proposed an economic model grounded on *a civilization of solidarity between peoples and between classes*.

With regard to official Church documents, the word *solidarity* appears in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.² John Paul II popularized this word when he referred to solidarity as a key to resolving the social question. In fact, we could say that the word “solidarity” summarizes the social teaching of his pontificate. The social discourses of John Paul II contain numerous references to solidarity and this was due, in part, to his dependence on Polish theology with regard to the concept of solidarity and, in part, to his concern for the social question. I believe that in this area of moral theology, the Pope was progressive and prophetic. The same could not be said of him in other moral issues. Be that as it may, the Pope came to see that the concept of political charity,³ valid and noble in itself, was devalued because in many cases it was linked with actions that never resulted in any social transformation.

In his first social encyclical, *Laborem exercens*, John Paul II encouraged the liberating struggle of workers as he appealed to the important ethical value of solidarity, as well as an appeal to common action (cf. *Laborem exercens*, # 8). He also encouraged *new movements of solidarity of the workers and with the workers* (*Laborem exercens*, # 8), stating that such solidarity ought to lead to dialogue and collaboration with others. In other words, workers

² See, for example, “The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity”: *Among the signs of our times, the irresistibly increasing sense of the solidarity of all peoples is especially noteworthy* (# 14).

³ Translator’s Note: The Spanish phrase, *caridad social*, has been debated and widely discussed. In English, however, the use of the phrases “social charity” or “political charity” does not exist. I use the phrase “social charity,” but I have to admit that such a phrase is meaningless.

should focus on the common good and not just sectorial interests. The manner in which John Paul II applied the concept of solidarity to the sphere of work led some sectors to express certain doubts about the Christian nature of solidarity. Questions were raised about the relationship between charity and solidarity. We should recall that the philosophical world that utilized this word during the 19th century was quite hostile to the Christian world. The Pope responded to all of these concerns in his encyclical, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987), where he referred to solidarity as *undoubtedly a Christian virtue* (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, # 38-40).

Solidarity and its relationship to communion

Solidarity implies social beings. Here we recall the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that states, *All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood [and sisterhood]*. Thus, the human person, as an ethical being, ought to be an individual who lives in solidarity with others; that is, one who treats others as brothers and sisters. One way of expressing this solidarity on a social level is to recognize the fact that all people have certain rights and obligations – and today that reality takes on great significance with regard to living together with dignity.

A Christian praxis of solidarity must manifest itself in an openness to the world, an openness to all people. No selfishness is so impenetrable that it cannot be touched and changed by that spirit of communion, which Jesus has given to us. Thus, openness to the other ought to be lived from the perspective that such openness is a fundamental characteristic of solidarity. For a Vincentian, solidarity implies being a servant of the poor, a servant who demands that the poor be treated in a dignified manner. It implies a preferential option on behalf of the poor.

In order for solidarity to be truly effective, it should be bound up with subsidiarity. In other words, one should know how to delegate, because solidarity involves the establishment of the common good. Space must be given to others so that they might organize with autonomy. Solidarity ought to encourage others to act. Such solidarity originates in freedom and patience and implies overcoming the practice in which power is vested in one single person. When any group (civil or religious) feels itself as all-powerful, then generally the common good is weakened. The common good requires a coming together of divergent points of view. Solidarity implies a theology of communion that then involves participation in the decision-making process, a sharing of material resources, and participation in the governing process. As can be seen, solidarity is not an easy virtue to practice in a sustained and profound manner. It demands ongoing conversion.

Solidarity as a virtue

In his encyclical, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, Pope John Paul II pointed out that there is an increasing interdependence among individuals, social groups, and nations and, as such, human regulation is necessary. Such interdependence can be [1] inappropriate and depraved when it is used to take advantage of the weakest members of society through perverse mechanisms of power and structures that make it easy for those who have to obtain even more. Such interdependence, however, is [2] appropriate and virtuous when interdependent relationships function on behalf of the good of all people, especially the most vulnerable members of society. Therefore, we can further define solidarity as *a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all* (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, # 38).

This moral attitude is a Christian virtue that is related to charity, because in the practice of solidarity we find certain gospel options: a commitment on behalf of the neighbor and a willingness to serve

others rather than exploit and oppress them (cf. Mark 12:42-45, Luke 22:25-27). Because solidarity has various points of reference to charity, it becomes clear that solidarity is a distinctive characteristic of Jesus' disciples (cf. John 13:35; *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, # 40).

Solidarity is also related to the virtue of justice. Let us reflect on the following example. At a given time, the other (as a people or as an individual) was plundered and exploited. Then, as time passed, this group of persons was assisted and aid was viewed, in part, as restitution. This was a theme about which Vincent de Paul was most concerned.⁴ Through a lived solidarity, one is beginning to balance things and this is better than if one had had recourse to the law or to the judicial system (look, for example, at the conversion of Zacchaeus, Luke 19:1-10). Solidarity is related to justice in as much as we understand the fact that we are guided by the law of empathy and cooperation. Empathy is the human foundation of solidarity and, at its best, demands a willingness to share. Disposable goods should be shared and distributed in a manner that excludes no one, in a

⁴ Vincent de Paul stated: *God will grant you the grace ... of softening our hearts toward the wretched creatures and of realizing that in helping them we are doing an act of justice and not of mercy* (CCD:VII:115). Unfortunately, there was an era during which Vincent de Paul was seen as a man who had a great ability to ask for funds from the rich in order to redistribute them among the poor. This view, not very prophetic and also not true, ignored the fact that Vincent was quite critical of the social order and was very harsh when speaking about selfish Christians who had little or no sense of the common good. It should be remembered that Vincent spoke against the ambition and corruption that he saw in some government officials. Vincent did not remain on the mere surface of the various social problems of his day, but looked for the root of such problems in order to resolve them. [The reference in this footnote to CCD:VII:115 refers to: *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume VII, p. 115; future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, CCD:VII:115.

manner that discriminates against no one, and in a manner in which “the few” do not take for themselves that which by right belongs to “the many.”

Solidarity will never become a reality unless one is willing to place oneself in the position of “the other” (those who suffer), unless one is willing to change societal relationships so that they are more equal. Such a decision is nothing more than taking an option on behalf of those persons who are poor. Thus, solidarity can be viewed as that virtue that supports and sustains the dynamics of justice as well as the transformative power of charity.

Solidarity as a principle

Even though this theme (solidarity as a principle) might appear to be a very uninteresting and dry theme, let us, nevertheless, take a few moments to explore this idea. Besides being a virtue, solidarity is also a principle that demands the transformation of the social reality. Virtue and principle do not exclude one another but rather constitute a twofold dimension that expresses the depth of the concept of solidarity.

In his encyclical, *Centesimus annus*, the Pope referred to solidarity as a key principle: *what we nowadays call the principle of solidarity ... is clearly seen to be one of the fundamental principles of the Christian view of social and political organization (Centesimus annus, # 10)*. As such, it has multiple applications to the social life: it is the principle of political organization; it is a criterion for economic relationships, as well as for relationships between management and labor; and, finally, it is a demand if there is to be some form of order in the judicial system. All of these applications are rooted in and find their origin in the ethical understanding of solidarity.

Solidarity, as an ethical principle, gives rise to the ideal of humanity as one large community and becomes one of the basic ethical principles of social life. The principle of solidarity is

concretized when individual men and women, through norms of social institutions and structures, collaborate with one another in order to satisfy the interests of all concerned. In other words, solidarity becomes a reality to the degree that marginalized persons become the focus of our attention. Therefore, there is an urgency to act in such a manner that inequality becomes a reality of yesterday. In light of all of this, it becomes clear that members of the Vincentian Family should know and practice solidarity in order to be faithful in the 21st century to our charism which originated in the 17th century.

Solidarity in the Vincentian world

I paused to prepare myself a cup of coffee and, as I did so, I gazed at the beautiful garden at the Motherhouse in Paris, a garden which becomes especially beautiful during the spring. I then returned to my computer. I believe that since Vatican II we have become better in the practice of solidarity. Indeed, we have entered into greater solidarity with one another as a result of a better understanding of the prophetic role that flows from our baptismal commitment and as a result of our critical social analysis. As we attempt to respond to the needs of those who are poor, there is a greater urgency to understand the economic, financial, social, and political structures that produce marginalization and exclusion. We must struggle against those structures of sin and those perverse mechanisms that enslave and enchain so many people in situations of poverty and exploitation. It is for this reason that the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission request that the members be attentive *to the realities of present-day society, especially to the factors that cause an unequal distribution of the world's goods* (Constitution 12, 2°). During the 42nd General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission, the delegates exhorted all its members to work for *the globalization of solidarity in favor of the poor* (Final Document, # 3.2). We also refer the reader to the example of the primitive community (Acts 2:44-45), which inspired Thomas More to write his famous work, *Utopia*.

How do the various provinces of the Congregation of the Mission live this virtue of solidarity? This is a very complex question since some provinces have various works that reveal an understanding of solidarity and in other provinces that is not so.⁵ Some provinces are still wedded to the concept of charity as a “handout” and have opted for conservative social positions. Other provinces are focused more clearly on social promotion and quite open with regard to taking progressive social-political positions. It seems to me that if two or three houses in a province are involved in such activities, this should not be used to excuse other houses in the province from doing the same. It is not enough to have only one individual work that is used to manifest a province’s position with regard to solidarity. Rather, the whole Congregation must opt for the poor, must opt for solidarity; the whole Vincentian Family must also opt for the poor and for solidarity. My hope here is based on the fact that, as a whole, the Congregation has taken many steps forward in this area (the General Curia has promoted such movement). Still, however, there is much to do. The recent General Assembly of the Congregation

⁵ Here we could make reference to hundreds of various publications, as well as hundreds of different ministry projects, but I limit myself to the following: Father Pedro Guillén Goñi introduced me to the work entitled, *Tierra Prometida* (Promised Land, a book written by Father Otilio Monedero). That work refers to the people who were driven from their land in 1998, as a result of the floods that were caused by “El Niño” (during that same time, other people had to flee their land because of terrorism). Little by little, in a seemingly deserted place, new homes were built, electricity and running water were made available to the people, a chapel and a school were constructed, a town square established, and a stable and dignified life replaced a former situation of poverty. I would also mention here the Integral Promotion Center of Villa Paul in Keiko Sofia, where, in addition to a soup kitchen, one will also find a school, a bakery cooperative, a center for single mothers, catechesis, and other forms of pastoral ministry. When I was giving a course in Puerto Rico, I became aware of the tremendous work of Father Gregorio Alegría. People who were living in deplorable conditions became part of a new model neighborhood, which was called *Nueva Barquita*.

of the Mission highlighted several lines of action: greater sharing among the provinces; a renewal of its option for the poorest of the poor; strengthening missionary structures; making systemic change a part of its process of evangelization, and, more recently, this year the Vincentian Family has initiated a worldwide project to eliminate homelessness on planet earth.

If we engage in the practice of solidarity on the level of the worldwide Vincentian Family, it becomes clearer and clearer that we are indeed a Family in which the virtue and the principle of solidarity reign supreme.⁶ This also means that there is greater collaboration among the many branches of the Family. I believe that we are maturing in our approach toward the poor. Yes, we are more and more involved with ministry on behalf of those who are poor and excluded. They are loved and served. All of this means that we are willing to continue to engage in the struggle against those structures that produce and perpetuate injustice. So then, may our love for the poor be ever more concretized in our promotion of justice and charity, virtues that revitalize solidarity.

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⁶ We could speak about many different works, but here I will mention only one, the Barbara Ford Peace Center. This organization is based in Santa Cruz del Quiché (Guatemala) and promotes responsible citizenship among the citizens of this country. This center is directed of the Sisters of Charity of New York.