

RESTORING AND REBUILDING SOLIDARITY

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2015, in the context of the work being done by the Charbonneau Commission, the *Conseil Église et Société* (“Council on Church and Society”) of the Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops (AQCB) published a reflection on corruption. It described corruption as a “cancer on the bodies of our societies” and invited each person to heed his or her “part to play in building a society of solidarity”. In this vein, we wish to invite our Christian brothers and sisters to reflect more deeply with us on the need for and the demands of solidarity. We do so

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with all the more conviction as Pope Francis invites us to “go out of ourselves” and “be a Church which is poor and for the poor” (*The Joy of the Gospel*, paras. 87 and 198).

After noting the limits of solidarity in the modern world, we will try to show how it is vital to everyone’s well-being and how it is fundamentally consistent with the essence of our faith in Christ. A vast area of endeavour opens up before us: that of restoring and rebuilding solidarity. God himself invites us to the task and supports us in it.



1. THE SOLIDARITY OF THE MODERN WORLD: WORTHY OF ADMIRATION BUT STILL INADEQUATE

1.1 Expressions of solidarity in the world today

At first glance, it seems as though we are living an unprecedented solidarity these days. The development of electronic means of communication has created a “web” around the world that makes distances vanish; greater sensitivity to climate change makes us more keenly aware that the Earth is our “common home”¹ and that we are responsible for one another. What’s more, whenever natural disasters or catastrophic human conflicts occur, we witness bursts of amazing generosity. Limiting our attention only to Québec, we can think of the great solidarity that unfolded during the 1998 ice storm, or again after the 2013 tragedy in Lac Mégantic. We might also think of the solidarity shown by Canadians from across the country towards survivors of the forest fires in Fort McMurray in the spring of 2016. And still today, there is a great deal of generosity being shown in the welcome extended to the many Syrian refugees who have fled the civil war raging in their country.

This solidarity bears witness to people’s spontaneous generosity and their compassion in the face of another’s suffering, to their desire to share in their burdens and to get involved in order to alleviate that suffering. This is truly deserving of admiration.

Nevertheless, it seems to us that this solidarity is inadequate and is under threat. Indeed, it is reliant on collective feelings and large-scale movements, whereas it ought to be rooted in the deepest convictions of each person. Two interconnected factors, related to our self-understanding, seem to be at the source of this inadequacy.

1.2 “Structures” of solidarity are undermined

Solidarity based on family, neighbourhood, common history and culture, and even on religious identity, has largely disappeared, or has at the very least been severely compromised. The makeup and permanence of these primary forms of solidarity -

¹ Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’ on care for our common home*, May 24, 2015, para. 1.



forms which fostered mutual help and support, volunteerism, and community groups - have been seriously undermined. Even where these solidarities endure, we can observe a flagging of energy largely due to aging and to the absence of the rising generations.

1.3 The emergence of an individualistic culture

The biggest threat to solidarity, however, is the individualism that characterizes our modern world. This individualistic culture developed gradually over the last few decades and even centuries, to the point that it has come to define the modern identity.² This identity is expressed, among other ways, by a definition of one's relationship to others in terms of *rights*. While there is in this notion a deep concordance with the fundamental principle of Christian ethics, namely, the dignity of the person, it also runs the risk of losing sight of the great responsibility we have for one another. This responsibility calls to solidarity not only as a moral virtue but also as a social principle.

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In short, solidarity cannot be reduced to few "*sporadic acts of generosity*" but demands "*a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few.*"³ It calls for a firm commitment of the will to fight against inequalities. As John Paul II writes, solidarity must be "*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.*"⁴

This determination is founded on the realization that we are connected to one another from the very beginning. Moreover, throughout our lives we are dependent on each other in the accomplishing of a good that we share – the common good. Finally, like God who places himself in solidarity with all humanity, the Word of God and the social teaching of the Church ceaselessly challenge us to live in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in humanity, especially the poorest, and to build the Kingdom of justice and peace ushered in by Christ.

² Moral philosopher Charles Taylor devotes his *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1992, 624 pp.) to this theme.

³ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii gaudium* ["The Joy of the Gospel"], November 24, 2013, para. 188.

⁴ Pope St. John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Sollicitudo rei socialis for the twentieth anniversary of Populorum Progressio*, December 30, 1987, para. 38.



2. A NECESSARY SOLIDARITY

2.1 Solidarity as the very principle of our freedom

If we must be in solidarity with one another, it is essentially because we are already dependent on one another in the building of our freedom, which is composed of many influences that connect us to a throng of people. If we attained freedom at some point and became able to carry out free acts, it is because we were welcomed into a human family that taught us what is rightly called a “mother” tongue; it is because we became part of a culture and religion that conferred on us certain values and a certain vision of the world and history. Right from the start we are accountable to all these persons and communities that have allowed us to be who we are; we have a debt of solidarity toward them.

2.2 Solidarity required in order to achieve society’s common good

Benedict XVI reminds us there is a good, common to all members of a society, at the heart of that society: *“Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of ‘all of us’, made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it. To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity.”*⁵ This creates a fundamental solidarity that is a source of duty.

2.3 Solidarity required if we are to respect the universal destination of goods

The duty of solidarity also arises from the universal destination of goods. As Pope Francis recalls forcefully, *“the planet belongs to all mankind and is meant for all mankind; the mere fact that some people are born in places with fewer resources or less development does not justify the fact that they are living with less dignity.”* Indeed, this situation implies an obligation of solidarity for those who are more fortunate. They *“‘should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others.’ To speak properly of our own rights, we*

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Encyclical letter Caritas in veritate*, June 29, 2009, para. 7.



need to broaden our perspective and to hear the plea of other peoples and other regions than those of our own country. We need to grow in a solidarity which 'would allow all peoples to become the artisans of their destiny', since 'every person is called to self-fulfilment'."⁶

However, it is in God that we Christians find the deep motivation for solidarity.

2.4 A solidarity of which God Himself is the example, one that He asks us to live

The God who made a covenant with the people of Israel is a God of solidarity and life. Unlike idols who “*have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see...ears, but do not hear*” (Psalm 115)⁷, the Lord says “*I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry*” (Exodus 3:7). He frees them from bondage and gives them a land so that they might live, and the people of Israel, to show that they belong to this Saviour God, must practice the rules of social solidarity. We must once again be heard to proclaim the cry of the prophets who denounced injustice and raised their voices against those who exploited widows and orphans: “*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*” (Isaiah 58:6-7).

It is no surprise that, as of his first public appearance, Jesus should have made his own a text from Isaiah: “*he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*” (Luke 4:18-19). Whether in the Sermon on the Mount and in his proclamation of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5) or in his discourse on the judgment (Matthew 25: 31-46), Jesus shows his true colours: he is on the side of the little ones, the poor, the blind, the lame – in short, on the side of the losers. “*Moved with pity*” (Mark 1:41), he offers them healing and social re-integration. His Kingdom of justice and peace is one of inclusion and not exclusion.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Apostolic exhortation Evangelii gaudium*, November 24, 2013, para. 190.

⁷ All Scriptural quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.



The Apostles too, faithful to their Master, are fully part of this movement. Thus St. Paul chides the Corinthians for harming the Church of God by “*humiliat[ing] those who have nothing*” during their Eucharistic gatherings (see I Corinthians 11:17-22). Or again, St. James warns his brethren “*Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?*” (James 2:5). Is this not what Pope Francis is trying to do when he invites us to be a Church of outreach that goes out to the margins?

2.5 Solidarity required for an ecclesial witness to charity

This commitment to solidarity is part of our mission to show Christ’s charity and the Good News of salvation to the world today. In order to be authentic and believable, our witness must take place through a concrete commitment to works of justice, development, and peace. Benedict XVI reminded us that “*justice is the primary way of charity or, in Paul VI’s words, ‘the minimum measure’ of it, an integral part of the love ‘in deed and in truth’ (I John 3:18), to which Saint John exhorts us. On the one hand, charity demands justice: recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples...On the other hand, charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and forgiving. The earthly city is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion.*”⁸

Solidarity, then, is not optional but is essential to the Church’s witness and is an integral part of evangelization. It flows directly from the commandment of love taught and lived by Christ (see, for example, I John 4:20 and James 2:13-18).

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The charity of Christ urges us on. We must act with courage and without delay. As Benedict XVI recalled, “*the urgency is inscribed not only in things, it is not derived solely from the rapid succession of events and problems, but also from the very matter that is at stake: the establishment of authentic fraternity. The importance of this goal is such as to demand our openness to understand it in depth and to mobilize ourselves at the level of the ‘heart’, so as to ensure that current economic*

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Encyclical letter Caritas in veritate*, June 29, 2009, para. 6.



and social processes evolve towards fully human outcomes.”⁹ We wish to explore now a few such directions for evolution.

3. RESTORING AND REBUILDING SOLIDARITY

3.1 Restoring basic solidarities

In the face of the growing number of solitary people, of broken homes, of purely virtual connections (computers, cellphones, iPods, tablets, television) it is absolutely essential to restore certain basic solidarities: the family, the neighbourhood, and even the parish. These play an essential role as a buffer against the trials endured by people in precarious circumstances. It is also vital to create and build new forms of closeness and relationship, to develop forms of solidarity and mutual trust to establish social cohesion. This calls for constant and renewed efforts to imbue the values of friendship, social relations, solidarity, and reciprocity into our society which is marked by individualism and the quest for material goods.

For further reflection

- Who are the people whom I encounter every day? Do I have a personal rapport with them? Or do I withdraw into a virtual world?
- What are some opportunities in my life right now to practice solidarity?
- When have I experienced the imperative of solidarity or the call to become involved with a person or group in need – beyond mere emotion or a one-time service?

3.2 Entering into solidarity with the poor and humble¹⁰

Following Christ who was in solidarity with his suffering people, we are called to answer the cry of the forgotten and abandoned and those who have been left behind; to defend their rights, to protect their life and their future. In order to do this, we

⁹ *Ibid.*, para. 20.

¹⁰ One thinks here of the four types of poverty identified by Cardinal Walter Kasper: physical or economic; social and relational; cultural; and spiritual (see Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Core of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (Paulist Press: Mahwah NJ, 2014)).



must place ourselves in solidarity with the poor and make of such solidarity the criterion of our pastoral and catechetical strategies. Being close to those who suffer sharpens our view of society and allows us to see more clearly the injustices that predominate there, and drives us to a more resolute personal involvement in favour of justice and peace. It invites us to step out of our comfort zone and go out to the world's margins.

“Sometimes we are tempted to be that kind of Christian who keeps the Lord’s wounds at arm’s length. Yet Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others. He hopes that we will stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into the reality of other people’s lives and know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people.”¹¹

To acknowledge the poor who are at the heart of Gospel proclamation is to accept that they are its privileged hearers and to work with them – never without them – to transform society and improve every human person’s circumstances in life. It also means being attentive to their spiritual searching, offering them paths of growth and maturity in the faith, giving thanks for their special openness to faith and their prophetic role in the proclamation of the Gospel.

This is what Pope Paul VI called the *well-rounded* and *holistic* development of persons and peoples: well-rounded because it seeks to promote “*each person and...the whole person*”,¹² holistic because it implies that all peoples “*work together to build the common future of the human race.*”¹³ The Pope explained that “*this duty concerns first and foremost the wealthier nations. Their obligations...present a three-fold obligation: 1) mutual solidarity — the aid that the richer nations must give to developing nations; 2) social justice — the rectification of trade relations between strong and weak nations; 3) universal charity — the effort to build a more*

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Apostolic exhortation Evangelii gaudium*, November 24, 2013, para. 270.

¹² Pope Paul VI, *Encyclical letter Populorum progressio*, March 26, 1967, para. 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, para. 43.



humane world community, where all can give and receive, and where the progress of some is not bought at the expense of others.”¹⁴

For further reflection:

- When have I “gone forth” to encounter people at the margins of my heart or my society?
- In what ways am I in solidarity with those afflicted with stigmatizing illnesses like HIV/AIDS, or with conditions that reduce their cognitive and intellectual abilities, such as Alzheimer’s? Does my response face up to the challenge of solidarity?
- What kind of room do we make for immigrants and refugees in our society, our village, our parish community? If ours is a community where seasonal workers are welcomed, do we strive to assure them of hospitality, of legal and social services, of resources for their assistance and integration, of lodging?

3.3 Adopting new ways of living as we spend time with the poor

Hence the urgency of adopting new ways and styles of living. Spending time with the less fortunate helps us to become aware of our own wealth and of our need to resist the temptation of excessive consumption, and even to envision a greater simplicity of life. As Pope Francis tells us, the poor “*have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*,¹⁵ but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them.*” This is why Francis wants “*a Church which is poor and for the poor.*”¹⁶ If the poor seem to show greater solidarity towards one another, it is perhaps because they are less encumbered, less possessed by their possessions.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 44.

¹⁵ The phrase “*sensus fidei*” means the ability, bestowed by the Holy Spirit on believers, to perceive the truth of the faith and to discern what is contrary to it.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, *Apostolic exhortation Evangelii gaudium*, November 24, 2013, para. 198.



Taking our cue from this solidarity that the poor often show to one another, we must first of all step out of our quest for our own comfort and carry out “*small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter.*”¹⁷

For further reflection :

- Do I have friends among those who are poor and sick? How do I offer them help?
- Am I really conscious of the difficulties people face in finding food and lodging when they can only count on social assistance?
- Do the people around me help me to practice a voluntary simplicity of life?
- Do I realize that my living and spending habits can contribute to the economic disparity between rich and poor, between poor and developed countries?

3.4 Confronting structural causes of poverty, inequality, and injustice

To be in solidarity with the poor calls for a conversion of heart and a conversion of manners, but it also calls for institutional change. The fight against poverty requires long-term, and therefore structural, solutions. Immediate assistance and emergency plans for the less fortunate will always be necessary, but we must attack the structural roots of poverty, inequality, and injustice. Actions and policies to transform the political and economic system are thus essential, and as the Bishops’ Conference of France writes so well, “*we must keep in view the ‘structural neighbour’, the one with whom we are bound by the complex mechanisms of taxation, the global economy, social security contributions, oil prices – the one with whom we are in solidarity in virtue of the political decisions that create the current world order or disorder.*”¹⁸

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, para. 188.

¹⁸ Conseil national pour la solidarité (“National Council on Solidarity”), *Au coeur de la solidarité, la joie de l’Évangile – pour mettre en acte(s) l’exhortation du pape François* (“At the Heart of Solidarity, the Joy of the Gospel – putting Pope Francis’ Exhortation into Practice(s)”), Conférence des évêques de France, February 2014, pp. 13-14.



For further reflection

- What is my response towards the millions of people who live in refugee camps or who flee their countries because of ethnic or religious persecutions? Does the sorrow and misery of so many millions of people in the world affect me? How do we respond together to the global problems related to hunger and poverty in the world?
- Do I raise my voice on behalf of peace in the world, especially in regions where conflicts and wars kill hundreds of thousands of brothers and sisters?
- In the debate between economy and ecology, am I in solidarity with those who fight for a healthy and viable environment, for a just and sustainable development? Identify concrete actions that tend in these directions.
- Am I aware of interest groups that fight for equality and justice? If so, how do I contribute to them? If not, let me take some time to familiarize myself with some of these groups (Amnesty International, *Fondation ACAT pour la dignité humaine*, Development and Peace, etc.).
- Do I keep abreast of the different political-party platforms so as to make an informed decision at election time? For example, am I able to identify elements that are contrary to solidarity (arms, frantic consumption, etc.)?
- Have I considered getting actively involved in a political party to promote solidarity, or have I at least written to my MP or MNA in support of an action that favours the common good, or to oppose something that is contrary to it?

3.5 Drawing strength from what nourishes solidarity

Living in solidarity is not always easy. As Christians, we must take to heart the imperative to draw strength from what nourishes solidarity, putting down roots in God's Word and in prayer. It is by learning at the feet of Jesus our Teacher and



from the Spirit of light and strength that we too can defend every person's right to dignity and solidarity, every person's right to be empowered to stand up (or, having fallen, to rise again) and take their future in hand. It is from the sacraments and from the life of the parish community that we will draw the strength and the energy to build up the Kingdom of God with the humble and the poor; it is, most particularly, in the Eucharist that we will build parish communities that are places of welcome, solidarity, and communion where the humble and the poor will be at home, contributing as much they receive. This is where service to brothers and sisters finds its source.

For further reflection :

- Have I ever thought about the connection between my faith and my commitments to solidarity?
- Have I considered nourishing my commitments to solidarity by meditating on God's Word, praying, and participating in the Eucharist?
- Do I realize that my participation in the Eucharist obliges me to solidarity and to a commitment to justice?

4. Counting on God in Hope

In this mission of ours, we are not alone. We can count on the help of God who became incarnate in Jesus and who brings us his grace and salvation in Him. *“Openness to God”* (in Christ, with Christ, and through Christ) *“makes us open towards our brothers and sisters and towards an understanding of life as a joyful task to be accomplished in a spirit of solidarity. God's indestructible love gives us the courage to act and to persevere in our quest for justice, the common good, and solidarity with all our brothers and sisters in the human family.”*¹⁹ For as Jesus tells us, *“apart from me you can do nothing”* (John 15:5).

¹⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Encyclical letter Caritas in veritate*, June 29, 2009, conclusion.



“As we contemplate the vast amount of work to be done, we are sustained by our faith that God is present alongside those who come together in his name to work for justice...Openness to God makes us open towards our brothers and sisters and towards an understanding of life as a joyful task to be accomplished in a spirit of solidarity...Awareness of God's undying love sustains us in our laborious and stimulating work for justice and the development of peoples, amid successes and failures, in the ceaseless pursuit of a just ordering of human affairs. God's love calls us to move beyond the limited and the ephemeral, it gives us the courage to continue seeking and working for the benefit of all, even if this cannot be achieved immediately and if what we are able to achieve, alongside political authorities and those working in the field of economics, is always less than we might wish. God gives us the strength to fight and to suffer for love of the common good.”²⁰

CONCLUSION

To hope is to believe in the possibility of a better world and to bring it about. May the things we plan in a spirit of solidarity bear witness to our care for all our brothers and sisters in the human family, and may it broaden the horizons of our hearts towards their needs – moral, spiritual, and physical. Let us not be afraid to unfurl the sails of our hearts, to leave the harbour of our individual security and set sail on the sea of solidarity between countries and between people from here and elsewhere. Once we reach the point where we recognize that the dignity of people we don't know is as important as that of the ones we meet, only then will we perceive the face of Christ in others, only then will we hear the call to solidarity. Hence the need for a “*mysticism of encounter*”²¹ which we must discover and pass on, as we are invited to do by Pope Francis.²²

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ This expression of Pope Francis' (see his *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People*, November 21, 2014) signifies this desire and this way of living together that is rooted in the communion of the Persons of God Who is Love.

²² Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii gaudium*, November 24, 2013, para. 188.



Our Father who is in the lives



Our Father who is in the lives
Of all men and women who seek justice
Because they love their brothers and sisters and serve You.

Blessed is Your name
By all those who defend the lives
Of the poor and humble
Who have faith and hope in You and
Who fight for respect for their dignity

Your Kingdom come
Your Kingdom which is Freedom and Love
Brotherhood and Justice, Right and Truth

Your will be done
You who are freedom for prisoners
Comfort for the afflicted, strength for the tortured
Liberation and life for those who suffer violence.

Give us this day our daily bread
The bread of equality and joy, the bread of Your word and of education
The bread of land and housing
The bread of food and medical help

Forgive us for not being able to share the bread
Which You have given us
Forgive our lack of faith and courage
When we keep silence through fear

Lead us not into the temptation
That makes us conform ourselves to the powerful of this world
And which makes us believe
That we are powerless to change anything

But deliver us from the evil which out of our own depths
Invites us to keep our lives for ourselves
When You invite us to give them.

From a prayer by Julia Esquivel, pastor (Guatemala)



For further reflection

- Take the time to read the proposed prayer a first time, out loud.
- Take a time of silence.
- Each one reads the text a second time by him or herself.
- Take a time of silence.
- Identify the word or phrase that speaks to you or that encourages you to make the world a better place.
- If this activity is taking place in a group, each person can, if they wish, share the word or phrase that speaks to them.

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