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The role of solidarity in the quest for the sustainable improvement of the material and spiritual living conditions of people and planet earth

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There is certainly a solidarity paradox in the contemporary world. On the one hand, there is so much solidarity exercised by individuals in families, hospitals, schools, and communities, while on the other hand there are huge solidarity deficits between nations and solidarity failures in tackling the global issues of people's poverty, education, and destruction of our planet.

The second paradox is that the world is richer than ever, but poverty persists in the midst of abundance. In this sense too, the world has vast technical knowledge, but technology has brought humanity to the brink of self-destruction, as manifested, among other things, by the climate crisis.

The third paradox is that today, alongside the wealth of material goods, there is an enormous wealth of knowledge that is unparalleled in history and must be made available to all peoples through new and appropriate processes of synthesis and transmission. However, the crisis of education, intensified by the pandemic, means that such knowledge and truths are not enjoyed by the majority.

Fourthly, there is the existential paradox of "mass atheism" or rather the idolatry proposed by mainstream thought that considers the human being the saviour of God and not vice versa. At a time when the grace of Christ is in fullness to be distributed to all men and women in order to realise the fraternity

envisioned by Pope Francis, the materialistic ideology of the “*Pensée unique*” (French for “single thought”) makes governments and many nations forget to ask Divine Providence for help.

With these vast stores of wealth and technology, knowledge, and the grace of Christ, our greatest need is neither more wealth nor more technology but the Gospel project of solidarity expressed above all in the programme of the beatitudes. Concretely, the reason and faith present in Christ’s message can teach us to use our wealth, technology, knowledge, and grace to realise solidarity among human beings, the common good, and the safeguarding of the earth.

We must find ways to overcome this micro versus macro paradox of solidarity, which poses a joint challenge for science, social sciences, philosophy and faith. Following Saint John Paul II, Pope Benedict pointed out in *Caritas in Veritate*: “The Church’s social doctrine, which has *an important interdisciplinary dimension*,¹ can exercise, in this perspective, a function of extraordinary effectiveness. It allows faith, theology, metaphysics and science to come together in a collaborative effort in the service of humanity.”²

Solidarity — religious, social, political and philosophical perspectives

Solidarity comes from the Latin “solidus.” Solidus means solid, firm. “In solidum” described a debt relationship in which each and all are liable — i.e., there is a binding obligation, a joint debt. In Pope St John Paul II’s *Centesimus annus*, the concept of solidarity is elaborated by referring to Leo XIII as “...an elementary principle of sound political organization, namely, the more that individuals are defenceless within a given society, the more they require the care and concern of others, and in particular the intervention of governmental authority. In this way what we nowadays call the principle of solidarity, the validity of which both in the internal order of each nation and in the international order [...] is clearly seen to be one of the fundamental principles of the Christian view of social and political organization.”³

1 St John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus*, 59.

2 St John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus*, 31.

3 St John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus*, 10.

Solidarity has an intrinsic value – expression of justice, compassion, care, charity – and solidarity is active for the humanisation and development of the singular individual and social human being. In political contexts, “Solidarity” has been used for celebration days in the Soviet Union and for trade union movements in developing countries such as “Justicialism” in Argentina and for other events and organisations. The famous “Solidarność” trade union in Poland confirmed its recognition of workers’ rights and freedom.

Associated with the *Frankfurt School*, the German philosopher and sociologist Habermas argues that solidarity and justice are two sides of the same coin, always internal to some concrete community, while universal ethics and justice require detachment from the internal bonds of concrete communities. In Habermas’ concept, solidarity is always a partial “we-think” driven by subjective agents, while justice represents an objective, impartial and agent-neutral perspective. However, it should be noted that the perspective of solidarity in *Centesimus Annus* and even more so in *Fratelli Tutti*, i.e., in the Magisterium of the Popes, clearly goes beyond this restricted concept of solidarity as applicable only to a particular, concrete community. This broader concept of solidarity is actually in line with the liberating message of the Gospel, with the Thomistic notion of the law of nations (*ius gentium*), and Kant’s concept that all people form a “Kingdom of Ends,” derived from the second categorical imperative.⁴ According to these views, each individual has rights and duties, and all individuals are neighbours to one another because they are images of God (One and Triune), redeemed by the grace of Christ and children of the same Heavenly Father. Although this may sound utopian, Rawls in our day, like Thomas and Kant, also considers universal duties towards other individuals and their welfare as integral requirements for human rights. This perspective actually overcomes an “us” versus “them” view. Rawls argues for a reconciliation of the principles of freedom and equality that applies to the basic structure of a “well-ordered society” with the Aristotelian idea of “justice as fairness.” “Justice – writes John Rawls at the beginning of *A Theory of*

4 “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end” (Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Translated by James W. Ellington, Hackett. (1993) [1785], p. 36. 4:429. St Thomas Aquinas already states that “the person is the most perfect being that exists in all nature” (St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, 29, 3.) Thus “intellectual creatures are governed by God insofar as they are willed for themselves, while other creatures are ordered to creatures endowed with reason” (St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 112.)

Justice – is the first prerequisite of social institutions, as truth is of the systems of thought'.⁵ A complexity is that the “we” must include consideration of future generations in the sustainable earth environment. This is important for solidarity in the accelerating climate crisis. Thus, Sen (2002) argues for a model of impartial arbitration, which can avoid the problem of lack of solidarity with future generations.

In terms of practical implications, poverty and inequality are a clear indication of the failures of solidarity, at least in the sense of the broader concept stipulated by the Gospel, St. Thomas, Kant and the Magisterium of the Popes.

In short, poverty remains high and has been growing with the Covid19 pandemic, and inequality is increasing in general and in many countries. Compared to the time of *Rerum Novarum*, the distribution of labour versus capital has evolved rapidly with an increasing weight towards capital (Picketty 2015). Labour’s share of income is decreasing, and capital’s share is increasing, and consequently so is wealth inequality (ILO 2020).

A particular cause for concern in recent decades about this growing poverty and inequality is related to education policy, where poor individuals in rich countries and poor nations are caught in the trap of ignorance. Given the growing importance of education, now more important than ever in human history for developing solidarity, of equal concern is the wide and often widening quality gap between schools attended by the poor and schools attended by the non-poor. This occurs in such a way that differentiated or segregated educational pathways often emerge. Most alarming is the fact that, worldwide, especially with Covid-19, about 400 million children and young people who should be receiving a basic education are not in school at all.

But poverty and inequality are not the only problems to consider when looking into the symptoms and causes of solidarity failures. Particular mention should be made of the loss of the Christian memory and heritage of Europe and the West, accompanied by a sort of practical agnosticism and religious indifference, whereby many Europeans and Westerners give the impression of living without spiritual roots, a bit like heirs who have squandered a heritage entrusted to them by history and providence. As St John Paul II used to

5 J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, The Belknap of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA (USA), 1971.

repeat: “European culture gives the impression of ‘silent apostasy’ on the part of people who have all that they need and who live as if God does not exist.”⁶

How to address Solidarity deficits

Solidarity at scale requires collective action that facilitates the overcoming of the indicated deficits of macro-solidarity on the part of governments, strong powers, and the one-size-fits-all thinking that promotes mass atheism. Collective action is necessary and possible. Elinor Ostrom (2009) helped to refute the idea that, for example, natural resources would necessarily be overused and destroyed by selfishness in the long run. She refuted this idea by conducting field studies on how people in local communities manage shared natural resources, such as pastures and fishing waters in Indonesia and forests in Nepal. Professor Virgilio Viana does the same in the Amazon with his “Sustainable Amazon Foundation,” creating or supporting small self-sustainable citizen communities. Other examples are the trade unions in Argentina, in particular the truck drivers’ unions, and the Solidarity trade unions founded by L. Wałęsa in Poland, which have shown over the years a growing awareness of the importance of respecting human dignity and labour, as well as family and education for the common good in the autonomous communities they lead. These examples underline the multifaceted nature of the interactions with human beings, always keeping environmental issues in mind. Ostrom proposes some “design principles” for the stable management of local commons and human resources, including internal trust and reciprocity; appropriation and provision of common resources adapted to local conditions; cheap and easily accessible conflict resolution mechanisms; self-determination of communities; and communities recognised by higher-level authorities.

From the point of view of the necessary re-evangelisation, we can also follow the apostolic example of building small communities. When St Paul arrived in a city or in a certain region, he did not immediately build a cathedral. He built the small communities that are the leaven of our Christian culture today. These small communities grew and moved forward. Today, this pastoral method is followed in every missionary region, especially in Africa and Latin America. Religious communities should aim to transfer this social science

6 St John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, 9.

knowledge from local levels to the management of global commons, such as the management of our common atmosphere. This requires global institutional arrangements and global solidarity.

Summarized conclusions

The concepts of marginality and relative deprivation of Pope St John Paul II and Pope Francis are important in identifying the causes of solidarity deficits because exclusion is a reality and because people more and more compare themselves with others in our urbanised, increasingly globally informed world. Promising actions that may help enhance solidarity in some key areas of humanity and the protection of the planet are:

Solidarity to overcome hunger and marginalisation...

...requires transformation towards healthier, more sustainable, equitable, and resilient food systems, including sustainable productivity increases and adding income and nutrition components to social protection programmes. Protecting the land rights of small farmers and smallholders, women, and indigenous peoples is paramount. Comprehensive coverage through social protection and basic social security, with cash transfers, employment and nutrition components, and access to capital and finance for the relatively poor, must be implemented. All forms of modern slavery must be avoided by upholding the dignity of labour and respecting the human body, which cannot be traded in part or as a whole, and which is only offered out of love.

Solidarity to overcome the climate crisis and achieve sustainable consumption...

...requires effective carbon pricing, taking into account equity implications. The poor must be protected from the rising costs of basic needs in the short term. Fundamental changes in consumption behaviour must start with promoting sufficiency and the concept of “enough.” Instruments to trigger behavioural change include information, education, encouragement, targeted taxes, regulations and restrictions, and reducing food loss and waste.

Solidarity in pandemic management...

...requires human resources, equipment and, in particular, sharing vaccines and appropriate medicines with low- and middle-income countries. Sharing medical science as the global collective activity of medicine offers great opportunities. This requires that scientists stand in solidarity for good – not in laboratories that are themselves “structures of sin” – and that governments are open to facilitating, rather than hindering, such cooperation.

Solidarity in education...

...requires overcoming the dramatic inadequacy in some parts of the world of education, especially at the primary level. The “classical” basic skills expected in primary education – reading, writing and arithmetic – are no longer sufficient in a globalised world. They need to be complemented by competencies leading to objectives such as the enhancement, protection or preservation of work skills, cultural and linguistic heritage, ethical values, social cohesion, the environment, health, and openness to the transcendence of the human person⁷ and of God.⁸ In the future, this classic triad needs to be expanded into a new objective: “reading, writing, calculating, reasoning, synthesising, healing, praying, sharing.”

Solidarity in teaching...

...requires a high level of expertise and knowledge on the part of teachers⁹ so that students, who learn through the process of instruction, may achieve a standard of education that they would not obtain on their own, for instance, from social networks. The role of teachers as agents of education has to be more recognised and supported by every possible means: e.g., continuous coaching by those who have more direct access to knowledge (especially

7 “Persona significat id quod est perfectissimum in tota natura, scilicet subsistens in rationali natura” (St Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, I, 29, 3.)

8 “Ipse Deus, qui est esse tantum, est quodammodo species omnium formarum subsistentium quae esse participant et non sunt suum esse” (St Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia*, q. 6, a. 6, ad 5.)

9 “Doctrina autem importat perfectam actionem scientiae in docente vel magistro; unde oportet quod ille qui docet vel magister est, habeat scientiam quam in altero causat, *explicite et perfecte*, sicut in addiscente acquiritur per doctrinam” (St Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, 11, 2 cor.) Also: “Magister docet in quantum actu scientiam habet” (*Ib.*, ad 6.)

trained academics and scientists), updating of professional training, adequate salaries and availability of information technology. To facilitate the success of the educational process, and to provide each member of society, and communities themselves, with that level of knowledge and learning that is a primary factor in empowerment and cooperation, it is important to aim for a high level of quality within the teaching profession, especially at the higher education level. This is also required so that, given that the expertise of every teacher is limited, what a student does not learn from one teacher he or she may learn from another, and so that teachers may learn from each other within a context of synergy.¹⁰ To support and promote this dual process, which is at the origin of schools, universities and other educational institutions, suitable national, international and private resources must be made available to them so that, throughout the world, they can carry out their tasks in an effective way.

Solidarity and care when using digital technologies...

...requires wealth generated by AI and robotics to be used to build a society that is more compassionate and loving. We would have more time and energy to invest in care work, community services, and education. Standards to protect people's rights, such as the ones defined for human dignity in the UN Human Rights codex, must regulate AI and robotics. In all of these five action areas social science and natural science can play important roles, and solidarity makes a big difference, if facilitated at scale. Therefore, we must not tolerate the existence of a knowledge and values-based division, in addition to an unacceptable economic division that also includes a "digital divide". Because, unlike the possession of material goods, knowledge and values, when communicated, shared and participated in, grow, develop and multiply.¹¹

Solidarity with personal testimony and example...

...knowledge is indispensable in teachers who teach speculative truth, when their aim is to teach moral virtue. In the educator, moral virtue is even more necessary, hence the importance of example in this field, which is much more

10 "Debemus audire non solum ab uno, sed a multis [...] Quod non addiscis ab uno, addiscis ab alio" (St Thomas Aquinas *Sermon puer Iesus*, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/Sermo8PuerIesus.htm>).

11 "Spiritualia bona sunt specialiter non ritenenda per se, quia comunicata non minuuntur sed crescunt" (St Thomas Aquinas, *De Malo*, q. 13, 1 pret. 8.)

effective than theoretical indoctrination: “because in questions of human actions and passions we give less credence to words than to actions.”¹² When we place moral virtue above actions, we discover more easily the truth about the good that must be practiced. Paul VI said that today’s men and women needs role models and life models more than teachers.¹³ Moreover, when teachers contradict themselves with their behaviour, all discourse is futile, especially for the young people who begin to admire them and then feel cheated. Therefore, the teacher’s behaviour should endorse his or her words and account for them. Kierkegaard famously speaks ironically of those teachers who resemble a swimming instructor who only knows how to swim in theory, and thus always teaches on dry land, afraid that a student will take him seriously and jump into the water: for such a teacher would not be in a position to help.

Solidarity in the dynamics of the participation in the grace of Christ...

...requires that each person in friendship with God be aware that they participate in a fullness of grace capable of sanctifying them, and also of actively sharing this grace with someone else for their salvation in accordance with charity. It requires those who live their faith in operative charity to act out such ebbs and flows of sanctifying grace, for example, from mother to child, from teacher to student, from spiritual father to sons and daughters, and vice versa, and also between friends and spouses on the basis of the grace of the sacrament, as well as in all human relationships that become fraternal “bonds of perfection” (Col. 3:14) nourished by the Eucharist. This teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas¹⁴ finds confirmation in one of the most innovative and decisive statements of the Magisterium of the theologian Pope Benedict XVI to achieve that “fraternity of solidarity” advocated by Francis: “As the objects of God’s love, men and women become subjects of charity, they are called to

12 “Circa actiones et passiones humanas minus creditur sermonibus, quam operibus. Si enim aliquis operetur quod dicit esse malum, plus provocat exemplo quam deterreat verbo [...] Quando ergo sermones alicuius dissonant ab operibus sensibiliter in ipso apparentibus, tales sermones contemnuntur. Et per consequens interimitur verum quod per eos dicitur” (*In X Ethic.*, lect. 1, n. 8–9.) Online at <http://www.josephkenny.joyeurs.com/CDtexts/Ethicsio.htm>

13 „Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (St Paul VI, *Address to the Members of the Consilium de Laicis* (2 October 1974): AAS 66 [1974], p. 568; also, St Paul VI, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41.

14 Cfr. M. Sánchez Sorondo, *La gracia como participación de la naturaleza divina*, Città del Vaticano, 2021.

make themselves instruments of grace, so as to pour forth God's charity and to weave networks of charity. This dynamic of charity received and given is what gives rise to the Church's social teaching, which is *caritas in veritate in re sociali*: the proclamation of the truth of Christ's love in society."¹⁵

Most importantly, we call on the world's leaders to accept their sacred responsibility to live up to the law of nations recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and to acknowledge that 75 years is long enough to fulfil what the world promised in the shadow of the Holocaust and the Second World War. Our most sacred task is to prevent another episode of self-destruction, whether by war or environmental devastation. For our survival and well-being, for the sake of our children and the generations to come, we must create a world of solidarity and justice, in which the dignity and rights of all are assured, in the awareness that every human being is not a self-made product but a child of God, created in his image and likeness and destined for eternal life.¹⁶ These are the indispensable conditions to achieve the project of solidarity between humans and the planet proposed by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* and in *Fratelli Tutti*.

15 Benedict XVI, Encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 5.

16 "Homo autem non solum est civis terrenae civitatis, sed est particeps civitatis caelestis Ierusalem, cuius rector est dominus, et cives Angeli et sancti omnes, sive regnent in gloria et quiescant in patria, sive adhuc peregrinentur in terris, secundum illud apostoli, *Ephes. II, 19: estis cives sanctorum, et domestici Dei*, et cetera. Ad hoc autem quod homo huius civitatis sit particeps, non sufficit sua natura, sed ad hoc elevatur per gratiam Dei. Nam manifestum est quod virtutes illae quae sunt hominis in quantum est huius civitatis particeps, non possunt ab eo acquiri per sua naturalia; unde non causantur ab actibus nostris, sed ex divino munere nobis infunduntur" (St Thomas Aquinas, *De virtutibus in communi*, q. un., a. 5.)

Abstract

The role of solidarity in the quest for the sustainable improvement of the material and spiritual living conditions of people and planet earth

This article focuses on contemporary challenges to solidarity. The author starts by outlining the paradoxes of solidarity, concerning the existence in the world of both an excess and a deficit of solidarity in the material and spiritual spheres of human life. The aim of the article is to try to identify ways to overcome these paradoxes. The Church's social doctrine is intended to help in this task.

Keywords: solidarity, climate crisis, consumption, education, modern technologies, hunger problem, pandemic

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Sánchez Sorondo M., *La gracia como participación de la naturaleza divina*, Città del Vaticano, 2021.

Bp. Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo — an Argentine Catholic bishop, the current Chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. Having issued a long set of various publications in the sciences, he earned several honours such as the Légion d'Honneur of France in 2000. In 1976 he graduated summa cum laude in Philosophy at Perugia University. From 1976 to 1998 he was a lecturer in the history of philosophy at the Lateran University in Rome, where from 1982 onwards he was a full professor in the same discipline. He was dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at the same university for three consecutive terms from 1987 to 1996. From 1998 to 2014 he was a full professor of the history of philosophy at the Libera Università Maria SS. Assunta (Rome) and in the same year was appointed president of the degree course in science of education. On 5 October 1998 he was appointed Chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. In March 1999, he was also appointed Secretary Prelate of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas. On 19 March 2001, Pope John Paul II consecrated him as Titular Bishop of Forum Novum (Vescovio). On 19 July 2011, Pope Benedict XVI made him a member of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America.