

Solidarity: A Spirituality for Our Time: A Feminist Theological Reflection

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Although the word solidarity is relatively new in social justice rhetoric, it has a long rich history in Catholic Social Theology. In its original meaning, solidarity identifies the two-fold reality of the human: our unique individuality AND our essential sociality. It challenges the inadequacies of both individualism and collectivism by insisting that the human person is a social being and the goal of the social order is not only the highest good for each person, but also the common good of all. As such, solidarity is a key principle of social order.

Theologically speaking, solidarity rests on the reality that each person is created in the image of God and we are all sisters and brothers in the family of God, redeemed by Christ.

During the 1960s and 1970s the meaning of solidarity evolved to include the political meaning of a social force. In *Progressio Populorum* (1967), Paul VI recognized that social questions had become global, and the focus of solidarity movements became global. *Solidar nosc* in Poland is a prime example, as well as the political work of people in many parts of the world to discredit and eventually help dismantle apartheid in South Africa. There is also the example of the work of the churches and others throughout the U.S. that challenged and altered U.S. intervention in Central America. Domestic examples would include the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 70s and the grape boycotts to support the National Farm Workers Union.

The Medellin documents (1968) call for solidarity with the poor: "We ought to sharpen the awareness of our duty of solidarity with the poor, to which charity leads us. This solidarity means that we make ours their problems and their struggles that we know how to speak with them. . ." (*Poverty of the Church*, #10). In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), John Paul II identifies solidarity as a virtue and defines its works: "The exercise of solidarity within each society is valid when its members recognize one another as persons. Those who are more influential because they have a greater share of goods and common services

should feel responsible for the weaker and be ready to share with them all they possess. Those who are weaker, for their part, in the same spirit of solidarity should not adopt a purely passive attitude or one that is destructive of the social fabric, but while claiming their legitimate rights, should do what they can for the good of all. The intermediate groups, in their turn, should not selfishly insist, on their interests, but respect the interest of others" (#39).

What is striking in this history is that solidarity is understood in the context of a love and justice that reaches out to help others. It is not presented in a context of mutuality and equality between the served and the servers.

A FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

A feminist reflection on solidarity would be shaped by several key feminist moral insights: the centrality of relationship, the wholism of the human experience and mutuality. While feminists cannot and do not claim these insights exclusively, their unique contribution is defining them specifically through women's experiences of relationship, wholeness and mutuality.

In naming relationship as central to the human experience, we are insisting upon the deep and total relationality of all things. All things cohere. Nothing living or non-living is self-contained. As Karl Rahner so poetically expressed it, when an infant falls from her/his crib, the furthest star shudders. Ecologists call this understanding the "web of life." For women, this wisdom is deeply rooted in their life sustaining roles as mothers, homemakers, and community sustainers.

In repudiating the artificial dualisms that have shaped western thinking-- and worked to justify the subordination of women--feminists have recognized the holistic nature of the human experience. Beyond the intellectual dualistic constructs of body/soul, sacred/secular, spirituality/materiality, reason/emotion, knowledge/intuition, and church/world is the

reality and experience that the spirit (soul) informs the body; creation and the world are shot through with the Divine; reason and emotion, intuition and knowledge interface; and the church and world share the same spaces.

Mutuality moves beyond both equality and complementarity, key themes of Catholic Social Theology, to insist on the continuum and interrelated-ness of giving and receiving, caring and being cared for. If our relationships lack mutuality, they will run a gamut from benign maternalism/paternalism to various forms of non-violent and violent domination.

When these insights inform the meaning of solidarity, we discover that solidarity is more than a political force, an identity with the suffering of the poor, a virtue rooted in helping others. It is at the center of our salvation as individuals, as communities and as people.

THE SPIRITUALITY OF SOLIDARITY

A spirituality of solidarity enters into the struggle for justice clearly recognizing that all of us are connected in both social sin and social grace. For example, racism is not only unjust to the person of a different race, it destroys the soul of the racist; sexism is not only unjust toward another person, it destroys the soul of the sexist; and the current economic and political domination of the peoples of the South and the marginalized people in our own country is not only imprisoning them in poverty and deprivation, it is eating away at our own national soul. Similarly our patterns of over-production and over-consumption are depleting the very source of our common life and our common future--the earth. Solidarity is not an act of altruism, it is participating in our own redemption as individuals, as communities and as a nation.

Moreover, a spirituality of solidarity knows that the depths of human suffering in the world can only be redeemed by God's loving solidarity with the human community in its struggle to create a more just and peace-filled world for all. The

passion and death of Jesus is not only an historical event; it is lived daily in the bodies, spirits, and lives of people all over the world, from our own impoverished and violent inner cities to the slums of Rio de Janeiro, Johannes- burg, and Calcutta. Likewise, the resurrection is realized daily as people take steps to affirm their own dignity and rights or to open their spirits beyond the walls of racism, sexism and all other forms of domination and control. The resurrection is the ground of our hope for each other and the future.

A spirituality of solidarity grounds us in the sense of relationship, mutuality and wholeness-- with God, with each other and with the earth--that is equal to the globalization of the world that characterizes our era. It gives energy for the massive task of envisioning and developing alternative structures and relationships that liberate both the oppressed and the oppressive.